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# Open Adoption From A Birth Mother's Perspective: A Story To Help Educators At All Levels Understand And Help Others Heal

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OPEN ADOPTION FROM A BIRTH MOTHER'S PERSPECTIVE:  
A STORY TO HELP EDUCATORS AT ALL LEVELS UNDERSTAND  
AND HELP OTHERS HEAL

A Thesis Presented

by

Sara Daniels Villeneuve

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## ABSTRACT

When I was just 17, and in my first year of college, I found out I was pregnant and I had to navigate my way through adoption and healing after relinquishment. Adoption is a difficult choice. There is no one path that each birth parent follows, and there is no one road to healing that works either. Each birth parent's experience is unique. Adoption and being a birth parent has historically carried a stigma of shame for "giving up" a child. In just the last 40 years, an adoption renaissance has brought new understandings about the process, the opportunities for open relationships with birth parents and their children, and the need for long-term support for birth parents and adoptive parents.

The birth parent experience can be one of love, respect, and compassion with the child and adoptive parents. I share my story to help those who face a similar situation; I hope that my story and supporting research can help others consider options and give them hope. In my profession as a high school teacher, I have had several pregnant students who faced difficult choices. I tell my story for all educators because understanding adoption and the birth parent experience can help other professionals practice empathy and understanding for their students facing this situation. Because of my own experience, I think I understand their fears and issues, and am able to give compassionate guidance.

## **DEDICATION**

To my family, in the largest possible sense: my husband, children, parents, siblings, relatives, and friends. I am so blessed to have you as the loving, encouraging force that keeps me whole. I appreciate all that you do to raise me up, hold me tight, and encourage me to continue on. With the deepest of gratitude and sincerity, I thank you for your love and support.

To all birth parents considering an adoption alternative—those before me and in the future: “From every wound there is a scar, and every scar tells a story. A story that says, I survived” --Father Craig Scott. I write my story to heal my scar just a little more; may you find a path to heal, too.

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## CHAPTER 1: A STORY TO HEAL

### 1.1 The Context

My story is that of a birth mother, a term few are aware of. I am a woman who gave her first-born child up for adoption. For 19 years I have struggled to tell my narrative. I hide it; I deny it; I put it in my little box and tuck it away. But my story does not just disappear. My story shapes my life. My story begins and ends with choices and features independence and resilience. Each time I share my story I find a way to accept it and I heal a little more. I am only one member of my story and, like it or not, it defines me. How it defines me continues to change and evolve. I share the reality now to reconcile my past, help others, and to share it with my own children. I always think it will get easier to tell my story, but each time I open it up, it is like ripping off the bandage again and again. There is no doubt that, if I could, I would go back to the very beginning and change the entire course. However, given all of the circumstances and what has happened and who I am now as a result, I could not be prouder and more thankful for the way it turned out.

How do I begin to tell a story that I have lied about for the last 18 years? I am ashamed and embarrassed. I intentionally hid my pregnancy, birth, adoption, and birth-child. I did this selfishly to protect myself from getting hurt; I thought others would think of me differently, judge me for my bad mistakes. Time does not heal all wounds. I thought if I just waited, my wound would heal and I would be ready to talk. “It has been said that time heals all wounds. I don't agree. The wounds remain. Time - the mind,

protecting its sanity - covers them with some scar tissue and the pain lessens, but it is never gone” (Kennedy 189).

Rebellion, the quarter-lifer’s quest for independence, the struggle for identity, facing difficult choices, adoption and resiliency are the themes central to this piece and will help readers find a pathway to understanding, accepting, and supporting. Valuable take-a-ways about the concepts will offer insights and provide the framework for conversations with birth mothers and young women considering adoption as an option. Educators on all levels will hear a voice of vulnerability, tenacity, and resiliency about a topic about which few people have knowledge or experience – placing a child for adoption. Understanding the journey that is possible can help both birth mothers and educators recognize the struggles and the potential of open adoptions. While there are no actual words to describe the pain of placing a child for adoption, readers may be able to better understand the depth of grief giving up a child can cause as well as the joy an open adoption can provide.

The memoir section focuses on my personal decision about whether adoption was the right choice, how I chose the type of adoption, finding the right adoptive parents, getting through the pregnancy and birth, processing the grief and loss, and building a life-long relationship with my birth-daughter.

This thesis was written not only as my memoir, but also for the reader to find conversation pathways to support others going through the same experience. But most of all this is for those potential birth mothers; I hope they find the same love, support, and healing that I have been able to find through open adoption.

## 1.2 Why SPN/eSPN Writing Methodology:

I am primarily utilizing the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) genre because Open Adoption is not a field that carries a depth of research. It is something that I have experienced and know others who have, and it is a topic that needs more available materials. Information about open adoption from a birth mother's perspective is very difficult to find. Many of the sources are marketing materials available through adoption agencies and are especially one-sided. SPN writing will allow my experience as a birth mother to be information accessible to others as well. My story is not only a story: it is also case research. "SPN writing encourages us to see ourselves as the pivotal variables in the research we do, without whom there would be no research at all. Why? Because, more often than we are willing to admit, me-search is prior to research. Our personal lives and experiences are central to our research and scholarship" (Nash and Bradley 58).

SPN writing allows me to bring in my own themes of resiliency, independence, and optimism. I hope to inspire others to have a better understanding of this option and how it can be a powerful and freeing experience. I hope that my SPN will be a voice that will allow pregnant women to feel empowered and optimistic as well. SPN writing is an opportunity, a possibility, and a belief that my story matters and others may benefit from hearing it. In his book *Liberating Scholarly Writing* (2004), author Robert Nash writes, "SPN writing begins with a nagging need on the writer's part to tell some kind of truth. And the best way to tell a truth is to tell a story. A story is always profoundly personal and unique to some degree, never replicated in exactly the same form by anyone else" (Nash 55). My story is unique and is one that others may find to be their shared

experience or a maybe a possible connection to someone in their lives. While my story matters to me, I hope that my story can also matter to others.

American scholar, author, Social Work and public speaker, Brené Brown offers amazing insight into the idea of why this type of storytelling is so important in her December 2010 TED Talk.

“I’m going to call you a researcher, I think, but I’m afraid if I call you a researcher, no one will come, because they’ll think you’re boring and irrelevant.” And I was like, “Okay.” And she said, “But the thing I liked about your talk is you’re a storyteller. So I think what I’ll do is just call you a storyteller.” And of course, the academic, insecure part of me was like, “You’re going to call me a what?” And she said, “I’m going to call you a storyteller.” And I was like, “Why not magic pixie?” I was like, “Let me think about this for a second.” I tried to call deep on my courage. And I thought, you know, I am a storyteller. I’m a qualitative researcher. I collect stories; that’s what I do. And maybe stories are just data with a soul. And maybe I’m just a storyteller.” (“The Power of Vulnerability”)

As a storyteller, therefore, I have a valuable past that has the opportunity to help others in their own journey to wholeness. Using SPN means that my stories matter and that my experiences mean something. Prior to learning about SPN writing, I felt that all research had to be quantifiable and numerical and that I had to have data and qualified references. However, SPN allows my personal experience to be part of the data. It is research with the small “r.” There is no wrong information if it comes from actual life and practice. SPN writing allowed me to look at my story and connect to others who

have a shared experience as well as find connections in other areas. My authenticity in retelling my story has the power to help others and heal myself at the same time.

In addition to SPN writing, I also include Epistolary Scholarly Personal Narrative (eSPN) writing in this piece. Utilizing letters allows me to speak to a very narrow audience at key points. Letters allow me, as the writer, to authentically share myself in as near a dialogue as I can with my intended audience. Many counselors ask their clients to write letters as part of their therapeutic process to meaning making. In many ways, the letters that I have included are both to convey a message and for my own healing.

## CHAPTER 2: MY STORY

### 2.1 Seeking Independence:

My story really begins after my senior year in high school when I started dating a bad-boy that my parents did not approve of. At the time I was going through a break-up – my first and only serious high school boyfriend. “Tom” rode up in his motorcycle one day while I was filling up at the local gas station, and he told me he had heard I was available. “Wanna go out sometime?” Hmm, Tom had a motorcycle. Tom had a wild side that I witnessed myself several times while knocking back a few beers at big parties. Tom was older and had a job, obviously far more mature than my now ex-boyfriend. Tom also had a reputation for smoking weed, a “minor” overdose, and recklessness. But I was only impressed by the fact that it was summer and Tom had a motorcycle.

Needless to say, my parents were less than pleased when Tom came to pick me up at their house one afternoon. He pulled in on his crotch-rocket Honda 600CC. I swear, he had the leather jacket, jeans and a t-shirt, and slicked hair. To me, it was like hot hunk Brad Pitt had just pulled into my driveway. To my parents it was bad boy James Dean had just shown up. My parents barely said a peep, however, and let me flex my 17-year old independence. I climbed on the back of the motorcycle, pulled on my helmet, and we took off.

I think my parents were trying to trust me. “Parents walk a tightrope between wanting their children to be confident and able to do things for themselves and knowing the world can be a place with threats to their children’s safety.” (“Independence – Helping Your Child Through Early Adolescence” 1). My parents allowed me the respect and trust to take this risk. They knew Tom well enough to know that he had a bit of a

reputation, but that I too was strong enough to take care of myself. Some might believe that if they had closed that window of independence, maybe this entire story would not have ever happened. That is not my thought. That is not my belief. Independence did not create my problem; it eventually made me strong enough to seek positive solutions.

Tom and I went out several times, and the relationship was purely fun for me. I would be heading to college in the fall and I was not looking for any sort of heartbreak like I had just gone through. I wanted to enjoy the summer; party with friends and have fun. I felt that teenage invincibility. Our days and nights together were spent with our friends, imbibing toxic amounts of beer in the neighbors' fields with other townies, taking long motorcycle rides down winding mountain roads, seeing drive-in movies, spotlighting for deer. There was never much depth to our relationship; we did not talk about love, we did not talk about futures, we looked to have fun together.

A few weeks later I started school at the state university. Tom and I spent much less time together. However, on the night of his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday he and his friends stopped by my dorm room. They called up from the front desk and begged to come upstairs to my room. The Resident Assistant was obviously annoyed and questioned them. Clearly they had been drinking, and wanted to hang out with a bunch of college girls. They had alcohol, why would we not invite them in? Was that not what college was all about? My roommate and I drank with them late into the night.

