

Views: Legacy of Love

**lynn
martin**

A few months ago, I attended a group for adoptive parents. It seemed a strange thing for me to do. True, I had adopted my first-born son. He was 6 months old. He is Filipino-American, dark eyed and gorgeous. True, eight months later, my second son arrived by birth. True, when the boys were 6 and 8 years old, I adopted my daughter. She was six months old and African-American. But they are now grown and flown. At the meeting, I found myself surrounded by parents of toddlers. Why was I there?

A short time ago, at a conference, I met a new grandmother from Indiana. Her daughter was lesbian and lived with a woman. Her daughter had given birth to a baby boy who was now only a few months old. Talking to this woman, I was struck first by her love and acceptance of her daughters choices, and secondly, by her anxieties for her grandson.

She longed to protect this child from disrespectful, non-understanding people. The feelings were so like my feelings when I first met my oldest son. I remember trying to affix a hex sign to the door to "keep demons away." I agonized about a white mother's ability to protect him from hurt. Today, I realize I hadn't protected any of my children. The world is a hurting place.

What I did, I told this new grandmother, was love them. I believe they are strong because of this love. Without love, I am sure they would have suffered even greater harm. My three children are not perfect, but they are sensitive, caring adults. And I have no regrets about adopting them. It was a wonderful family to raise. Sure we fought our battles with racism, sexism, all those isms. It brought us closer. No

matter where they chose to live in this country, these issues would have been a part of their lives.

Your daughter and grandson are fortunate, I said to the woman, to have you for a mother and grandmother. I can tell you really love them. A week later I received a letter. It said, "The dear little one is doing very well, as are his two Moms. I didn't expect to feel so protective as a grandmother. I felt so understood by you. Thanks so much."

That's why I attended the Adoptive Parents group. I wanted to say, Yes, there will be problems. Yes, some of the problems will be because the child is from another culture, whether it be Korea or a gay community. But most of the problems will be those that children, no matter how they enter a family, will have: Who am I? Who are my family and friends? What do I need to know to live?

To face life as a loved child does make a difference. We all long to protect our children. We can't. We can only wrap them in love, give them the knowledge we have, and pray. ▼

Lynn Martin is a poet, AIDS educator, and writer who lives in Brattleboro.

Through Project Family, SRS and the Lund Family Center are offering a number of free pre-adoption services and post-adoption family support. They include:

- Pre-adoptive counseling
- Child and family matching
- Adoption finalization services
- Post-placement visits
- Post-adoption counseling
- "Pride training" for new adoptive parents
- Respite care
- Daycare subsidies
- Access to summer camps
- Medicaid insurance
- Financial assistance

In addition, the federal government awards a \$10,000 tax credit to parents who adopt special needs children; most children being adopted from foster care qualify.

Another resource is the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse at www.calib.com/naic online, and by phone at 703-352-3488 or toll-free at 1-888-251-0075.

If you are interested in adopting a child through Project Family, contact Wanda Audette at the Lund Family Center by phone at 802-864-7467 or 1-800-639-1741 (toll-free), or via email at adoption@lundfamilycenter.org.

Keith. "We had to switch [from our names] to 'Daddy' and 'Papa,' and that was a little hard to always remember to call John 'Daddy.'" The switch solidifies the idea of family and the role of each family member, agrees Wanda Audette.

John advises parents to keep a journal so that they can identify patterns of behavior and find the keys to solving their significance. The journal they kept helped them figure out why Levi had bathroom accidents each time they went to Maine together: the route passes the foster home where Levi was traumatized. Also, says John, "You need to let these kids go through that and talk about their families or their foster families. Levi hasn't mentioned his foster family's name in about a year."

Both men heaped high praise on a book, saying all parents – and especially adoptive parents whose kids may arrive with "attachment problems" (an inability to trust or bond with others) – should read it: *Building the Bonds of Attachment: Awakening Love in Deeply Troubled Children* by Dr. Daniel Hughes. "I was amazed," says Keith, "at how much in there related to us and Levi."

Another Levi story: Levi and his two dads go to therapy. One week, John and Keith were in another room when Levi came out into the waiting room, where another family had settled before their appointment. Levi looked around, and not seeing his dads, went into the bathroom and curled up into a fetal position crying: he thought John and Keith had left him there. John says that he knew at that point that the three of them were bonding just fine as a family.

Keith also suggests getting extended families involved as much as possible. John adds, "Show affection to each other in front of your child and your extended family – whatever is normal for your relationship."

John's family, who live

in Maine, have all worked on making Levi a part of the family at holidays and other times, too. After Levi came into the family, honorary family members – old friends who were called "Uncle" and "Aunt" – had to give up those titles temporarily so that Levi could have clear family boundaries and know who among all these new people were really his aunts and uncles. Keith's family is also very supportive.

Whatever activities or hobbies or interests you have before the adoption, John says, keep them going – or re-activate them after taking a break – after the adoption. "It is healthy for your child to see you doing outside activities, socializing with people outside the family, having something of your own to do."

He ruefully adds that it's important to prioritize your relationship with your partner, too. A newly adopted child can take all the attention, to the detriment of the adult relationship. After everyone has settled in, remember why you're in the relationship, and make grown-up dates.

And don't let the fear of what *might* happen rule your life, says John. Keith confirms that, recalling that their home study took place during the Take Back Vermont backlash. Then he tells a post-adoption story: "One day, John had been to Levi's class reading with them, and then I was there on a field trip. One kid said, 'Hey, you look different today.' I know we look sort of similar. I said 'I am different, and I'm Levi's other dad.' One of the mothers overheard me and spent the rest of the day glaring in my direction."

"You have to decide not to react but to act positively. It's not about me any more, it's about what's best for this child. I by no means am ashamed of who I am," John concludes.

"Don't disagree on rules or consequences in front of your

child," advises John. "Even if you don't agree, let it go. I told Levi's teacher, 'What ever you need to do to make your day successful with Levi, you do it. Even if I disagree, we'll work that out later.'"

Lund's Wanda Audette said, "It's okay to tell a kid, 'I'm sorry, I overreacted. I messed up this time.'" And, she added, it's important to lay down ground rules from the beginning and to enforce them consistently – and not to make exceptions in the "honeymoon" period. "If bedtime is 8:00, and follows a bath and a book, then it should be 8:00 with a bath and a book on the first night."

John recommends, "Let in the compliments from friends and family about your parenting. When you're having a hard day, those are little gems you can bring back to brighten things up a bit." He and Keith tell the story of lesbian friends who complimented them on their work with Levi – they saw a lot of progress. Last year, the women said, he was wild, stir-crazy, almost impossible to settle down. And this year they could see him able to sit with everyone at a table and play games and be sociable.

When difficult and unexpected things happen, says John, "step back, and ask yourself, 'Is it really that bad?' In the larger scheme of things, when the day is done, it's just another day." ▼

John and Keith are willing to correspond by email with anyone from our communities about adoption. Please send your emails to OITM, put "Dads" on the subject line, and we'll forward them: editor@mountainpridemedia.org.



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