

“An Extra Layer” *Written by a member of the Local Adoption Support Group Inc (LASG).*

Being an adoptive parent is different to biological parenting. There are extra layers to the experience that play a part in how you develop as a parent, and how you operate as a family. Sometimes family, friends and even acquaintances have a need to assimilate these layers, as if smoothing them out will take away some of the complications that are associated with adoption (grief, identity, unknowns, search, reunion). I occasionally grapple with the challenges, but I have known no different, and cannot imagine my life without them. Indeed, I suspect I am a better person and parent because of them.

I have never carried a child full-term, or given birth. I do not have a sense of the natural or everyday order of things. I do not have an innate feeling of entitlement that says you fall in love, marry, get pregnant, give birth and raise a family. Instead, to me my life is all a little out of the ordinary – sometimes even extraordinary.

My faith in the world was gradually eroding every time I rang the IVF clinic and said I didn't need to come in for the blood test; I had my period and already knew the result. It shattered further each time I miscarried. We had good careers, a nice home and great friends. People told us we could live an interesting life without children, but we knew they were wrong. We wanted to raise children. The urge to parent was like a freight train that we'd boarded and there was no way of getting off. Instead, we just kept changing carriages as we got closer and closer to understanding what this 'journey' meant for us. No, we didn't need to conceive the child ourselves – next carriage. No, we don't need to carry the child physically – next carriage. No, we don't need to be the only mother or father a child knows – next carriage.

Adoption seemed to be the right place for us to be. The carriage hopping had been exhausting, but once there we understood that raising a child was what was truly important to us, somehow our journey meant we had greater capacity to do that well, far greater than when we had started.

We had no doubts. The intensity of our commitment to raising children had kept us on the freight train through all of those (literally) dead ends, and now it kept us together as we went through the adoption process. People commented on how intrusive or bureaucratic becoming an adoptive parent was. Others commented on how unlikely it would be to actually happen; that there are so few local adoptions these days. But we stayed on the freight train. Indeed, I suspect that we would not have had any idea of how to get off, let alone what we would do if getting off meant there was no other carriage to move to.

When that phone call came our whole world realigned. The feeling of joy was indescribable and did not go away for a very long time. Yet, even in our euphoria we knew that our joy was based on another's grief. Our gratitude has changed how we live our lives, and in many ways, how we parent the children who came to form our family.

The parenting tasks we undertake are the same, but wrapped around each day to day activity is the realisation that but for someone else's courage, this would not be our reality. If our children's' birth parents had not been able to make the decision to place their child for adoption, we would not be parents to these extraordinary children.

Knee deep in dirty washing, cleaning the flour off the floor that they have used to make snow angels while I was out of the room, or holding a sick child over a bucket while they vomit. These are everyday activities that like any parent can exasperate or exhaust me. But the adoptive parent in me can't help but admire the sweet neckline on the little shirt that I am washing, or the creativity that sent them looking for flour to make their own snow on my kitchen floor. I know that life can be miserable. I lived that misery for ten years while my husband and I tried to build a family. I know that life will be hard at times; just because it is and also because both of our children have stories with which they will need to grapple. I know many of the layers that being an adoptive parent brings involve sadness and a grief (abandonment, identity, unknowns, search, reunion) that may not be possible to soothe. But I also know that without my children, I would not appreciate the joy in the life the way that we now do. It is a rare moment that slips past us without it being appreciated; either at the time or retrospectively.

This appreciation of life and all it brings is an adoption layer that you don't often read about. It is not in the text books or many of the stories about you read about adoption (sometimes less than positive) in the media. But it is real, and I sometimes wonder if it is that layer (more than any other) that may help my children become strong, healthy adults in the future. If they are able to appreciate the joy or depth in all they do; mundane or significant; will they be more capable to integrate what adoption means for them personally. Will they be more capable of embracing their birth family and adoptive family together; something that seems so very hard in some of the stories we read?

I don't know, but I do know that I can hope.

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