Tom stayed that night. We had spent other nights together too, but on that night, I knew we were not going to stay together. He was not what I was looking for, and I do not think I was what he was looking for either. Our summer together had been epic in my eyes, those of a 17-year-old girl. But in hindsight, it was shallow, wasted, and

insubstantial. I had moved on to college life. We did not see each other much after that night. Calls went unreturned. Schedules were too busy. We parted our ways without even talking about it. Life went on.

## **2.2 Figuring it Out**

A few months later I started to notice. I know that sounds ridiculous. A few months? I felt tired; I felt nauseous. Who did not with all the college late nights? I know that I should have noticed...I think now that I chose not to pay attention to the signs. I do not know what it took to shed my denial, but I finally went to Planned Parenthood alone and got tested. Six months along! I was dumbfounded. I could not speak, could not react. I sat with a pregnancy counselor who told me about options, but when I left the building my “options” were few. About 750,000 teenagers get pregnant each year and about one-third of these teens get an abortion. “Currently, 24 of every 1,000 teens has an abortion. This means that over 200,000 teens get an abortion every year” (“Teen Pregnancy Statistics” 1). I was now a number in a very startling statistic. I had never considered this would be me.

Late term abortions are illegal in the state of Vermont. That was not an option; I was not even sure if it was one that I would have considered. It was almost a relief that it was not even on the table. Regardless, this was not a pregnancy that I wanted. This was not a child that I wanted to raise. I thought the wildest thoughts about how to have the child without my family and friends knowing, and what I would do with the baby once it was born. These outlandish thoughts kept me up late at night tossing and turning; how had I gotten myself into this? How can I get myself out? My independent heart kept me from seeking the help of others. I did not want anyone to know.

My tall, thin frame hid my pregnancy well. For a long time I could barely tell that my body had changed. But I was afraid others could see it. I started to go to the dorm showers at strange times to avoid anyone seeing me in a towel. I wore baggy shirts. When I sat with friends, I covered my stomach with a throw pillow. I ate less, hoping to avoid any weight gain. I did not go home to visit my family in fear that they would see. I maintained that I had gained the “freshmen 15” from all the food options on campus. My mother worked at the university at the time. I would breeze in and out of her office with a smile—it was a safer way to stay connected and hide my physical shape. I felt shame. I had let my parents down; I had friends and family but no one I would turn to. I was in this alone. I almost began to believe I could keep it a complete secret from everyone. It was not long before I had to really work to hide my secret. I even rejected confidential help. Planned Parenthood had been calling my dorm room. Obviously concerned about the way I had left their office, they wanted to counsel me and help. I had hung up on them, lied and told them they had the wrong number, and even told them, “Sara’s not here right now, can I take a message?” My roommate had fielded a few of the messages when I was out. She did not seem to know anything and she did not ask me anything directly either, just little notes on my desk that *Suzy from Planned Parenthood called--call her back*. I never returned those calls. Eventually Suzy stopped calling.

Now, I cannot pinpoint exactly what led me to the day that I opened the yellow pages of the phone book. It was probably mid-March when I realized that I had to do something. This was not going to go away. I remember making two phone calls. One to the Lund Center, a place I had heard girls could go and give birth, like some sort of residential facility. Our conversation was brief. I needed my parents’ consent and

insurance. I decided that was not an option. I would need to find another way. I would do this on my own, somehow.

### **2.3 The Adoption Option**

Phone call number two was to an adoption agency, Friends in Adoption. I simply picked them alphabetically. If there had been a place called “Acme Adoption” they would have gotten my phone call. A friendly voice answered the phone and listened. I do not recall what information I shared at that moment, but I scheduled to meet with Dawn, an adoption specialist. She said she would meet me anywhere. I picked the bagel shop downtown. Not long after that phone call, we met.

I cannot express just how surreal my conversation with Dawn was. She told me about open adoption, where I could pick the adoptive parents, maintain agreed upon contact with the family, and maybe even a relationship with my birth child. Dawn spoke from experience as an adoptive mother in an open adoption. She had started the Friends in Adoption Agency because she and her husband were turned down by every agency they applied to. “We were told we weren’t married long enough, we were of different religions, or my husband’s hair was too long. We weren’t the average middle-American couple,” she said. But the more she got turned down, the more Dawn became determined. She heard of a pregnant woman in Florida, but interstate adoption was illegal at the time. “The only option,” Dawn said, “was an ‘open adoption’ under which the pregnant woman and her husband and daughter would come to Vermont.” (Dawn: Founder and Director 1). Friends in Adoption provided a service to both birth parents and to adoptive parents that was not available anywhere else in Vermont. The stigma and

secrecy of adoption did not exist at Friends in Adoption, which was the opposite of my mindset at the time.

Open adoption – I had never even heard of that before, and at first exposure I was taken aback. That was not at all what I expected or what I thought I wanted. I wanted the entire nightmare to be over. I wanted to walk away and never think about the baby again. Start life fresh. Dawn said that was an option too, but that research showed in time most birth mothers had curiosity, questions, and often wanted to find their child. The idea appealed to me. I did not want to have more doubts; I was already living in what felt like constant regret. I could not spend the rest of my life feeling this same sense of guilt and remorse.

Then she pulled out brochures. These were not adoption information brochures; they were brochures about families. These colorful brochures displayed pictures of men and women, men and men, women and women, and families of all combinations seeking additional children to fill their hearts. Their houses, pets, and family vacations were illustrated in the colorful images. They shared their stories about wanting to adopt, about trying to start a family naturally, and how much they wanted a child of their own to love. They talked about the quality schools in their neighborhoods, the access to the best health care, and the beach houses and vacations they go on each year. Each family had their own plea as to why they would be the best birth family for me to pick. I glanced through these colorful family stories and then I simply thanked Dawn for her time.

I walked out of that meeting even more confused than when I had walked in. Select a family? Stay in contact? This nightmare was never going to end. How could I continue to hide this pregnancy if I was getting letters from the family? Was traditional

adoption still my best option? The baby on the firehouse doorstep started to sound like the best way out for me. No trace. Deliver this baby in some public bathroom and drop the orphan off.

Those crazy thoughts ran through my head over and over again. However, reality set in, too. I did not know how to deliver a baby. I did not even know what to expect when this child came out of my body. I would have to go to a hospital, but how could I do that without my parents knowing? Without their insurance being billed? I needed support and this lady, Dawn from Friends in Adoption, was the only person I had told about my situation. In my continued effort to keep the baby a secret, I called Dawn again.

#### **2.4 Taking the First Steps**

Friends in Adoption mailed me a packet of family profiles (those same brochures I had seen at my initial meeting). These profiles were narrowed down from their entire database of families waiting for a child. They were selected based on “my criteria” that I had given to Dawn over the phone. I wanted a married couple. I wanted people who did not live in a city (I was a country girl after all!), and I wanted them to be “young enough to be alive while the child grew up.” My criteria were pretty open. And that criteria was what Dawn had mailed to me in a manila envelope full of families who wanted my baby to my college post office box.

I drank in the family information. They all seemed so nice. Lovely homes, financial stability, vacations, cute pets, and some that had already adopted or had their own biological children. All of them seemed like they would make wonderful parents on paper, so who was I to judge who should get my child? How would I narrow down these

25+ families to a few to start having conversations with? What would be my next criterion?

During all of this, time was going by, and as nature goes, I wasn't getting any less pregnant. It had been more than a month since my original visit to Planned Parenthood when I found out I was at least six months pregnant. It was already April and I had only about a month until my freshman year would be ending, exams would be over, and the baby would be born. I started to fear the realities – How was I going to “get away” with giving birth without telling anyone? What if this baby did not come before school was over and I had to go back home before it was born? I would certainly be found out. What if I went into labor while I was taking my exams? I had no answers to any of these questions. That was just about the time that my secret came out.

## **2.5 Answering to My Family**

I was at home for the weekend, staying at my parent's house for God only knows what required family event. I remember sitting on the end of the couch, throw pillow in my lap to cover my stomach, and watching television. My mother came into the living room and sat in the old wooden rocking chair beside me. She finally confronted me with the question that I am sure that she had been trying to ask, “Are you pregnant?”

“Mom, of course not! I've just gained some weight, so what.”

“Prove it.”

“What?”

“Prove it.”

What seemed like harsh, cold sentiments at the time were the exact words I really needed. I needed to be called out on my lie. I needed someone to force me to explain myself.

Tears streamed down my cheeks, and in turn, down the cheeks of my mother as well. I ran to my room and sobbed. My biggest fear had come true; someone found out.

I do not remember too much now about how the following events occurred. Things blurred together. I demanded that I was putting the baby up for adoption. She insisted that I see a doctor since the child had not received any prenatal care. I insisted that it be a doctor who knew nothing about me, and at a place I would not see anyone that I knew. She agreed and we went to a health center several towns away. Since they were just a general health center, they sent me for an ultrasound at the hospital right near the college. I waited in that waiting room, head down, praying that I would not see anyone I knew. And of course I did run into someone. When they asked me why I was there, I quickly lied and said to have my lungs checked. Deeper I continued into the deceit of my actions.

As I lay on the examining bed, waiting to see the blurry image of the baby inside me on the monitor, I sobbed. What prompted me to ask the next question I will never know, "Can you tell me the gender?"

A baby girl. I was going to have a baby girl. And soon.

The ultrasound technician said that I was probably at 34 weeks. I only had a few weeks left to finalize whatever my plan was going to be. (God forbid I have the baby early.)

## **2.6 Finding a Forever Family**

I sat alone in my dorm room on the top of my loft bed pouring over family profiles. I kept them tucked inside my pillow, sure that my roommate would never look there for anything. Scared, confused, and doing everything I could to maintain my secret, I hoped that a solution would come to me. I had narrowed down my selection to a few families that I would call. These families, that were so desperate to adopt a child, were trying as hard as they could to make the process easy for the birthparent. They had 1-800 numbers that rang at their homes. I called one family.

I remember the first family that I called. What an awkward conversation! It was like some strange blind date with uncomfortable questions. I had no idea what exactly to ask them, and there were a lot of long silent pauses. I did not know how to answer some of their questions. “What type of contact would you like to maintain?” “Could we be in the hospital room during the delivery?” “Are you thinking of naming the baby?” All of these questions were topics I had not even considered. How could I answer these pivotal questions without time to consider the ramifications of each?

What I did know after that first conversation was that I needed to think seriously about what I wanted. In an open adoption I would be able to make important decisions from the beginning. I could choose what I needed personally both in the immediate and in the long term. The decisions were not binding, but they would shape the adoption and even the list of families that I would be picking from.

