

INFERTILITY, ADOPTION, AND THE SPACE IN BETWEEN

By Carolyn Berger, LMCSW

A number of us at The AFA began pursuing adoption while at the tail end of infertility treatment. And we were supported by other AFA parents who had decided that adoption would be their route to parenthood. Between Board meetings we coached each other, cried when situations didn't work out and celebrated the good news when our babies arrived.

I will never forget the early morning call I made to Pamela Madsen, our Executive Director and my dear friend, to tell her a pregnant woman I had spoken to once a few months before was in labor and wanted us to be the baby's adoptive parents. I was to talk to Pamela and many other professionals throughout that day as we secured a lawyer for the baby's birthmother, Barbara, and sought out a hospital that was adoption-friendly. At Pamela's urging I spoke with Catherine Unsino, CSW, a therapist well-versed

in adoption, and we explored the possibility of my being in the delivery room when the baby was born. After I had summoned up the courage, I asked Barbara if she would like for me to be with her, and wound up being her labor and delivery coach, spending the better part of a rainy night in May doing Lamaze breathing exercises with her. That was the night Ethan was born.

Ethan came into the world a little over ten years ago, and like many adoptive parents I believe he was meant to be ours, or, as some adoptive parents say, "Our baby found his way home." He was not our first child, although you might have thought so if you had seen my husband and me scrambling around the house in a panic to get him fed, burped and settled down to sleep that first night home. I had given birth to our son Zachary almost four years before after experiencing primary infertility and seeing two pregnancies end in miscarriage. But with Ethan our family was complete. I had always wanted two children, and though I didn't have the baby girl I had once imagined, I felt that I had been lucky beyond words. I believe that one of the gifts of infertility is the sense of how precious our children are. That got me through many days when I ran from room to room, and child to child, finally living my dream, but sometimes too tired to realize it!

Would I have done anything differently in terms of family building if I had the chance to do it again? Absolutely. I sensed back then, and know for certain now, that it was a mistake for us to run so fast from infertility treatment to adoption in our quest for a second child. We didn't take the time to grieve for the biologically related child we had dreamed of and would never know. As a result I stepped into adoption in a numb state that had come upon me when I realized I couldn't conceive another child. Magically, like many adoptive parents, I thought that once our second child came into the family infertility would be nothing more than a memory.

Luckily, after reaching a point where we were emotionally exhausted, we agreed to take time off from adoption. We

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stopped letting everyone near and far know that we were “looking to adopt,” and began to let ourselves relax and enjoy each other and the child we already had. It was summer, the perfect time for traveling, and we took a trip out west.

Slowly, we allowed ourselves the time to mourn our losses; slowly, we began to let go. It was then that we started to realize we could be happy with just one child, even though we preferred more. Before long, we found ourselves in a better place, appreciating the present reality without projecting too far into the future. We began to have conversations about things other than babies. We went through the healing process we had not allowed ourselves earlier, and that made all the difference. We no longer needed to adopt in order to heal. A child could come to us without the burden of having to make up for our infertility.

As summer turned into autumn my husband said he wanted to advertise and try again to adopt. As a family we were back in balance; we were now truly ready for another child. That March, Ethan’s birthmother called, and while I thought we had a good conversation, my hunch was that she would not follow through and make an adoption plan for her baby. When she didn’t call back I wasn’t surprised. But two months later when I stumbled out of the shower to answer a call on our 800 line, it was Barbara asking me if we were still interested in adopting. (We were!) She was in labor and our long wait to adopt was just about over. Three days later we put Ethan in his car seat, his brother, Zach, beside him, and drove the 20-minute trip home.

After you have lived for a while in the world of adoption and have successfully adopted a child, you really feel that you have earned your stripes. I have a friend in adoption who used to come to conferences wearing on each lapel big round pins displaying pictures of his adopted children. I didn’t really understand why someone would do this until I had adopted Ethan and wanted everyone to take a look at his pictures in my wallet.

The pride that comes with successfully adopting is another gift of adoption. There are many more. When you begin to

adopt your world expands. You connect with caring people who have adopted before you through organizations like The AFA. They understand what you are going through and offer themselves for guidance and support.

They applaud (or edit) your adoption ads or tell you what to expect when you travel abroad to pick up your baby. After you have adopted they invite you into their playgroups and give you tips on how to handle questions from curious strangers about how your child (who may look nothing like you) came into your family. The support from adoptive parents groups is available long after you have brought your child home, continuing through the teen years and beyond.

Many of us at The AFA have built our families through birth and adoption. We understand that people who have been through infertility need infertility-sensitive support as they make the transition to adoption. The challenge is to be aware of what we have lost in terms of fertility, while opening up to what we can gain when we adopt. I remember standing outside the hospital, holding Ethan and thinking what a miracle it was that his birth mother had entrusted him to us.



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I would not have experienced that miracle without going through infertility. Nor would I have understood how important children and family were to me without going through infertility and adoption.

At The AFA we have worked to develop programming that can help an individual or a couple feel safe in the space between infertility and adoption. We offer people in infertility treatment the opportunity to learn about adoption so that if treatment fails they have a good sense of the adoption process. We provide the emotional support a couple may need to “take the leap” from infertility treatment to adoption. At the same time we understand the losses people experience through infertility and how this can affect the way they come to adoption. We know that adopting a baby does not make the losses of infertility go away, but it does provide the opportunity to parent.

Adoption has always held a significant place in The AFA's array of family building options. We offer articles by

adoption experts in our monthly newsletter as well as in this special issue devoted to adoption, a five-part Adoption Series during the spring and fall in the New York tri-state area, and an adoption track at our annual April Conference in New York. We have recently developed an Adoption Advisory Board that includes Dr. Jane Aronson; Sara Barris, Psy.D.; Peg Beck, CSW; Aaron Britvan, Esq.; Michael Colberg, JD, CSW; and Dawn Smith-Pliner, all professionals well-known in the world of adoption, and all adoptive parents themselves. We understand the pain of infertility: It is a normal response to your learning that you and your spouse cannot bear a child. And when you have begun to come to grips with that pain and can begin looking at alternatives, we are ready to share the joys and challenges that can be yours through adoptive parenting.

Carolyn Berger, LMCSW, is Chair Emeritus of The AFA and The AFA's Adoption Coordinator. She is a parent through birth and adoption.



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