

Open Page

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Open Adoption & Family Services, Inc.

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Out of Touch Part 2:

The Other Sides of the Story—Helpful Guidance from a Birthparent

By: Katie R. Stallman, OA&FS Counselor/Mediator

There are three sides to every story. This statement is especially pertinent in the world of open adoption. In any relationship, especially when people are dealing with challenging issues, it is important to remember that we all have our own unique perspective, rooted in a complex collection of our innate personality traits combined with our individual experiences. We also have to remember that the others have their own unique perspective too—a perspective shaped by experiences we are often not aware of. And somewhere in the middle is the *shared reality*.

I was humbly reminded of this truth when I received a call from a birthmother about the article I wrote for the last issue of the Open Page. As part of our exploration on how to create and maintain a culture of openness, I submitted a piece entitled Out of Touch: Why Some Birthparents are Unable to Stay in Contact. In this article I listed a few of the most common reasons why some birthparents lose contact with the adoptive family; citing grief, lack of support, too many other responsibilities, uncertainty regarding a new role, lack of involvement in the initial adoption planning process, unstable lifestyle, pursuit of future plans/goals, and disappointment/anger with the open adoption relationship as the main reasons. However, as with all stories, there were numerous points of view that were not captured. This article, drawn from my interview with the OA&FS birthmother who contacted me, is an attempt to bring additional perspectives to light.

A Birthparent Speaks Out

“Does anybody really know what they are getting into when they place a child for adoption,” one birthmother asked? Sharing her insights, she noted that when she placed her second child for adoption, she admittedly had unrealistic expectations for the relationship. As a birthparent with one successful open adoption already, she had hoped for the same level of comfort. When she noticed the relationship was not evolving as she had envisioned, and the adoptive parents began distancing themselves from

her, she felt disempowered to do anything about it. “I stood back and watched as our relationship grew more distant, and I felt as if I was being buffered out of my child’s life. Being the one who had chosen to place my child, I didn’t feel as if I had the right to interfere. When you choose to give a child to someone else to raise, there are more questions than answers to the emotions you feel,” she said. Thankfully, this birthparent was able to process her painful feelings and empathize with the adoptive family. With a lot of support from a friend who was also touched by adoption, she was able to imagine the situation from the perspective of her child’s adoptive parents. “I don’t know what it feels like to find out you can’t physically give birth to a child. I do not know the pain and the loss that must be felt. I can imagine that it would seem easier to pull away and try to protect yourself from having to ‘share’ the child that is now yours,” she stated. She added, “But it won’t do any good for any of the parents and, more importantly, doesn’t serve the best interest of the child.”

Helpful Guidance from a Birthparent

After much hard work and processing on her part, this birthparent was able to sit down with the adoptive family and share her feelings. Their relationship is not perfect and there is still work to be done. But she now sees their relationship as a work in progress, a relationship that is growing instead of dwindling, and a relationship she has the right to comment on. It is also a relationship she still cherishes, despite her disappointments. How did she get there? What advice would she offer to other birthparents finding themselves in a similar situation?

1) Feel Empowered:

Any birthparent (or birthfamily member) struggling in the relationship needs to feel entitled to share his or her opinion. This birthparent indicated that her biggest struggle was getting over the “what right do I have to open

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Sharing the News

By: Carol Merwin, Adoptive Mother and OA&FS Boardmember

The last Open Page featured an article on why birthparents may drop out of contact. This article is intended to address why adoptive parents might slip out of touch. I wanted to share my experience, in order for birthparents to understand how hard it is for adoptive parents to bring birthparents bad news. This is my story.