I went home that weekend and called a few other families from the privacy of my parents’ home. I did not have to worry about my roommate accidentally walking into the middle of a phone call. So I hid up in my room, constantly annoyed by my mother’s

incessant checking in to see how things were going. I finally found a family that I thought would be a good fit. After our phone conversation they seemed kind, they could provide a comfortable life for the child, the father was a lawyer, the wife stayed at home. No other children. But now what? We arranged a meeting time to just talk.

To complicate the story further, Tom, the baby's birth father, came into the picture again. The complicated story has less to do with me than the agency. They strongly encouraged me to contact him. In the end, I did feel a responsibility to involve him in the decision. "Experts point out that only a very small percentage of birth fathers historically have taken an active part in the decisions around adoption, but some agencies report that in recent years, a quarter or more relinquishments have included active involvement of birth fathers" ("Teen Pregnancy and Adoption Statistics" 1). Tom had rights, both legal and, I believed, fundamental to human emotion as well.

Tom had made the last few weeks a challenge for me as well. Of course he was shocked to discover that I had not contacted him when I found out if I was pregnant. He asked the, "How do you know it's mine?" I felt ashamed. What did he think of me? Tom never demanded a paternity test, although I am sure that he and his family wanted it. There was no question it was his; there had been no one else. Whether he believed me at face value did not matter to me. This was his child but it did not have to be his problem.

Tom waffled about whether he would sign the relinquishment of parental rights form. At one time he said he and his live in girlfriend would take the baby. (No Way! She'd just been investigated for child abuse!) At times I was worried that my decision to involve Tom would jeopardize the entire adoption. I would now have the responsibility

of my own child, my unplanned child, for the rest of my life. But I was only 18! I had other plans for my life.

However, Tom was finally willing to meet with families. The family that I had called and told him all about jumped at the opportunity to meet. They came to Vermont from Connecticut and met us at a local restaurant for dinner. We sat and talked. Again, more socially awkward moments. They tried to get to know us, find out our plans, and certainly their priority was to woo us for our baby. They retold everything we had already read about them in their colorful printed profile. They detailed the stories of their luxurious family vacations, their profitable careers, and their ability to provide everything our baby could ever want – everything I could not offer my baby. I left that interview feeling worse about myself and about my devastating predicament.

Moments after they left, Tom looked at me and said, “No way. They are way too old. I want someone who can play outside with my kid, someone who will still be alive when they graduate from high school.” Those words were a breakthrough. Tom had an opinion. Tom wanted some say, too.

Exams ended, I moved back home for the summer, and week 40 came. Still no perfect family for our child. Phone calls, interviews, procrastination, and more disagreements caused a terrible weight of stress for both Tom and me. Dawn had told me to be patient and that there would be foster care available for the baby if we did not have a family selected yet. She helped me draft my birth plan, outlining exactly what I wanted to have happen in the delivery room, immediately after the birth, and even in the days after the birth as we continued to find the right family. While this was supposed to bring

reassurance that the wheels were in motion and that Friends in Adoption would be there every step of the way, instead it felt like bricks on my chest suffocating me.

## **2.7 “The Day” Arrived**

Then it happened. 12:00 at night I knew something was happening. I had no idea what to expect, but I knew I was not going to be able to go back to sleep either. I walked into my parent’s bedroom and told them that I thought I was in labor. I was having contractions and I was ready to go.

It was a long and physically uncomfortable ride to the hospital. Tom and I had agreed that he could be present for the birth. We had tried to call Tom before we left, but he did not answer his cell phone. His parents could not reach him either. He had gone out with some friends. It did not entirely matter, I was in labor and the baby was coming.

My parents and I arrived at the hospital and were brought directly to the delivery room – this large sterile room where no one and nothing I did was going to stop everything from changing in my life forever. The pain, fear, and anxiety overwhelmed me. My parents were equally as scared for me. My mother sat in the corner of the delivery room with tears in her eyes supporting me through my pain and tears, and my father paced outside in the hallway.

A short while after I arrived, Tom walked in with his friend Steve. They were nearly removed by the nurses from the Labor and Delivery wing because he smelled of booze and his eyes were blood-shot. “All this stress, I had to go out with the boys,” he explained. And as much as I understood what he was talking about, I hated him for not being there when I called. Even though there had been no romantic connection between us for nearly a year, I felt close to him as he held my hand in the delivery room.

Thankfully, labor and delivery did not last long. And then there she was. She was handed to me and I just cried. She was so beautiful. She had dark hair, perfect fingers and toes, and an adorable button nose. But what I remember the most was that she was just so tiny. This innocent being was depending on me to find her the perfect family. Was I making a huge mistake? How could I give this child away? Should I keep this baby? And then Tom and I named her, a name we had picked just a few days before, Jayda Marie.

As per my birth plan request, I was transferred to a different wing of the hospital. I did not think I would want to be around other mothers as they gave birth to their children. I did not want to run the risk of knowing someone in the masses of families and friends who came to visit the other new parents. I was placed on a general patient floor in a room of my own. Jayda came in and out of my room at my request. For the next 24 hours I rested, recovered and thought a lot. I was alone. I felt alone. I felt despair.

## **2.8 Our First Goodbye**

My parents and I knew that if we brought the baby home there would be no adoption. I planned to be discharged as soon as the doctor would allow me to go home. A local foster care family came to pick Jayda up to take her to the foster care home. I had never known true heartache until those moments. I watched them bundle Jayda into a car seat and take her away. She was so fragile and delicate. I questioned my decision over and over as they buckled her into the car seat. I wanted to scream, “STOP!” However, I kept my composure on the outside as my heart broke.

That night Dawn called me at home to check in. She wanted to see how I was doing personally, but all I wanted to talk about was if she could tell me how Jayda was.

Had she heard anything about how she was settling in? Was she taking a bottle okay? Maternal instincts of protection are innate and instinctive. As much as I wanted to distance myself, my mind would not stop worrying. Dawn shared whatever information she had and assured me that this foster family was someone that Friends in Adoption trusted and had used for several other adoptions. The father and mother were not only well equipped to take care of Jayda, but they were providing her the love and attention she needed.

And then I asked the question, “Can I visit her?” Dawn paused. I do bit think many other birth mothers probably request this after giving birth. I could tell Dawn did not know exactly how to respond.

“Well, yes you can. You have not relinquished your parental rights so she is still your child. I can arrange a time for you to visit her at her foster family’s home.”

“Can I take her somewhere for a private visit if I want to?” I did not even know if I would want to do this, but all I could think of was how hard it would be to visit with my baby in someone else’s home. I just wanted to know if it was an option.

“Yes you can.” A long pause came. “Sara, you can still change your mind.”

## **2.9 Relinquishment**

This is the crux of the story. How does a successful open adoption heal the factors related to guilt and grief of relinquishment? “While numerous studies have documented the negative consequences of parenting “too early,” few studies have examined the outcomes experienced by adolescents who relinquish their children. There are two primary reasons for this lack of information. First, relinquishment is a relatively rare event. Second, it has been difficult to collect data on women who relinquish their

children because adoption has traditionally been a highly confidential process” (McLaughlin 28).

Only a week after Jayda’s birth, Tom and I found a family that we thought just might be perfect to raise her. The Bennetts. Their family profile included the most adorable pictures of a family vacationing, an older sibling for Jayda photographed while swinging in the backyard of a quaint suburban home just three hours from where we lived. We agreed to meet the Bennetts at the Vermont Teddy Bear Factory for a visit. Together we wanted to introduce them to Jayda. It would be a relaxed environment to get to know their family.

The visit could not have been a more perfect fit for what Tom and I wanted for Jayda. Watching Martha, the tall, thin, kind mother interact with her husband Bob, the “excessively tall” husband, and their 6-year-old daughter Eliza was like watching a 50’s television family. Martha and Bob were so sweet. I observed them as they held Jayda so gently, singing to her and introducing her to the teddy bears in the gift shop. As I watched, I could also see my physical resemblance to them: tall, brown hair, thin build, yet soft and gentle. They were like my own family already. I identified with them both personally and physically. I felt certain that Jayda would grow up happy in a home that most on-lookers would never even pause to consider if she was adopted or their own biological daughter. They could provide Jayda with the stability, opportunity, and life that she deserved. Our day together never felt awkward the way previous interviews with other families left me feeling. They engaged Tom and me in conversation. They wanted to know about us, and they wanted to get to know Jayda and every moment of her brief life.

## **2.10 Saying Goodbye**

It did not take much for Tom and me to agree that the Bennetts were the perfect family for Jayda. I contacted Dawn at Friends in Adoption and she told me she would begin the arrangements. When I called Martha and told her, she wept with happiness. Through the tears she eked out the words, “Thank you, Sara. Thank you.”

Although I did not choose to parent her, I ensured that my child would have a stable family, a wonderful life and opportunities that I could not offer to her. But the day that the Bennetts drove away with her was the day I first understood true heartbreak. Tom and I said goodbye to Jayda at a boathouse on the shores of Lake Champlain. It was a beautiful backdrop for our heartbreaking goodbye. I wrapped Jayda up in a red quilt I had as a child and snuggled a stuffed puppy dog next to her chin to “guard” her. Bob and Martha told us that they would be changing Jayda’s name. (Dawn at Friends in Adoption had prepared us for this. Most families do change the baby’s name.) Martha spoke so sweetly to me as she said, “We’d like to call her Margaret Mary Jayda Bennett to honor my mother, Bob’s mother and the name you gave her.” There could never be enough hugs and kisses in a situation like this. Finally, we said goodbye as they gently tucked her into her car seat for the ride home. We watched them drive away and I crumbled into the seat of my car.

## CHAPTER 3: MY LIFE WAS NEVER THE SAME AND THAT IS OKAY

### 3.1 What Followed

Placing a child for adoption was a life changing experience. I wept on and off for months. There were days that I considered some of what I now see as the craziest of options – retracting the adoption and reestablishing my parental rights, changing from an open adoption to a closed adoption, moving far away, moving closer to my baby. Shutting myself up at home and not coming out. Partying to forget about my troubles. All of these were self-destructive.

I also did not want to reach out to receive support. I wanted to handle it on my own – put on my “game face” and forget anything had ever happened. But I could not. My new reality was that I was a birth mother, and my child’s family wanted to make me a part of her life.

