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My adopted son David holds a place in my heart as do all three of my naturally born children. However I have to admit to an even stronger sense of attempting to be a good parent with David because we were raising him as a result of a gift from another couple. I was perhaps more protective and very aware that we must get it right, that there was an obligation to nurture him and help him reach his potential. That is not to say we did not want our other three children to reach their potential, we did, but there was an additional sense of responsibility with David.

I have one brother but always wished I was part of a family like my cousins who were in a family of four children. Before I was married I did what young women did in those days and went for a pre-marital medical examination. I had not indulged in pre-marital sex. My doctor told me it was unlikely that I would have children and I was devastated. After four years of marriage and no babies I raised the issue of adoption with my husband. He thought there was no hurry and we left the topic alone. By some miracle which I will not go into here, I became pregnant. Things were precarious because I had an internal examination and a womb scrape when, unbeknown to me and the doctor, I was already pregnant. My daughter arrived unscathed and the next two pregnancies followed without any difficulties in conception. After my third baby was born the doctor told me it was our lucky last as there was considerable damage and he felt I should not have another baby. For a while that was fine. I was very busy and happy but then the little girls commented that their brother would not have a companion like they had. Then there was a newspaper article which drew attention to the fact that babies from our state were being "exported" to elsewhere because there were not enough adopting parents available. My husband and I discussed this and he agreed I should go to the Department of Social Welfare and make some enquiries. I was pleasantly surprised when they greeted me very encouragingly, saying that they liked adopted babies to go to established families where the other children were naturally born. I asked about procedures, what was involved and how long it would take. For a girl it would take longer; there were more people wanting girls. For a boy it would take six weeks "for the paper work".

After more discussion we decided to go ahead with the interviews and then put things on hold until my husband returned from work overseas. The girls were very excited and behaved well as they were interviewed. Colour of eyes, hair and skin were noted after we let it be known that we did not want a mixed race child but one who would fit into our family without appearing different. This was not that we could not have managed the alternative but we had strong connections with other nationalities and were afraid a mixed race child might be identified. That was an important issue then.

Before my husband returned I received a phone call asking if we were ready to take a baby and I said no, that this baby needed two parents. Very soon after my husband's return we were offered a baby and were very excited. Then my husband received a phone call from the paediatrician responsible for pre-adoption health checks and he advised us to say no to the baby. This was based on the fact that the baby was very fractious and it was difficult to identify the cause. The doctor said that if I had been a nurse and had no other children he would have considered it but felt the baby should stay in care until older and it had been observed over a longer period.

We thought that we would go to the bottom of the list because the social worker assigned to us tried to persuade me to foster that baby rather than adopt and maybe adopt at a later stage. She was very persuasive and seemed unable to understand our concerns. However two weeks later we were offered David. Everything had to be dealt with in complete secrecy and we were advised to tell no-one any details.

Some time before a neighbour, knowing that we hoped to adopt, showed me an article from the Age (I think) which talked about breast-feeding adopted babies and detailed how grandmothers in Papua New Guinea breast fed their grandchildren so the mothers could go back to work. It added that they also suckled piglets! I was very sceptical, but interested, and followed up with the Nursing Mothers Association. I received a recipe for something called Tiger's Milk and then started on the tedious process of breast massage and daily tipples of the drink. From memory the drink contained brewer's yeast, molasses, oil, wheat-germ and orange juice which was meant to mask the taste. It didn't and I remember my little girls standing in the kitchen persuading me to drink the foul concoction. Amazingly it worked and I started to lactate. I told the social worker assigned to us what I was hoping to achieve and she was not at all understanding. In fact she made me feel I was doing something weird. It was therefore something I could not discuss with her. I will not go into the ups and downs of that breast-feeding experience but will say that it was an enormous bonding experience with David. He was a natural sucker and although he had been on a bottle for six weeks, and my equipment was minute by comparison, he latched on very effectively. I should have had support from my family doctor but he was overseas and I was not keen to ask another because the social worker was so negative. I could have had oxytocin to assist but did not. I did talk to my chemist and he was helpful. When we went for the pre-adoption medical with the same paediatrician who had advised us against taking the first baby, he was very matter of fact about what I had done and said it was the best gift I could have given David because he received all the antibodies he needed to boost his immune system.