My daughter and I were in a car accident. One minute we were happily singing a song, waiting for the red light to change to green, the next minute we were flying through the intersection surrounded by the sound of metal smashing and glass shattering. We were very fortunate—we were hit by a larger vehicle going 60 mph and we walked away from the accident without life-threatening injuries. When the accident happened I was in shock, blindly going through the motions of dealing with the immediate needs of Natalie crying, police arriving, towing my car, and getting my daughter and myself to the doctor to get checked for injuries. After the shock wore off, I began to worry about how much worse it could have been. One of the most awful aspects was imagining having to tell Natalie's birthparents if she had been badly hurt. As it was, I knew I needed to let my daughter's birthparents know what had happened. But as my mind was seized by post traumatic stress and visions of catastrophe, the last thing I wanted to do was call and tell them something had happened to Natalie.

Natalie was entrusted to our care because her birth parents wanted a better life for her than they could provide her at that time. We take the responsibility of that trust very seriously. But what if, despite our best efforts, Natalie's life wasn't the wonderful life we all set out to create for her? Would they regret the choice of adoption or of us as the adoptive parents? The responsibility of having someone entrust their child to your care is huge, yet adoptive parents are not immune to life's setbacks such as illness, job loss, divorce, accidents, economic downturns, etc.

I feel very fortunate to have a strong open adoption relationship and a mutual commitment to stay connected through all the ups and downs with Natalie's birthparents. When I shared the news, I was met with concern and compassion, not judgment. But if that strong relationship hadn't been there I could easily imagine dropping out of contact in the face of having to deliver bad news. I would rather say nothing than give them reason to feel disappointed in their choice or disappointed by me as a parent. I would like to offer birthparents three things I learned from my experience.

- First, please don't take a lapse in contact personally.
- Second, be aware that adoptive parents can be struggling with a sense that they need to be "perfect parents."
- And third, build a strong relationship during the good times so that trust is there to carry you, the adoptive parents, and the child you all love through a rough patch.

Carol Merwin is adoptive mom of 6 year old Natalie. She is a member of the OA&FS board and enjoys volunteering for the agency on a variety of projects.



Life Challenges Can Create Distance

By: Katie R. Stallman, OA&FS Counselor/Mediator

Adoptive parents sometimes choose not to maintain contact or to distance themselves much to the disappointment of the birth family. Sometimes the openness challenges adoptive parents far more than they feel prepared to manage. Though philosophically all OA&FS adoptive parents are committed to openness, practicing that commitment can cause challenges for some. Just like a birthparent can feel confused or uncertain about their role, adoptive parents struggle too, wondering: "Am I really this child's parent? Does the birthparent's presence challenge my connection to the child?" Though a healthy open adoption enhances an adoptive parent's security with parenting, it is easy to lose sight of the benefits when riddled with self-doubt or fear about their role. Unresolved grief can also continue to challenge adoptive parents in surprising and unexpected ways for years down the road. Rather than address the grief directly, some choose to reduce or shy away from contact, hoping their fears and insecurities will disappear on their own.

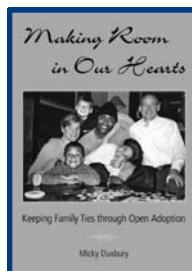
Sometimes distance is created when adoptive parents are reluctant or challenged to commit the time and energy a relationship needs to flourish. Some adoptive families feel overwhelmed as new parents, as their child grows or as their family constellation changes, by the attention an open adoption relationship truly needs. "Life just gets in the way," we hear. Over the years, we have also heard adoptive parents share some of their most pained reasons for not maintaining close contact with birthparents. When adoptive parents are at their worst, they often don't share their struggles with the agency either. After all, we are the people who "approved them" to become adoptive parents. It is hard for them to then tell us, "I am struggling. I need help." Sometimes, instead of reaching

out, people retreat to protect themselves, alienating the birthfamily in the process.