How many times have I heard  
the word “choose” in this sense?  
That I CHOSE not to Parent  
a child of my womb.  
That I CHOSE not to Love  
a piece of my Soul.  
That I CHOSE not to hear  
her very first laugh.  
That I CHOSE not to hold her  
deep into the night.  
That I CHOSE not to help her  
walk her very first step.  
What I REALLY did “CHOOSE” was  
A family to Love her  
as much as they could.  
A house to be her home  
with her very own bed.  
A better Life than I could provide  
In my circumstance.  
And although I know that I can never have back  
those thing that I've never lost.

I know that she has them.  
And that must be enough.  
To the parents who I “chose”. Thank you. (Leonard 1).

I knew I had to figure out a way to both deal with my emotions and continue with my life. I had, after all, made the decision so that I could carry on with my life. I had to accept that change was a part of living and my life was forever changed. The American Psychological Association defines this as one of ten ways to build resilience. “Accepting circumstances that cannot be changed can help you focus on circumstances that you can alter” (“The Road to Resilience” 2). My parents had agreed with my wishes to tell nobody, not even my immediate family. I would tell others if and when I was ready. I needed to feel in control of my situation and in control of my future. I was not prepared to tell my story and open up the wounds that were so fresh.

In my heart I knew that there was no going back and that I had made the right decision. The circumstances that my child would have faced had I chosen to keep her would have never been as prosperous as the life she was going to have the opportunity to lead. And I, too, had my education to complete. I kept my mind and my body so busy at work and with friends that I did not allow myself time to think about my heartache. Late nights alone in my room I would sob. I had no one to relate this pain to. I knew no one with a similar experience. I just wanted to put it behind me but my mind would not quit. However, I had big things to come. My own personal situation was going to be able to continue: I would go back to college in the fall; I would go back to being an 18-year-old young woman. But what would never change is that I had “given up” my child. Could I come to terms with that?

### 3.2 Missing Margaret

Adoption has become synonymous with the phrase “giving up,” as though you have quit on someone or something. There is a defeatist tone that is engrained in society’s view of birth parents—they “give up” their children to adoption. However, I did not give up my child; I chose to place my child in an adoptive family. I was able to choose her religion, know her family’s traditions, pick family pets, and know that she would have a sibling in life. I did not give up my child; I gave my child a wonderful life. I tried to take the most difficult situation and find the best possible outcome for everyone involved.

According to the Mayo Clinic, one of the best ways to build resilience is to be proactive. “Don’t ignore your problems. Instead, figure out what needs to be done, make a plan and take action” (“Resilience Training” 2). Friends in Adoption gave me the opportunity to plan a beautiful future for my child. As easy as it would have been to turn my back and run, I chose a path that allowed me to be involved, stay connected, and be a part of her life – not apart from her life. While there is comfort in that relationship, pain continues to exist. Lorraine Dusky, a “first mother” writes about this enduring pain in her book *Birthmark*.

“A mother’s responsibility to her child begins with birth and does not end with adoption.”

“I may look normal, but there’s something a bit off. I cry much too easily, for starters.

“I am a mother without a child.”

“The child was everywhere. True, I stopped thinking about her every hour, and maybe sometimes several days would manage to slip by...But then

something...commercials for gentle Ivory Snow, safe for baby...  
“I would always be a woman who gave away a child.”

“They call me ‘biological mother.’ I hate those words. They make me sound like a baby machine, a conduit, without emotions. They tell me to forget and go out and make a new life. BUT I AM A MOTHER.” (Dusky 26)

I, too, was a very young “mother without a child.” The first days were the darkest. I deflected my parents’ attempts to distract me from my own grief. “I’m fine!” was my repeated retort. They continually begged me to see a therapist, talk to someone about it, or tell my best friends what was going on. I took a different approach; I kept it to myself. I hid it inside. I bottled it up and pushed on with my life. I worked long hours at my summer job waitressing at the local restaurant and snuck out after work to drink with friends. On the off chance that I stayed home, I cried. I hid in my bedroom and sobbed. As long as I was busy I was able to keep my mind off from the heartache I was feeling. The days felt endless. In *My Sister’s Keeper* (2010) Jodi Picoult expressed this well: “The human capacity for burden is like bamboo-far more flexible than you’d ever believe at first glance” (Picoult 236). I knew I was falling into a depression and I had to find a way out of the dark abyss that awaited me. My life was forever changed; there was no turning back. How was I going to cope?

I constantly thought about Margaret. I would see young babies in the stores and my heart would hurt. I would see mothers holding hands with their daughters and I longed to hold Margaret’s hand. Every song reminded me of the pain that I was going through. One song reminded me just how close we were to each other.

## **Somewhere Out There**

Somewhere out there  
Beneath the pale moonlight  
Someone's thinking of me  
And loving me tonight

Somewhere out there  
Someone's saying a prayer  
That we'll find one another  
In that big somewhere out there

And even though I know  
How very far apart we are  
It helps to think we might be wishing  
On the same bright star

And when the night wind  
Starts to sing a lonesome lullaby  
It helps to think we're sleeping  
Underneath the same big sky

Somewhere out there  
If love can see us through  
Then we'll be together  
Somewhere out there  
Out where dreams come true

And even though I know  
How very far apart we are  
It helps to think we might be wishing  
On the same bright star

And when the night wind  
Starts to sing a lonesome lullaby  
It helps to think we're sleeping  
Underneath the same big sky

Somewhere out there  
If love can see us through  
Then we'll be together  
Somewhere out there  
Out where dreams come true...

("Linda Ronstadt - Somewhere Out There Lyrics" 1)

One of the first approaches to “seeing love through,” as Linda Ronstadt sang, was to stay in close contact with the Bennetts. I had to navigate this new relationship and find a comfortable place. What an awkward place to figure out! How would I fit in to this family and how would this family fit in to mine? I had never met anyone who was part of an open adoption. I did not know the possibilities, or how to even approach the relationship. I knew that I wanted to be a part of my child’s life, but how would I do that without stepping on toes? What could I have a say in now that I had relinquished my parental right?

In many ways I was undergoing a rebirth of myself and reinventing my place in the world. I was no longer just a young college student; I was a child’s birth mother and at the same time I was harboring that secret. I needed to find agreement between that which really mattered to me and the goals that I had for myself as well.

I remember right after our first goodbye and Margaret arrived home with the Bennetts, they left for Martha’s Vineyard for a family vacation. Margaret was only a few weeks old at the time. In a phone call with Martha I remember the simple question, “How is Margaret doing?” It broke my heart to hear that she was having a hard time sleeping, and that she was colicky. I wanted to scream into the phone, “Why did you take a newborn baby there? Don’t you think such a small infant should be home and in their own bed!” But who was I to tell this woman, a mother of a six year old and the adoptive mother of my child, how to parent? I had to find my place, bite my tongue, and respect their parenting choices for their new baby...not mine, theirs. I told myself instead that my child was having opportunities to travel already, see amazing places, and be with

wonderful people. Margaret had a wonderful road ahead of her. I had college to return to.

### **3.3 Shame**

The fall of my sophomore year approached quickly and I continued to hide my secret from my friends and most of my family. I tried to continue on as usual, however this was an entirely new life for me. I had to change my thinking about who I was and what I valued. This shame has a solid history in the literature about adoptions.

“In the early 1930s, it was believed that adoption should be a discreet process and that secrecy should be maintained to protect not just the adoptive family, but also the birth parents. American society believed that a relationship between the child, the adoptive family and the birth parents would cause undue stress and emotion for everyone involved. These assumptions, presumed to be adoption facts, were furthered by the societal view that being an unwed mother was shameful” (“How Adoption Has Evolved Toward Openness.” 2).

My only background about adoption fit the traditional adoption style. I had to find a new path that would work for me. Yet I did not know how to get past the grief and humiliation I felt. Bouncing back is not easy when you do not call on your friends. I did not want to share my story with them; I did not want to feel the shame and embarrassment of what I was going through.

I needed to learn how to forgive myself. I had to redefine the definition of adoption in my life. Jim Gritter, the author of *Hospitious Adoption* takes the approach that practicing goodwill, respect, and courage within the realm of open adoption makes the process move smoother and enriches children's lives (Gritter 18). Friends in

Adoption was built on this premise. I was determined that I could act and love with goodwill, respect, and courage. I had to somehow reestablish my resiliency.

“When resilient people fail, they forgive themselves. People with greater resiliency don’t experience fewer life stressors. However, they tend to recover after crises faster, true both for when they feel they managed the crisis successfully and for when they feel they blew it. This suggests that part of resiliency may be forgiving yourself for the times when you don't shine as brightly as you'd like.” (Verlik 1)

It was not an easy path to forgiving myself; it really began with getting to know my child.

### **3.4 Our First Reconnection**

Several weeks after Margaret was born her parents invited my family and me to attend her Catholic baptism. This was to be a milestone in Margaret’s religious life and one which I could relate to as a Catholic. I was proud to be attending but also unsure how the event would be for me. I did not know how the Bennetts would introduce me to family and friends who were attending the service and the celebration at their home afterward. I wanted to be present at this event but I was worried about how I would feel. I was once again afraid of being judged as the girl who gave up her baby. I had not let go of that self-inflicted title yet. It would be a long three-hour drive to attend the baptism, but I knew I did not want to miss it either. This was going to be the first visit to her home and the first visit with my baby since the adoption. I decided that I was most comfortable going down the night before and leaving after the church service. I did not quite feel ready to be in such a casual social setting answering unpredictable questions. However, I did want to be there at the church and see her home.

The visit to the Bennetts' home was the first day of my self-forgiveness. As my parents and I walked into their 1920 Sears craftsman-style kit home, I was comforted and thankful. The Bennetts had a lovely home, well decorated with thoughtful details. The hardwood floors, moldings, and trim were classic and dignified to me. I could feel the love that filled the home as I walked in. Martha's antique doll collection in the foyer, the beautiful hand-stenciled stars on the ceiling in the dining room, the children's finger paint handprints were all personal touches that invited me in. I was so thankful; I could finally breathe a sigh of relief knowing that Margaret had a beautiful home to grow up in, located in a quaint suburban community where the streets were lined with safe sidewalks and neighborhood parks. There was a neighborhood playground practically in her backyard, a library just down the block, and the center green just steps away from their dooryard. It was picturesque, the type of town that I wanted to live in as I got older. It affirmed that my decision was the right one.