When the Director of Social Welfare met David he said his department had done a very good matching job in terms of colouring. He also rang me to say that there were relatives of David's causing trouble and that we must be very careful not to divulge anything we knew about him. He said a special adoption court would be convened to push the adoption through quickly. Prior to this the social worker had let slip that David's parents had married and we were very upset, feeling that the baby should be with them. After much soul searching, we asked the social worker to see if they would change their mind about the adoption. If so, we would relinquish the baby. This was a dreadful prospect but we felt strongly we should make the offer. She assured us that they were determined to go ahead. I cannot now remember the sequence of events but do recall that it was some time before the papers were signed. When we met the couple years later they said they never received our message and did not sign the documents for some time because they were so upset by the experience. When we heard about the relatives causing difficulties we were told that they had reached our church minister and he had informed the department. It transpired that he had married the couple and when we later took David to church the minister and his wife immediately recognised where he had come from because he had a strong family resemblance to his birth parents. Our minister never referred to the matter until I telephoned him when David was a teenager asking if anything happened to me and my husband would he tell David his story. Because we were told the young couple were determined to go ahead, we went through with the adoption. Years later when we met and became friends with David's birth family we discovered that the difficult relatives were the baby's grandparents and auntie. She was willing to offer a home and financial support to the baby and parents.

All went well with us and the baby. He developed normally and was no problem. Our family was complete and he was much loved. I heard that the social worker resigned her job. We were her first and last adopting family.

My first brush with authorities was when I attempted to get a new British passport as we were travelling overseas as a family. The British Embassy in Canberra happily put all three naturally born children on my passport as previously but refused to put David on because he was adopted. I told them he had already been on my passport and they said that was a mistake and it could not happen again. I fought their decision but each time I protested I had to pay another sum of money in order to get them to consider the appeal. I argued that under law David was exactly the same as the naturally born children. Eventually I managed to get patril rights for him because I and my parents and my husbands parents were all UK citizens and my husband had dual citizenship. However, I never had him on my passport again. I subsequently applied and received Australian citizenship.

Another brush with authorities occurred when I went to the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages to obtain a birth certificate for David and was horrified when I heard an officer call out a name from behind the counter for whoever was waiting to pick up a certificate. As far as I was concerned this was private information being shouted out to all assembled. A name was called and no-one responded so I went forward and quietly said our name. For all I knew the name called out could have been David's birth name. I never did know if this was the case because I deliberately erased the name from my mind. I registered my anger to the registrar who assured me that the name called out was a mistake and was not David's birth name. I asked the Registrar to change their procedures and not call names out across the counter.

We had no more contact with the Department of Social Welfare until David started to search for non identifying information about his natural family. The search came about because David was studying science amongst other things and became interested in genetics and also because he kept getting letters from the university that told him he qualified for an aboriginal scholarship. He asked me whether I knew about his aboriginal heritage and I said it did not appear on the documentation we had been given; far from it; his background was European on both sides. It turned out that the offer of a scholarship was a computer glitch. It was about this time that the law changed and David started to think he would join Jigsaw. I told him there was no need to do this as there was a departmental responsibility to help him search for his birth parents. I also knew that if this was not successful I had a way of finding out through our church connections. David went ahead step by step, first with non-identifying information and then contact by letter via the Department. All the time he was growing up I tried to keep the subject of adoption as one which could be discussed but he showed no interest. In fact it was worse than that; he left the room if adoption was mentioned on the radio or television and would not discuss it with me either. He was a much-loved and protected brother to his siblings and we treated all four children in the same way. They each had their own "story" which we told from a very early age. David's story was told to all the children and they would add to his and their stories as they got older.

Eventually David was ready to obtain his documents from the Department and he arranged to pay the fee, which I gave him, and go for his counselling session. He chose to do this alone. When he returned he put his large envelope on the table and I asked how the counselling went. He told me that he was asked if he had any questions and when he said no they passed him the envelope. I was very upset because I considered, as did the regulations, that some professional counselling was mandatory. It never happened. Because of my distress and my sense of feeling threatened by the procedure of tracing his birth family, I rang the Department and asked if I could have some counselling. Great surprise was expressed and I was told there was no provision for counselling for adopting parents, only relinquishing parents and adoptees. I commented that there was a triangle of people involved in an adoption and I needed help. The officer eventually and reluctantly said I could make an appointment to see a social worker. I went to the appointment but it was no real help. The social worker again expressed surprise that I had asked for help and I left with little satisfaction.

The adoption of David was a very positive thing for our family except for my husband's parents. A married uncle had fathered a child out of wedlock and he and his wife had adopted it. Therefore my husband's parents wondered if our baby was from a similar situation. In addition they found it hard to understand how we could take just any baby without any connection to it. My father-in-law caused great unhappiness when he asked us not to name David as we had because one of the names was his, although my father-in-law was never referred to by that name. My husband wrote a very clear letter saying that all our children were equal under law and loved in the same way and we were not prepared to change the name we had registered.

David showed great promise at school and then university. He has held senior government employee positions and has done well. He is now married and has his own child. We are very close. My biggest regret is that my own marriage failed when David was in his twenties and I felt huge remorse that I had not been able to turn things around for myself and for my children, especially for David because we were supposed to have been able to offer him a secure life and I would never have anticipated a marriage breakdown as part of that security. No matter what my family says, I shall carry that guilt to my grave.