One adoptive mom going through a divorce indicated that telling the birthfamily was absolutely the most terrifying experience for her. "The birthparents entrusted their child to us. And now I had to tell them we were getting a divorce," she said. "It was awful," she reflected. Thankfully, this adoptive family had the strength to share their news and manage the consequences. Though their relationship was challenged for a time, the connections remain. Other sensitive topics that adoptive parents find difficult to share with a birthfamily include: a health challenge (with themselves or with the child), behavioral challenges/or learning disabilities the child may be struggling with, an unexpected move across or out of the country, a job loss, or other financial hardship. Basically any unexpected life challenge, which we ALL face at one point or another, can be hard to share with the people who chose you to become parents. In every adoption, when birthparents choose to place a child, there are a lot of expectations and hopes—some voiced and others less apparent. When adoptive parents feel like they are not living up to either the real or perceived expectations of the birthparent, they feel like they have failed. Unfortunately, sometimes these feelings, whatever the root may be, can contribute to adoptive parents losing touch.

What to do? It is critical for all of the adults in an open adoption to make continued efforts to communicate. No matter how much time has passed or distance created, it is never too late to reach out. Facing life challenges together and strengthening bonds through these experiences is an excellent model for the children we love.

Katie R. Stallman, LICSW, has enjoyed six inspirational years with OA&FS learning about the depths of the human spirit.



Making Room in Our Hearts: Keeping Family Ties through Open Adoption A new book by: Micky Duxbury

Adopted individuals struggle their entire lives with the question of self-identity. The hope of open adoption is that these children will develop stronger identities if they have the opportunity to foster healthy, ongoing relationships with their families of origin. Making Room in Our Hearts offers an intimate look at how these relationships can evolve over time, with real life stories from families who have experienced open adoption first-hand. This book helps both adoptive and birthparents address their fears and concerns while offering them the support to put the child's needs at the center of adoption. Openness has altered the landscape of adoption, and Making Room in Our Hearts will help us catch up to the reality that is open adoption today. This book is available through: Routledge Press at www.routledge.com

Lifegivers: Insights

By: Amy DeGennaro, OA&FS Counselor/Mediator

Thanks to an incredible group of birthmothers, this years Lifegivers Retreat was a wonderful day of relaxation, creativity and pampering. With good food, a comfortable location, meaningful conversation, and craft projects, what could be better? Planning the Lifegivers Retreat and watching it all come together is something I look forward to every year. Most of all, I enjoy meeting and spending time with these amazing women who open up their hearts and lives to us on that day. To bear witness to their stories and listen to them recall their most intimate experiences is humbling. Hearing birthmothers speak of the pride and love they have for their children, and the relationships they enjoy with them, ignites my commitment to open adoption.

Open adoption relationships, like relationships in general, require work and fine tuning from time to time. There are certainly birthparents who, as they are reading this, are struggling with challenges in their own open adoption relationships. I also know many birthparents who, while acknowledging their ongoing grief, consider themselves integral members of the family they have created for their child. It is a relationship, in their words, characterized by mutual respect and the overwhelming love they have for the child.

It has been my experience that the women present at the Lifegivers retreats feel, for the most part, positively about their open adoption and are satisfied with the nature of the relationship. Although it is impossible to generalize every birthparents' experience, there were three resounding themes that came out of this year's Lifegivers Retreat. These themes seem to capture the core reasons birthmothers feel compelled to stay in touch.

I want my child to know

When asked why maintaining an open adoption relationship is important the resounding answer was that their children would simply "know." Know why their hair is curly, why their eyes are blue, why their skin is a different color and, at some point, understand how they came to be with their adoptive family. The answers to these questions are fundamental to helping children create a healthy sense of self. Birthparents choose open adoption not for themselves but for the sake of their child and they



Lifegivers Attendees 2007

make this difficult decision out of the incredible love they feel for their child. Simply put by one birthmother when asked why maintaining an open adoption was important to her: "because I love [my daughter] and want her to know she is completely loved!"

I feel welcomed

Many birthparents have successful open adoption relationships because they feel honored and welcomed by the adoptive family. Invitations to special family gatherings, holiday get-togethers, school open houses, and birthday parties are great ways to let birthparents know that they are important and valued members of the family.