We celebrated a lovely evening together. I really got to know Bob and Martha and their oldest daughter Elizabeth that night. However, the highlight, of course, was holding my beautiful child. Margaret was so sweet. Her cheeks had started to fill out; she was beginning to look like the Gerber baby. She was perfect. I knew that she was so loved. Her sister Eliza doted on her, holding Margaret's hand as I held her in my arms. I knew I could let go of some of the nagging questions and concerns I had been holding onto. I now saw just how precious she was adored. "The mental and physical space we create by letting go of things that belong in our past gives us...the option to fill the space with something new" (Sarkis 2). I was finding room in my heart and my mind to love this child rather than to regret and hurt. It was not just me that that my child was

beautiful, she really was valued as a treasured gift in their family. I rocked her in my arms, whispered my love to her in her ear, and felt her warmth warm my heart. She was going to have a beautiful life, and I realized, so was I.

The next day I awoke excited for the baptism, but I still remained nervous about the reception I would receive. What would be said as I was introduced? What questions would people ask? We arrived at the church and quietly took our seats just a few rows behind Margaret. The Bennetts recognized us with their eyes, acknowledging our arrival, and the service started soon after. It was not long before I received a beautiful complement. Bob's mother, 78 at the time, leaned back and said in a voice much louder than usually "acceptable" at church, "She is the most beautiful gift and we could never thank you for all of the love she brings to us." Without even being introduced I knew that the Bennetts had already made me a part of their family.

I had to navigate this new role and accept that I had already become a beloved member of their clan. I sat behind the Bennetts in a pew with my parents. I continued to watch Grandma Bennett throughout the service. She constantly reached forward to interact with Margaret who was propped up with her head just peaking over her father's shoulder. Grandma Bennett would lovingly pinch Margaret's cheeks and coo at her. Margaret always returned the gesture with a smile.

*"Family isn't always blood. It's the people in your life who want you in theirs; accept you for who you are. The ones who would do anything to see you smile and who love you no matter what."* This was a quote that I had had a magnet of in my high school locker. My best friend Jessica had given it to me at Christmas when I was 16. The quote now meant something completely different to me. This was my new family. They had

accepted me into their family. Family had an even broader and richer meaning to me. My parents were equally involved in Margaret's new life. They were called Grammy Pat and Grandpa Chum, their new role as birth parents was probably equally as difficult to navigate, but their love and connection with Margaret was just as engrained.

During the service my feelings wavered. I longed to be the one holding my child as she was being baptized. I also saw the baptismal water as not only washing away the original sin but as a passage into her new family. The baptismal event held such significance for me. She was being baptized into the Catholic Church, but also into the Bennett's family. This would be their first family celebration of Margaret's adoption. They had chosen to make me and my family a part of that family celebration.

### **3.5 Grieving**

Leaving the baptismal ceremony, I felt comforted and reassured, loved and accepted. But I also felt heart-broken. Although the entire event had been cathartic for me, it was like opening a wound leaving Margaret behind once again as we drove home. I sobbed as we pulled out of the church parking lot, covering my face from the view of the congregation. My parents turned to me and asked what they could do? Had I changed my mind and wanted to go to the reception at the Bennett's home; my parents were desperate to comfort me. I felt that I would feel this sadness over and over again each time I visited with the Bennetts. How would I overcome the grief it brought to leave?

“The established stages of grief, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, often don't seem to help the grief experienced by birthmothers and adoption losses. Unlike the grief felt from a death, the loss from adoption is often

said to be a complicated grief or a continuous grief. As life for both parties carries on through the years, the separation continues to add more missed opportunities or milestones that are normally shared with one's children" (D'Arcy 1).

While I was able to be there for Margaret's baptismal milestone, I knew that I would miss a million smiles, I would probably never be there for her actual first steps, and first day of school. I would miss precious moments.

### **3.6 Bouncing Back**

The answer to "How would I overcome the grief" was less difficult than I thought it would be. My grief would subside because I began to realize that the next visit was just a short time away. The Bennetts made our visits a priority in their life. They would travel to Vermont to visit nearly every month over the next year. I never had to miss out on the monumental events in Margaret's life because they would send pictures of her travels, her first solid foods, her first tooth, and a lock of her hair at her first haircut. They worked hard to never leave me out of the important firsts that mothers look forward to. I continued to heal from my pain because I did not continue to feel new pain.

I began to nurture a much more positive view of myself. I was discovering new ways that I could fit into Margaret's life. Through our visits, photographs, and phone conversations, I saw myself in a different light than I had just months before as I agonized over the decision to place my child in adoption. I began to let go of the guilt. I began to see the happiness. I also began to recognize that there was a positive outcome and my fears about being judged by the Bennetts were irrational. They loved me, too. They were helping me to heal.

### 3.7 Celebrating Life

When we celebrated Margaret's first birthday, I swear the entire town came out for the event. I traveled to her home with my parents on Memorial Day weekend. The Bennett's lived on the main street of their town. Sitting on the porch, sipping on punch and eating cupcakes, we watched the town's road race, parade, and fireworks. Throughout the course of these events, neighbors filed in and out of the open door in celebration of Margaret's first year. I sat on the porch swing trying to relax, but each time a new visitor arrived I wondered if they would ask the question that I still did not know how to answer independently: "How do you know the Bennetts? Margaret's family all knew me; aunts and uncles, grandparents, and cousins had all taken the time to get to know me over the last year. However, I was unsure how the Bennetts wanted to introduce me to their friends. I felt uneasy and uncomfortable asking Martha and Bob what they wanted me to say.

They made it so easy for me. As more and more guests arrived, they continued to introduce me as Margaret's birth mother. Instead of the informal handshakes I had been receiving, those informed immediately hugged me. I began to accept the name birth mother. I had an important role in the family and one that I could accept and appreciate. I was reinventing my identity. I had not thought about who I could become down the road as Margaret's birth mother and an accepted member of the Bennett family.

In heartbreak  
We learn about love  
In loss  
We experience  
Spiritual growth

And in brokenness  
We are made whole.  
(Richburg 52)

### **3.8 The Adoption Closet**

Later on in my life I would learn about what many birth mothers call the “Adoption Closet,” a metaphorical place that we hide our fears of coming out about being birthparents. We shame ourselves into this closet hoping that no one will find our secret. I remained in this closet in many ways. I used to keep photo albums of Margaret separate of those that I kept of my friends. I would hide them in a box deep in my closet. Many others share this experience of being in the Adoption Closet like me. Aristotle once said, “To avoid criticism say nothing, do nothing, be nothing.” I once felt like this adage was my best defense. However, I came to realize that I could not possibly stay in the adoption closet forever. I had felt safe to be in that closet, even if I was not truly happy there.

“The secrecy, shame, guilt, self-blame, feelings of selfishness and loss leave scars on birth mothers' self-esteem. Birth parents may struggle as they re-evaluate their decisions later in life. Birth parents might feel incapable of making decisions, feel unlovable, or feel unable to handle having another child. At such moments, they need to realize that they made the decision at a particular time and place, perhaps as a vulnerable teenager without adult skills or resources. Restoring self-esteem is an ongoing process, and rebuilding self-esteem also depends on the degree of self-esteem possessed prior to the pregnancy crisis and relinquishment” (Roles 1).

### 3.9 Vulnerability

It was difficult to share my open adoption story. Each time I talked about it, I opened myself up to be judged for my decisions. Despite all the love and appreciation I had for my family and Margaret's family, I held guilt and shame in my heart as a birth mother who relinquished her parental rights. I had let my heart become vulnerable to others. Vulnerability scholar Brené Brown says,

“This is what I have found: to let ourselves be seen, deeply seen, vulnerably seen; to love with our whole hearts, even though there's no guarantee -- and that's really hard, and I can tell you as a parent, that's excruciatingly difficult -- to practice gratitude and joy in those moments of terror, when we're wondering, “Can I love you this much? Can I believe in this this passionately? Can I be this fierce about this?” just to be able to stop and, instead of catastrophizing what might happen, to say, “I'm just so grateful, because to feel this vulnerable means I'm alive.” And the last, which I think is probably the most important, is to believe that we're enough. Because when we work from a place, I believe, that says, “I'm enough,” then we stop screaming and start listening, we're kinder and gentler to the people around us, and we're kinder and gentler to ourselves.” (“The Power of Vulnerability”)

Through adoption I have learned that to be vulnerable is enough. When you are vulnerable you let people in who lift you up and as a result, you lift yourself up, too. Eighteen years ago when I discovered I was pregnant I wanted to take care of everything by myself. What I thought back then was “independence” was really fear. People like Dawn at Friends in Adoption, my parents, my husband and kids, the Bennetts, and

Margaret have shown me that to be open to others is to accept the love that we all have to share.

I have always been terrified that people might think of me differently because of my choice to place my child in adoption. The stigma of a birth mother “giving up” her child contributed to the shame that led me to wait to see a doctor, wait to tell my parents, refuse to tell my friends, and continue to hide my story from many of those I care about. I did not want to make myself vulnerable to the judgments of others by daring to share. “Vulnerability is about sharing our feelings and our experiences with people who have earned the right to hear them” (Brown 45). While I believe that all of my family and friends truly love me and have earned the right, I still have not yet gathered the ability to be so daring and brave to share with everyone.

### **3.10 Resiliency**

Time does not heal all wounds, but it does give us more opportunities to change and to grow. I have grown a great deal since the day I gave Margaret up for adoption. I have learned about myself and given myself the opportunities to grieve and to enjoy. And I believe I have learned things to help others. Above all, there is no one road map to an open adoption. I had to navigate it blindly. However, I was not alone on this journey. Without the love and support from the Bennetts I would not feel open to the love I continue to receive from Margret today. Not a day goes by where I do not wonder what things would be like in my life if I had made a different choice. But I am certain of my decision. I am blessed to have two families that have become one. We spend holidays together, Margaret was a flower girl in my wedding, and they are seated with us at family events. We have our own traditions like visiting the pumpkin patch each year and going

camping in the Adirondacks. We traveled to Disney World together to celebrate Margaret's 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. There are no longer two families—we are one. I still have room for growth; there are people that I have not shared my story with. But I have found that when I do share my story I continue to be accepted. I know in time I may continue to open the closet and share my story with others. But no one can tell me that I have to or when I will do it. I get to make those decisions about my life.

### **3.10 My Story Matters**

*Unwritten* by Natasha Bedingfield

No one else can feel it for you  
Only you can let it in  
No one else, no one else  
Can speak the words on your lips  
Drench yourself in words unspoken  
Live your life with arms wide open  
Today is where your book begins  
The rest is still unwritten

(Natasha Bedingfield – “Unwritten” 1)

My ending is unwritten. I write my story. My life is about my choice.

Independent, self-reliant, reflective, brave – no one can accurately write my story but me.

