

## HONOR IS AN ORCHARD

Thirty-four years ago, in the high mountain desert of northern New Mexico, social workers placed a nine-month-old African American baby into the home of a White family for an adoption that would be finalized almost four years later. The match was based upon the similar educational levels of the baby's biological parents and those of the eventual adoptive parents. In a land of ancient and vibrant American Indian cultures, flush with a thriving and deeply rooted Latino population, a Black child was placed with a White family based upon the criteria of education. A sojourn was set. Not only for that baby, who was me, but also for the family that would face the joys and challenges of that union.

As the American Adoption Congress reflects upon 25 years of adoption, I meditate on my own thirty-plus-year personal experience with this unique phenomenon of familial metamorphosis. Besides my own walk toward peace, purpose, and gratitude, I have worked with foster and adoptive youth, families, and professionals nationwide for over a decade. What occurs to me, as a truth increasingly luminescent, is that a certain principle challenge remains for all of us involved in the mission of adoption. While education and support resources for adoptive families and adoption professionals are abundant compared to the era of my childhood, there appears to remain a critical collective misorientation. This involves the *spirit* with which we conduct what we call child welfare. We remain in need of a spiritual reckoning with the *larger purpose* of the child crisis and its resolution. Too often, too many of us engage in adoption, and relate to the adopted child, as a matter of charity. I deeply believe that adoption, for families and professionals, is a divine honor and opportunity granted by Life itself. An opportunity to enrich society through compassion and humility.

I hold in the clutches of my childhood heart the passionate belief that adoption is a reflection pond, wherein the capacity of a child to achieve peace and security is a direct function of the child's ability to see herself in the reflective surface that is her adoptive family. As with water, adoption's reflection pond must hold a smooth, placid surface in order for the child to truly see herself in the spirit, character and values of her surrounding family; in order to feel as though she belongs. That tranquil reflective surface comes only when we find the courage to honor the entire spirit of the child, especially those aspects of her that are different from, or discomfoting to us.

My tone about the state of child welfare is not pessimistic. Rather it is optimistic and demanding. It is because I have faith in our adult ability to transform our spirit to a heightened level, that I encourage us all to strive toward genuinely honoring the child. We often and easily celebrate love, as in the 'loving family,' or the 'passionate' social worker. Love in this sense, though, is the easier of transactions. The more difficult, and often frightening task, is that of honoring the child.

Honor is an orchard. Its trees bear the fruits of humility, modesty, honesty, and selflessness. Such fruits are void of the blights of pride, ego, defensiveness, prejudice, and self-centeredness. Importantly, Honor's orchard harbors no wind of charity. Here is a place where children fill their bellies with the sense that the adults in their world value the whole child, even those parts of our youth that are undervalued by society: their race, ethnicity, gender, physical disability, emotional turmoil, learning challenges, 'shameful' biological family backgrounds. These children drift off to slumber against orchard tree trunks, content that thankful are the adults who provide them shade in the blistering sun. Thankful are the adults that *Life Itself* thinks so highly of them that it would place children into their hands and trust a safe delivery to their potential. Adoption is not charity, it is an opportunity to expand, evolve, re-learn and find root in a youthful life that has much to teach.

Honor's orchard hosts slumbering children, sweet juices of adult compassion and respect dripping down their chins. The grass is thick and richly green there, it provides a soft mattress, a gentle surface to stumble and fall upon. These children fall, as do all children, but in Honor's orchard, the children get up. Adoption is not charity. We should never feel or believe that these are *lesser* children being done a favor by a better class of folk. We who 'do' adoption should not pat ourselves too heartily on the back for solely the transaction of a child moving into, or being in a family. But we should celebrate until our singing reaches the heavens, whenever we have fulfilled the blessing of circumstance that *allows* us to contribute to the honoring of the adoptive child.

Honor is an orchard we would all do well to visit faithfully. As a child of adoption, I proclaim that the growth ahead of us in child welfare involves nothing fancy, complex, sophisticated, or expensive. The tonic is simple, ancient, and enduring. And there is good fruit to be had there.

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