I am present

Being present in the child's life, both physically and emotionally, is critical to maintaining openness. One birthmother stated that by the adoptive family simply being open to her and keeping the child's adoption story alive by retelling bits and pieces from time to time makes her feel honored. Simply being open to openness validates the child and the birthparent experience.

Over the years, I have been continually amazed by our open adoption community and the strength of everyone involved. When birthparents and adoptive parents start the open adoption process they have no idea what the future holds for them, but are willing to put aside their fears and anxieties for the sake of the child. They recognize the incredible benefits of openness and, despite the unknown, make a loving commitment to each other and to nurturing their open adoption relationship.

Amy DeGennaro has been a Counselor/Mediator with Open Adoption & Family Services for four years. She appreciates the education and perspective her clients have given her over the years. They have all been an inspiration.

**Many thanks to all who participated in and donated to the Lifegivers Retreat this year.
Your time, energy, and wisdom are greatly appreciated.**

“This is the second year that I was present for Lifegivers and both years I have walked away feeling wonderful about the event. I appreciated so much the attendee’s willingness to share their stories and to reach out for, and offer,

support to and from one another. It felt like personal connections were made throughout the day and that when the women left, they left knowing that there were other birthmoms out there in the world they could relate to, and that understood some of their life experiences.”

*You must give yourself to love
if love is what you're after
Open up your hearts to the tears
and laughter,
And give yourself to love,
give yourself to love.”*

—Kate Wolf



LMT Deborah Waer giving Birthmother Tariq a massage



Thank you!

We had so many wonderful people give to Lifegivers this year in the form of creative gift baskets and in-kind donations. We also had a licensed massage therapist, certified Yoga instructor, and an incredible craft-maker donate their time and talents. Thank you everyone who had a hand in making this year's retreat a success!

SPECIAL THANKS GOES OUT TO:

Ryan Crosby
Cindy and Jeff Eckart
Cassie Hansbrough-Sala
Bill Hollands and John Flynn

Annie Johnson
Christa Richardson
Dawn Stahlberg and Tim Thornes
Terri Stanik
Deborah Waer

**Help us continue to support and nurture birthmothers!
Please consider a restricted gift to Lifegivers 2008.**

Just check
“Lifegivers” on the
remit envelope
enclosed.

OUT TOUCH PART 2 *continued from page 1*

up and share" feeling. Once she acknowledged this feeling, though it still troubles her at times, she was able to take the next steps toward improving the relationship.

2) Find Support:

Talk to other birthparents if you can. This particular birthparent is available to mentor other birthparents. Call the agency and ask for a mentor. Surround yourself with other people who understand and value the importance of the open adoption relationship. Thankfully, this birthparent has a very supportive husband and other people in her life who have experience with adoption and can support her choice to place her children in an open adoption. She had a lot of help processing her emotions.

3) Have the Difficult Conversation:

If things are not going the way you hoped, say something. A relationship that is struggling or really distant is not going to suddenly improve. "The more you let it go, the more the child will suffer," this birthmother stated, noting that the lack of contact in the relationship was a loss for her child. Sometimes the dread of the difficult conversation is far worse than the conversation itself.

4) Acknowledge You Don't Know How the Other Person Feels:

This birthparent had some help in identifying and appreciating the perspective of the adoptive family before even sitting down with them. She readily admitted that she did not understand their perspective, and that there was something for her to learn about them and from them through their difficult conversation. She was able to hear their side of it, despite her own emotions.

5) Be Prepared that Not Everything is Going to Go Your Way:

Relationships definitely require work. Be prepared to have more than one difficult conversation. The outcome you are hoping for will not occur overnight and it may never occur. But something will shift and change. This birthparent will likely continue to have difficult conversations with the adoptive family. But with each conversation comes more progress and understanding.

6) Talk in a Comfortable Setting:

Try to talk to each other in a place where everybody feels safe and not in a rush. For this birthparent, talking with the adoptive family alone was really helpful. She noted that she called the agency for guidance, but was glad not to ask for a formal mediation right away. She felt that immediately asking the agency to facilitate a meeting might put people on the defensive.