### **3.11 A Letter for My First Daughter**

Dear Margaret,

Know that what I chose, I chose for you. My decision was not for me. I had several options. It was for you. I chose Bob, Martha, and Eliza because they not only loved you, they needed you. While I wanted you, you were able to complete their family. You were the beginning of my family, but you were the piece that they were missing.

I know you know I love you. I say it all the time. I show it all the time. But what I want you to know is that I never stopped loving you as my child. Watching you grow up to be the beautiful, thoughtful, generous, spiritual person you are, I am so thankful that I made the decisions that I did 18 years ago. I would love to think that nature outweighed nurture here, but I know the truth is that you grew up to be the amazing person you are because of everyone who has been a part of your life – your parents, your birth parents, and all of your extended friends and family, including mine. You are who you are because of your story, not just mine. Our stories are intertwined. In many ways I am who I have become because of you.

On the nights that I cried missing you, the kind, thoughtful gifts, photographs, and phone calls from you and your family always comforted me. But I am mostly comforted by the memories we share. Those snapshots in my mind, they are the glue that keeps my heart together.

I am so lucky that we have remained together all of these years. Your parents gave me the gift of being a continued part of your life. I am so thankful that I have been to every birthday, shared in each holiday, and that you have held your half brother and sister after their births and watched them grow up. We are truly blessed.

I often fear that my son and daughter pose a sort of question for you; why did she keep them and not me? Does she love them more? Now, you have never ever given me any sort of indication that this is how you feel. I believe that this is just in my mind. But I want to answer that question now for you anyway, just in case you are too scared to ask it. The answer is I love you too and with as much depth and intensity as my younger children. In truth, I have loved you longer. You and your family have helped to teach

me how to love Curtis and Grace even more. Grace and Curtis are blessed because you are here for them. When I watch you play with them, teach them, and encourage them I know you are truly their sister. You take that role with deep responsibility.

I accept that I am not perfect. Indeed, I wish that I could have done many things differently in my life. However, where I stand today, I am thankful for ALL of the choices I have made. I am imperfect. I am human.

“We are not ‘everything,’ but neither are we ‘nothing.’ Spirituality is discovered in that space between paradox’s extremes, for there we confront our helplessness and powerlessness, our woundedness. In seeking to understand our limitations, we seek not only an easing of our pain but an understanding of what it means to hurt and what it means to be healed. Spirituality begins with the acceptance that our fractured being, our imperfection simply is: There is no one to ‘blame’ for our errors—neither ourselves nor anything else. Spirituality helps us first to see, and then to understand, and eventually to accept the imperfection that lies at the very core of our human be-ing.” (Kurtz 2)

Each day I search to find my way to accepting myself, and the thought of you in my life brings me one step closer.

In your own life you may stumble, but I know that you too will find strength in yourself and in others. You will pick yourself back up and continue to dance. You are amazing. You have been, and will always be, a gift to me.

With all my love, your first mother,

Sara

## CHAPTER 4: I AM NOT ALONE: OTHER BIRTHPARENT STORIES

### 4.1 Isolation by Choice

As a college student, I felt isolated by my experience. I did not know anyone else who was experiencing the same level of depression and shame I was feeling. I wanted to exert my independence so I did not accept counseling, support groups, or even conversations with my parents post relinquishment. I wanted to be alone, so I felt utterly alone. I was experiencing a grief that at the time I believed would never end. I felt that no one could ever understand my grief and the depth of my pain, so why would I want anyone to even try?

Isolated means to be apart from others – I created that isolation. However, I did not physically separate myself from others and hull up in a little room by myself. Instead, I isolated myself by refusing to acknowledge what I was going through and not letting anyone in on my secret. I did not tell my friends about my pregnancy nor my baby and I did not let my parents tell my extended family. I did not tell anyone. I excused away the few days that I had spent in the hospital and made myself furiously busy with friends and work. I kept my feelings and emotions silent on the outside, but on the inside I was broken. The more I worked and the more I hung out with friends, the more I missed my baby. “When you leave the hospital physically you weigh less. Emotionally you carry a load that not many could withstand and few ever chose” (Christensen 22). I walked out of the hospital without a baby in my arms, physically hurting and emotionally broken. And I was determined to handle all of the emotions on my own.

I did not want to physically run away, but I wanted to escape the pain. I did not want to feel the hurt that was in my heart and my entire being. Women often experience post-partum depression as a result of chemical imbalances in their body immediately or shortly after childbirth (Jones 72). My depression may have included this syndrome, but it also included a pain I did not think anyone else could possibly understand. Unless someone had also been through what I was going through, no words could help someone relate to my anguish. The emotional pain seemed to manifest itself in physical ways as well. I remember I could actually feel pain in my body. It hurt just to exist. “When a mother is separated from a child in any way, shape, or form, a kind of death does occur. God gave us Mommy hearts and all they want to do is love and nurture our babies. A mommy, is a mommy, is a mommy. We are created for that! Your heart knows that and it grieves like it is experiencing a death” (Christensen 16). My Mommy heart was broken and my spirit was broken, too.

At the same time that I was experiencing extreme grief, I also was consumed by guilt and shame. I had gotten myself into this situation, it was my fault, and maybe I deserved this pain. I had once been a person who had previously criticized others with, “What kind of woman could give her child away?” And now I was that woman. The same judgmental questions I had asked of others could now be aimed at me. “When a taboo is in a question, our instinct is to judge the person rather than the circumstance. When the unthinkable happens, we want to know what kind of person would do such a thing. In this manner, taboo breaking has less to do with guilt than with shame” (Gritter, *Lifegivers* 27). So my survival strategy became, *don't let there be an opportunity for the question to be asked*. Avoid and ignore at all cost—even at the cost of honesty.

What I lacked was someone that I could relate to. I was missing someone who shared a similar story and could understand the type of grief I was experiencing, someone who had the same questions, concerns, and regrets that I faced. I had no one in my life that could play that exact role. All I had was a stigma I had created in my own mind based on a public perception I had come to understand from society. While I did not actively seek to find other birth parents at the time, as I grew older and started to accept and appreciate my experience, and myself, I began to seek and learn more about birth parent stories.

#### **4.2 The Third Option**

Every person who chooses adoption makes a very difficult choice. The choice is a very personal decision and is often made because of a variety of life situations. Whether it is a single parenting situation, financial decision, abusive relationship, rape or incest, or not being ready to be a mother, the decision is not an easy one. Adoption is often called the third option because parenting and abortion are the most discussed choices when a young woman is pregnant. “[Only] 2% of unmarried women at any age place their child for adoption” (“Teen Pregnancy and Adoption Statistics” 2). Many people say that they would never consider adoption as an option if they were in the situation. “The reasons for choosing adoption over other options are quite varied, personal, and complicated” (Fogge and Mosconi 16).

I chose an open adoption because I wanted to have a relationship of some kind with my child. I did not know what I wanted that relationship to look like at the time, but I knew I wanted information that my child was safe, healthy, and happy. Open adoption promised the idea of letters and photos, but also other opportunities for a relationship if

both the birth parent(s) and adoptive parent(s) were open. I consider open adoption to be the fourth option, and believe that if I could share my experience with people, open adoption could be selected by more birth mothers.

Critics of open adoption doubt that ongoing relationships between birth mothers and their birth child can be successful. Opponents argue that it would make it more difficult to separate from the child (Foge and Mosconi 29). I did not find this to be true. I was only more deeply reassured that my child was safe and happy. It still hurt with each goodbye, but it was comforting to know that she was a letter or phone call away, and that our next visit would be soon.

Selecting the adoptive family was a challenge for me. Respectfully, I suggest that there are characteristics and questions that all woman and men consider placing a child in an open adoption should consider. The opportunity to interview and get to know perspective birth parents may feel awkward and very uncomfortable. Birth parents need support to choose the “right” questions to consider and ask, there are helpful resources available. Leslie Foge and Gail Mosconi, authors of *The Third Choice: A Woman’s Guide to Placing a Child for Adoption*, have personally helped more than 500 birth parents through the process of adoption, and undoubtedly they have helped more through their book. I wish I’d had a book like this to help me through my selection process. They suggest a sample list of questions to ask prospective birth parents. Many of the questions were identical to the questions we asked the Bennetts when we selected them to adopt Margaret. For example: “Why do you want to adopt? What kind of contact do you envision? How close are you with family and relatives? What are your child-rearing beliefs and practices?” (Foge and Mosconi 51). However, their list included questions I

never thought to ask: “How do you plan to tell the child about being adopted? What if my baby is born with a disability or health problem, would you still want to adopt?” (Foge and Mosconi 51). These are the types of questions that can help a birth parent get to know more about the adoptive parents’ values and beliefs. Although they are difficult questions to ask, and also to answer, the answers could shape whether or not the prospective parents are the right people to raise the child.

### **4.3 Finding Out I am Not Alone**

Stories of open adoptions and support books for birth parents are not exactly on the *New York Times* best sellers list. The literature and resources available to help support birth parents through adoption is challenging to find. In 1996 when I gave birth, the Internet was not nearly as readily accessible for research as it is today. Today, a simple Barnes and Noble Boolean word search for “Adoption” finds 2,462 books available. If you add the term “Adoption” AND “Birth mother” there are only eight books available. Access to information and the connection that comes from finding others who share your experience is a challenge for birth parents.

Many stories and forums are filled with circumstances from birth parents who do not have a narrative similar to mine. Some are open adoption stories that leave birth mothers feeling deceived and misled. Claudia Corrigan D’Arcy is the publisher of “Musings of the Lame” a website for birth parents. Her relinquishment story includes negative terms I would not honestly include in my narrative: lies, anger, and hate. But while I cannot relate to those emotions, I can relate to the grief she experiences, not all of her posts include hate. There are themes similar to my own experience. She writes, “Welcome to November. As a chill takes to the air and most folks go digging for warmer

clothes, I start to think about the extra layer I wear for the mid weeks in November – the very familiar feelings of ‘Adoption Birthday Triggering’” (D’Arcy).

The relinquishment experience is one that only about 20,000 women in the entire United States experience each year (Carney 1). Being able to make connections, even with total strangers, helps a birth parent feel an acceptance and understanding that they cannot find in most other people. Yet, finding face-to-face support groups in rural areas like Vermont are nearly non-existent. Now, adoption agencies such as the organization I used, Friends in Adoption, often use online forums and social media websites to connect birth mothers for support. The interconnected world we live in now allows these platforms to be used. Hopefully as the digital world continues to advance, access to support will continue to grow as well. Perhaps my isolation would have been less if those supports were accessible twenty years ago.

James L. Gritter, a leader in the field of open adoption, has published four pivotal texts about the open adoption experience. His book *Lifegivers: Framing the Birthparent Experience in Open Adoption* helps connect birth parents through their experience and helps adoption agencies and adoptive parents understand the experience. In his direct style he states, “Birthparents do not turn to adoption lightly...None of them grew up with the dream that some day they would find themselves unexpectedly pregnant...and promptly pass their child to other “more prepared” persons. Hardly. Adoption is contemplated because something in that birthmother’s circumstances requires its consideration (Gritter, *Lifegivers* 77). Gritter’s recognition of the unique struggle, the ultimate decision, and the grief that results helps me feel that my story has both a place

and a purpose. *I am a birth mother who feels alone and isolated, and there are others who feel the same way.* It sends me to search out other stories and find more connections.

Other texts such as *Birthmothers: Women Who have Relinquished Babies for Adoption Tell Their Stories* by Merry Bloch Jones incorporated narratives from a broad spectrum of adoption and relinquishment experiences. Some stories come from an era when open adoption was not an option and the veil of secrecy was deeply entrenched in much of society's expectation of the birth parent's experience. Other stories were more closely related to my own. "If I had not relinquished my baby," she says, "I'd have been saddled at the age of 16, with parental responsibilities and financial burdens I could not have handled. My grief would have been for me not my baby" (Jones 102). Like me, this birth mother in Jones' book realized the ramifications for her own future, as well as the child's.

Shame does not disappear overnight; it sneaks up on us in the simplest of moments. When a physician asks during a routine physical unassuming question, "How many pregnancies have you had?" Or a new acquaintance asks, "How many children do you have?" Hmmm, how do I answer these questions without feeling shame over and over again for the rest of my life? Now, I could simply answer these questions with a white lie, "I have two kids; Grace and Curtis." Or, I can be honest, but that answer nearly always stirs up a much larger conversation than there is time for at a doctor's appointment or in a casual conversation at a dinner party. In sharing the honest answer, I open myself up to vulnerability. I open myself up to be judged. Brown also addresses this when she shares, "Often 'not being good at vulnerability' means we are damn good at shame" (Brown 61).

My process for healing was my own because I did not understand what could have helped me and what opportunities were available. Whatever the resources—books, support groups, online groups, counseling, etc. birth parents can benefit from understanding that their experience and grief are part of a shared narrative that can help them heal.

#### **4.4 Helping Birth Parents Heal**

I am not a licensed counselor or an expert in healing the grief from adoption. In my life, however, I have found resources that have helped me in my journey. The unique dimensions of the loss and grief are not often noted in research on depression. One general concept rings true: “The loss that a birth parent experiences is oriented to the future rather than the past. It has more to do with the possibilities and potentials than with tangible experiences....The loss is ongoing....the mind entertains could-have-been thinking” (Gritter, *Lifegivers* 114). Birth parents understand this grief the most accurately.

Jessalyn Speight and Alysia Foote are two birth mothers who began helping others by organizing retreats for other birth parents. Through this they realized that creating a process with different steps to help deal with the grief could help provide a structure that could assist others in a supportive, caring, and compassionate way. *Birthparent’s Guide to Grief: A 12-Step Process* is the product of their work. Although I read it long after my depression ended, as a birth parent I saw the value and connected with each of the steps they suggest in their process. Their focus on mindfulness, reflection, and self-care are paramount in helping birth parents to heal. Their steps are:

1. We admit that we are powerless over parenting decisions made for our child.
2. Understand that we are not alone in our journey.
3. Make a decision to focus on your healing and moving forward in your journey.
4. Commit to looking within ourselves to find the things that matter.
5. Admitting to ourselves the reality of our grief.
6. Accept the defects of our adoption relationships, primarily those of the adopting couple.
7. Submitting to and working on our own personal shortcomings.
8. Make a list of our talents and strengths that we can share with others and build on our own self worth.
9. Accept parts of our journey and birth experience we cannot or could not change.
10. We commit to constantly re-evaluate our choices and their consequences and admit our wrongdoings.
11. Praying or turning to our higher power for peace and acceptance throughout your journey.
12. After working through these steps, carry the knowledge and love to birth parents and continue to live by these steps and lessons.

(Speight and Foote)

While these steps are suggested steps that were created out of their experiences and the experiences of those they worked with in supportive retreats for birth parents, they may not work for all. There are steps that they include that I do not agree with because of my own experience, such as step 10, but that step may be crucial for someone else. The steps are at least useful prompts for self-reflection and tools to help empower the birth parent. “No birth parent deserves to feel alone or left behind. We are all people, who chose adoption for whatever reason. Different walks of life may have brought us to this point, but our commonality can create and foster relationships that last forever” (Speight and Foote 50). No matter what the birth experience is, the birth of a child changes a parent’s life forever. The changes may not manifest themselves so visually, so many do not see the way it has altered a birth parent’s life. Helping birth parents explore these steps can help them through a restorative process towards healing. Time cannot

heal wounds when the source of the pain is infinite. However, healing can lead to empowerment and an acceptance of a new reality of life.

#### **4.5 A Letter to Birth Parents**

Dear Birth Mother,

You have made difficult decisions. I understand that every day your heart aches at least for a brief moment for the child you cannot hold, and you may ask yourself questions that center on regret, shame, and guilt. Adoption is not about giving up, it is about giving life. By making the choice to place your child for adoption, you have given your child a new opportunity that you may not have been able to provide. You have given a family a child that they could not have. You have given the world a precious gift of your flesh and blood by choosing life. Give yourself the time that you need to heal and grow.

I believe you can heal because you have inner strength. Even on the days that you feel you have none, the days that you cannot bring yourself to smile or feel happiness, you have strength inside your heart and inside your being. You made a difficult decision that many in your situation do not make because they fear exactly what you are going through – emotional pain. However, know that your decision for an adoption was the right decision, even if it is breaking your heart. Your child has the love of two families – the one that holds them close at night, and the one you who hold in your heart from afar.

Your life is forever changed because of adoption. You are a parent but yet you do not get to hold your child each day, measure their height on the door casing, put a dollar under the pillow with their first lost tooth, drop them off at their first school dance, teach them to drive, or hold their hand as we dress them for their wedding. You miss the

milestones. You miss the highs and the lows of their daily lives. There is no length of time that will fully heal your pain, however, there is love that can satiate your heart and your child's. You wear your loss in ways that very few see and understand. Those who know your story may look at you with sympathy rather than with compassion. Those who do not may speak words about which they have no idea of the implications.

You are not alone. Your choice is the difficult choice that many of us have had to make. Your pain is shared, and I weep for you when I weep for myself. Adoption is life changing in many good ways, even when it is hard. Our children may not be with us, but they are loved, safe, and growing. Our choices were courageous, selfless, and compassionate. We both gave life and received life. While we share pain, we can share in the joys as well.

Your life has changed; while some day-to-day routines may return, your heart and soul have grown. Figure out who you are now and learn to accept this new person you've become. Seek your friends and loved ones for support and love. True friends will be there. Let it take the time it will...there will be so many changes in your life. It is important to nurture your spirit and find yourself again. It is always okay to seek whatever supports you need. The encouragement of friends and family is important but professional help can help you move forward in your grieving (Foge and Mosconi 108). Your life has changed.

Whatever you do, never forget that you made a decision out of love. The love you gave your child through adoption is a love that is eternal. Your love, the adoptive parent(s)' love, and the love of your child is an endless loop that exists because you chose

life. Let that love raise you up. You may be a mother of loss but you are not a mother of defeat.

With heartfelt compassion,

Another birth mother

## CHAPTER 5: FOR EDUCATORS

### 5.1 How Can We Provide Support

As educators we face many professional challenges. Academic settings not only provide education, they work to ensure safe environments where students grow and develop skills to be independent and successful members of society. Many educators specialize in a particular field of study – language arts, mathematics, fine arts, etc. but most feel unqualified to offer assistance to pregnant students. In fact, educators may tell themselves, “*Maybe that is an area better suited for the nurse, health teacher, or guidance counselor.*” Regardless, that population of students arrives in our classroom, and they need support. In 2013, nationally, there were 26.5 births per 1,000 adolescent females ages 15-19. Pregnancy remains the number one reason that girls drop out of high school (“Trends in Teenage Pregnancy and Childbearing”).

Pregnancy does not have to mean the end of education. There is hope. With help from strong, sensitive teachers and administrators, those pregnant teens can succeed. And while I may refer to our students as the “birth parents” in this section, I also ask you to consider your colleagues and other peers as you read these considerations.

Adoption is a personal choice, and also a difficult decision. While only two percent of teenage females choose adoption, these young birth parents need support as they work to reestablish a new normalcy in their lives (Herndon 1). As these students enter our classrooms and offices, it is important to understand the unique grief and depression that they are experiencing. There can be ongoing feelings of grief long after adoption and the termination of parental rights. Even when birth parents are certain that adoption was the right choice for them, it is a challenging emotional process that can

continue to affect them throughout their lives. The initial grief of the loss of a child may end, but anniversary periods, such as the child's birthday, Mother's Day and Father's Day can trigger angst and depression. Birth parents in open and closed adoptions can experience this emotion for different reasons. Birth parents in closed adoptions may grieve the loss of ability to share in these life events, while those in open adoption may have the opportunity to be a part of the event, yet grieve the relationship that could have been (Patricella 1). Being aware and recognizing the different sorrow that these young birth parents are experiencing can help navigate discussions.

A birth parent is a birth parent forever. Although she/he cannot be there to make typical parenting decisions, the child is always in their thoughts. How does a birth parent come to terms with this? How does it affect their schooling? There is evidence that an open adoption can be easier for the birth parent to adapt to than a traditional adoption. "While the birth parent will never forget the child, it is important that the birth parent adapts to the new circumstances and comes to terms with any regret. When birth parents are able to integrate the loss into their lives and gain some feeling of control, they can then move on to deal with whatever else life brings to them" ("Impact of Adoption on Birth Parents" 6). One study, by Fravel, McRoy, and Grotevant (2000), states that all the birth mothers, including those in both open and closed adoptions, reported thinking about or feeling something about the child to some extent, with the average response indicating frequent thoughts or feelings. These thoughts and feelings were both positive and negative, but tended to be more positive when the adoption was more open ("Impact of Adoption on Birth Parents" 3). These frequent thoughts and feelings can impact a students' ability to focus in class and concentrate on their academic work.