7) Communicate Without Accusing:

Share your perspective in a way that highlights your feelings, your wishes, and your concerns without making accusatory comments. This birthparent noted that she works very hard at being clear about what her role as a birthmother means. "I keep my parenting instincts in check," she said, allowing her to share her feelings in a way the adoptive parents can hear without feeling as though she is questioning their parental role or their ability to make decisions.

8) Focus on the Positive:

When any relationship is struggling, it is easy to let negative feelings take over. Don't do that, this birthparent cautions. "Open adoption is a roller coaster. There are going to be ups and downs. But it is worth the effort," she exclaimed. For every difficult aspect of openness, there is a joyful one too. Try to remember the moments where you felt (or still feel) valued as a birthparent. Try to remember what is working well in the relationship too.

Open adoption relationships continue to mystify and confound the average person. Notably, open adoption participants (and by that we mean ALL members of the triad) are well beyond average in their ability to communicate their feelings, and express the compassion they feel toward one another. Though these relationships are very challenging at times, thinking about the other sides of that story can bring both adoptive families and birth families greater compassion and generosity towards one another.

Katie R. Stallman sends a HUGE thank you to the birthmother who so generously shared her time and insights for this article. She is truly an inspiration and an example of the efforts and understanding needed on all sides to make open adoption relationships thrive.

Beautiful Birthmothers!

Special thanks
to birthmothers
Melissa and
Sunny who
give so much
time, energy
and wisdom to
OA&FS.



*Thank you for
sharing your selves and your stories!*

Great OA&FS Gatherings!



All left and center photos: April Seattle Open Adoption video debut
Right upper: March Eugene Adoptive Family Gathering
Right lower: February Portland LGBT Adoptive Family Gathering

Please Support Open Adoption

Like all nonprofit organizations, Open Adoption & Family Services depends on donors to expand and fulfill its mission. There are many ways to support OA&FS with gifts of all sizes.

- Donations by cash, check or credit card—always welcome and always needed.
- Automatic Deduction: Make a pledge to OA&FS, in the increments and timing of your choice, payable by automatic deductions from your bank account or credit card.
- Endowment Fund: OA&FS accepts gifts of cash, stock, property or other appreciated assets. OA&FS has established a \$25,000 endowment fund with Oregon Community Foundation. Assets are invested by OCF, and OA&FS receives distributions from the interest generated by the fund twice a year.
- Planned gifts: Make a bequest to the agency through your will or other estate-planning method, and we'll welcome you into OA&FS' Family Legacy program.

For more information please contact Development Director Kim Heavener at (503) 226-4870. Thank you for your support!

**OA&FS is a charitable organization under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.
Contributions are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.**

Agency Happenings

Welcome Angie

Angie Lunde has joined the OA&FS team as our new Counselor/Mediator for Eastern Oregon and Washington. Previously, she was Executive Director of Building Healthy Families which delivered comprehensive parent education programs including Healthy Start in Eastern Oregon. Welcome!

Welcome Maria

Maria Silva has joined the OA&FS team to assist with outreach to the Spanish speaking communities of Oregon and Washington. Maria also works as an interpreter. Welcome!

Portland Adoptive Parents: Tell your adoption story!

Information meetings for prospective adoptive parents are now being held the fourth Monday of each month at the NE McMenamins Kennedy School. Volunteer an hour to tell your adoption story and make it a date night with your sweetheart! Please call (503) 226-4870 or e-mail kimh@openadopt.org to volunteer.

OA&FS FAMILY PICNICS 2007

- Seattle: Saturday, Aug. 25
- Eugene: Saturday, Sept. 8
- Portland: Saturday, Sept. 8

It's a potluck! Please bring an item to share, according to the first letter of your last name:

A through M: Main dish

N through Z: Salad or side dish

OA&FS will provide dessert, beverages, plates, cups, utensils and napkins.

PLEASE RSVP TO 1-800-772-1115

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