It is unlikely that these young birth parents have many peers in similar situations to which they can relate. Students can, however, access support systems like online birth parent forums, as one way to connect using social media, a platform most teenagers readily use in their daily lives. Teachers who guide these students to online groups like the ones listed below may provide them with meaningful support:

- I Am a Birthmother  
<<http://www.experienceproject.com/groups/Am-A-Birthmother/27227>>
- Birthparent Forum  
<https://community.binti.com/>
- Fertile Thoughts  
<http://www.fertilethoughts.com/forums/adoptive-birth-parent-relationships/>
- Birth Mom Buds  
<http://forum.birthmombuds.com/>

Writing is another opportunity for birth parents to express their thoughts and emotions. Journaling can be a private or shared way to reflect on feelings and experiences. This may serve as an outlet for their grief and provide some perspective over time. The details that are included in journal writing may help birth parents see their emotional growth over time, as well as recount details about their child that they may forget over time. Dialogue journaling can offer an opportunity for the birth parent to write as though speaking to their child or the adoptive parents. This type of journal may help express feelings that a birth parent is not ready or willing to vocalize. As educators, the birth parents may share or maintain privacy with these journals, by simply encouraging journal writing as an opportunity for reflection. Scientific evidence provides support that journaling has many benefits. The left-brain, which is analytical and rational, is accessed during writing. While the left-brain is working, the right brain is able to create and feel. This is true for all people, not just birth mothers. “In sum,

writing removes mental blocks and allows you to use all of your brainpower to better understand yourself, others and the world around you” (Purcell 1). Journaling can help students clarify their thoughts, get to know themselves better, reduce their stress, and resolve problems more effectively. I recommend journaling or similar types of reflective writing as one way for birth parents to sort through their options, and then reflect about their decisions and support.

Providing students with resources such as books, articles, credible websites, and skilled counselors about the adoption and birth parent experience can help them understand their emotions and the situation they are a part of. Many of these resources include the narratives of other birth parents who have been through similar situations and experienced the same emotions and situations. Many young birth parents feel alone in their loss and these first-person narratives can provide the comfort of a shared experience, which could be otherwise difficult to find. I hope that my memoir can serve that function.

Birth parents may find, however, that the support from their friends, family, and teachers is not enough. They may need additional help in the grieving process. Grief after adoption is normal and counseling can help birth parents navigate the grieving process. Helping the birth parent and their family find appropriate counseling can provide the professional support they may need. Counselors who are trained in this field can help birth parents accept the new reality of their lives, acknowledge what has happened, and undertake their new roles as birth parents. Birth parents should find counselors who have significant experience in the areas of adoption and bereavement. Referrals for counselors can come from friends, physicians, birth support groups, an

adoption agency, or the attorney who helped with the adoption (“Impact of Adoption on Birth Parents” 6).

Birth parents may need to deal with shame and the stigma that has been historically attached to placing a child for adoption. Classmates may not understand the circumstances or the emotional turmoil surrounding the adoption. As a result, birth parents can be the result of cruel comments, harassment, and bullying from peers. Society’s image of birth parents often comes from movies, and teenagers use these stereotypes to form their own opinions about birth parents. “Hollywood often portrays birth mothers as the deadbeat lady that has nothing to show for her life when their adopted child comes looking for them when they are 18. The girl that got pregnant in high school on a drunken one-night stand and ‘gave up’ their child to avoid the associated drama and embarrassment” (The Stigma of Being a Birth Mother”). When teenagers accept and talk from the perspective of these stereotypes, the result can be harassment and bullying. While most schools have strict policies about bullying and harassment, it is important to recognize the vulnerability of the birth parent and the likelihood that they will not report infractions for fear of further mistreatment. Ensuring the emotional well-being and physical safety of birth parents in academic environments needs to be a priority.

Some birth parents may experience difficulty forming and sustaining friendships or relationships after the relinquishment of their child. This could be a result of the persistent feelings of loss and guilt, or in romantic relationships, a fear of becoming pregnant again. Educators should be aware of this and help foster opportunities to build positive friendships within the classroom. Intentionally yet discreetly finding supportive

peers for group work, lab partners, classroom seating assignments, etc. can help build positive interactions with peers.

It is important to understand that most birth parents do not consider, choose or experience an open adoption like my experience. Many birth parents do not have any frequent connection or interaction with the child they placed in adoption. Each adoption is unique and the relationships between birth parents, adoptive families, and adoptees are widely unique. Birth parents in semi-open adoptions or closed adoptions report a variety of fears that are very unique to their situations and unlike the fears that their peers experience. In Eva Begleiter's conference paper "The Medium and Long-Term Aftermath of Relinquishment" (1983), she summarized the top eight fears experienced by birth mothers that are significant and include:

1. Fear that the adoptee will never know of his adoptive status.
2. Fear that the adoptee has suffered negative feelings and had other problems related to his adoption.
3. Fear that the adoptee has hateful and angry feelings toward his natural parents. Natural mothers often question how they will cope with this if contact occurs, although one recently stated she would prefer to hear negative feelings voiced directly rather than never have the opportunity to meet the adoptee face to face.
4. Fear that the adoptee will believe his natural mother did not want him, and never know she did and still cares and continues to be concerned about his progress and welfare.
5. Fear that the adoptive parents have told the adoptee lies, "your mother is dead," or painted a very bleak picture of his natural parents.
6. Fears that the adoptee is dead or fears for his welfare should his parents die while he is still dependent.
7. Fears that the child relinquished for adoption was not placed and instead grew up in an institution.
8. Fears that the adoptee will not search, despite his desire, because of his adoptive parent's opposition or because he feels they will be really hurt if he searched. ("Effects of Adoption on the Mental Health of the Mother")

When these fears are present, birth parents search for answers to these questions and anxieties. They may scour the Internet looking for answers, call the adoption agency

asking for information, and persevere on the fear. These behaviors may appear in our own classrooms. It is important for educators to understand the fears that birth parents face. By understanding these fears, we can be more specific in our responses and supportive of more positive thinking. Helping to find the right supports is crucial. This may include counseling or other trained professionals.

Intense grief and depression are commonly reported as the symptoms many birth parents face. My memoir reveals this, also. However, some birth parents' suffering is as severe as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and their coping mechanisms can include catastrophic behaviors.

“Many natural mothers say they split themselves off from their trauma as a coping mechanism. This avoidance as a strategy is one of the key symptoms of PTSD, which may be caused by the trauma being internalized to avoid immediate pain. Many say they escaped into drugs and alcohol or precocious sexual activity, especially in the year or so after relinquishment. Most say they felt numb, shocked, empty, sad and many said they felt the same way many years later.”  
 (“Effects of Adoption on the Mental Health of the Mother”)

Educators need to be aware of these symptoms of PTSD. Recognizing and preventing the resulting dangerous behaviors will help keep students safe and healthy while they work through their trauma.

As educators, we work every day to support our students academically, emotionally, and personally. We may consider our students to be much like our own children and want to help them be successful members in society during and after they leave our classroom. It is important to recognize the unique needs of birth parents and

understand the challenges they face. Any opportunity to help birth parents' personal and emotional well-being will help them heal. While it may feel uncomfortable to approach the student, it is part of our ethical obligations as educators to protect our students' health and safety, keep information confidential (except when required by law), and to work with each student considerately and justly to help them through the stress and grief associated with teen pregnancy and resulting choices.

## **5.2 A Letter to My Colleagues**

Dear Educator,

Pretend for just a moment that I am your student just returning to your classroom after delivering a child and making the heart-breaking decision to place my child for adoption. While it is impossible for you to know my pain, I look to you for support, just like I did before I became "that pregnant girl in your class". Please do not turn away from me. Instead pay attention to me and consider my feelings. Let me know that you are present and available to support me. I may ask you questions that you do not know how to answer. Believe me when I say, I don't expect a correct answer. I am really just looking for you to acknowledge my situation, my pain, and how scared I am right now.

You are equipped with tools that I do not have. You have connections within our school that maybe I haven't accessed yet. For example, you know about counselors and you have been trained to recognize bullying and harassment in the school and enforce the school's policies. If we talk, you may find that you have life experiences that might help me. I look to you because I respect you, and I look to you because you have shown me respect in the past.

I may feel too ashamed to approach you right away, but please look for and notice the signs that I am ready for you to talk to me. Maybe you notice the broken hearts that I draw on my papers, or maybe you notice self-harm to my body. I may have done those things in hopes that you recognize them as signs that I need some help.

I am still that same student who sat in your class. I may feel (and look) broken right now. I want your help and support. Do not ignore my situation or give up on me when I tell you “I am fine.” Continue to teach me and continue to care about me. While you may not understand my struggles, you know the power of the human spirit. You’ve taught me all along that I can do anything that I set my mind to as long as I don’t give up. Please do not give up on me. Treat me like a person, not like the stigmatized birth parent who others, including myself, may perceive me to be.

You may have chosen your profession because you were good at math or Spanish, or art. However, you are also good with your students as people. You care about us. Show me you care about me and use what you know about life to help me find ways to heal.

Sincerely,

The birth parent in your class

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

### 6.1 In Summary

Being a birth mother is forever. I will never stop being involved in my child's life. I have had the privilege of a powerful relationship with my child. I am thankful for every birthday card, photograph, phone call, and visit. It is not the life that I thought I would have when I was a child myself, but it is the life that I will continue to cherish and foster. I am incredibly appreciative to all of the people who supported me through my pregnancy, childbirth, relinquishment, and every day since. Without the supports I have received I would not be the daughter, wife, parent, teacher, and friend that I am today.

The more I learn about adoptions of all types and the more I learn about birth parents, the more I appreciate the supportive agencies and workers whose job it is to help women and men in the adoption process and after.

Author Viktor Frankl writes in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, "Life's meaning is an unconditional one, for it includes the potential meaning of unavoidable suffering" (Frankl 137). The suffering I experienced is now shadowed by the joy I have because of our open adoption relationship of nineteen years. While guilt, denial, shame, and fear may still be present at times in my life, they are most often quenched by love, resiliency, and acceptance.

I hope that my story can help others. I hope that birth mothers facing critical choices will consider the possibilities within open adoption as a choice. With trust, acceptance, and a very open heart, it is possible to grow a close relationship with the child and adoptive family throughout a lifetime—to actually become a stronger unit as a

family. Open adoption can allow birth mothers to continue to pursue further education and life goals that elevate the quality of their own lives.

I hope that birth mothers can relate to my story as a way to see new possibilities. I hope that birth parents can heal, and I hope that educators can see the crucial role that they can play.

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