



OUR VICTORIAN HOUSE IN ELGIN

# CHAPTER 5

## *“Open” Education*

Angie and I are genuinely “open” people; we have visitors and friends in our home almost daily. When resident directors at the men’s dorm we lived by an “open door” philosophy. In addition, we’ve had thirteen different people live with us for varying lengths of time. I imagine we will relate in this spirit of “openness” for as long we live.

“Open” adoption, however, was a brand new concept. Even after we had researched it, we were still somewhat naive as to how the arrangement would actually take place. We had a hunch that it was a good thing for both couples, and, more importantly, we were pretty sure of the emotional and psychological benefits to the children. But, we still had much to learn.

Sunny Ridge requires all adoptive couples to read *Dear Birthmother*, by Kathleen Silber and Phylis Speedlin. This collection of letters from adoptive parents to birthparents, and vice versa, is an important educational lesson and a very moving emo-

tional experience. Any couple considering adoption and especially “open” adoption should read this book. You will almost assuredly identify with at least one or two of the letters, if not many. We quickly passed the book among our family and friends, and bought a few additional ones about open adoption for further study.

As beneficial as the reading and research was, nothing sold us more on the open process than hearing from some actual birthmothers in person.

During the last of the group meetings at Sunny Ridge, we heard from a panel of birthmothers. We were excited about this opportunity to learn from actual birthmothers, but we were also apprehensive, knowing that their stories would soon be our reality and their pain would now be quite relevant and soon absorbed into our future. On the panel were several recent birthmothers who shared with us both the joy and loss of placing their children for adoption. Overall they were at peace with their decision, and the process, and comfortable with the families who had received their babies. This “live” affirmation of the positive nature of open adoption was most reassuring, and it gave us a tangible point of reference for what we were about to experience.

The birthmom who was the most influential, however, was a middle-aged mother who twenty years ago had not been involved in an open adoption. The difference in her story compared to the stories of the other birthmothers was dramatic, as she told of the

years of agony she went through knowing absolutely nothing about her daughter. She said it was as if her daughter had died. The lack of any information made closure and growth almost impossible.

Now, after twenty years of silence, she had located her daughter, and they had met recently for the first time. The reunion was a healing occasion for both, and an opportunity to start a brand new, yet difficult, relationship was about to be explored. The look of relief and release was clearly visible in all her non-verbal communication.

This particular meeting was a pivotal moment in my trust of open adoption. With two degrees in psychology, and being an avid reader of psychological material, I felt I now had a grasp of the benefits of openness for both family systems. After her talk, however, I began to consciously “own” openness. I was no longer the counselor learning another therapeutic technique; I was now the hopeful father understanding the benefits of an open system. Now, both Angie and I could become strong advocates of open adoption, explaining the concept to others with boldness and confidence. We moved through our fear and embraced openness as our own.

After riding the pendulum swing both ways, I’ll summarize the reservations couples experience when considering adoption, and in particular, open adoption. Really, it comes down to one word—fear. Fear of the vulnerability. Fear of not being able to truly love “someone else’s” child. Fear of the child’s dual identifi-

cation. Fear that our parents might not want to be grandparents to “someone else’s” child. Fear that the biological parents might become too possessive as time goes on. Fear that the biological grandparents will intrude. Fear of our own inadequacies as caregivers. Fear that the child might grow to adulthood and then reject us. Fear of fear itself.

Most of the couples who have gone through infertility procedures know first hand how gripping and paralyzing fear can be. Most of us can look back, years after a successful adoption or a biological birth has taken place, and wonder why we didn’t pursue alternative options sooner.

Embracing open adoption involves wrestling with an immediate contradiction. It means sharing intimate experiences with the very people who decided that they couldn’t or shouldn’t be responsible for those exact same experiences. To the new and nervous adoptive parents, this often feels like a concession of control and security. How can we allow the birthparents to continue to see their biological child and still develop a safe and protective environment? For mothers, I think, this fear is even more territorial. She might think, “Wait a minute. This woman placed her baby with us, and now my maternal instincts are telling me to prevent anyone else from bonding with my child.”

As a father, I had my concerns as well. For example, how could my children have another father they might identify with and probably look like, yet spend their whole life completely free

from his influence and guidance? Would my future daughter run into the arms of her birthfather with the same speed and energy as she did mine? Would my future son want to “hang out” with his birthfather more than with me?

What if the birthmother changes her mind or disagrees with our parenting style, and takes us to court with charges of neglect, abuse, or endangerment? How would I respond in twenty years if my son told me that he wished he had been raised by his birthfather instead of me? Would my heart ever heal from that kind of blow? These questions, and many more, are understandable and reasonable, and they definitely need to be processed verbally and cognitively with your spouse, your caseworker, and your family for two very important reasons.

First, we must understand that the most critical aspect of open adoption is, indeed, the word *open*. And the key player in this openness is not the birthparent or the adoptive parent, it is the child. Of course, when proper communication and structure exist in an open adoption relationship, there is no doubt that both parental units are greatly positively affected. This does not come close, however, to the need for the child to feel a strong sense of belonging, identity, and heredity. And the child can only get that complete picture and gain that security and stability if the entire process is in the open. How open and what that openness means to each family can certainly vary, but the opportunity for

an adopted child to know his/her history is as important as it is for any one else.

Openness removes the stigma and the fantasy element for an adopted child who knows his own background, his placement circumstances, and his complete historical being. When open adoption is explained as a natural occurrence, it is neither frightening nor bizarre in nature. Children of an open system are able to discuss the relationships that have determined and will continue to determine their lives, with all the parents in their family system being fair topics of conversation.

The children do not get to choose who their birthparents or their adoptive parents are, but now, with an open adoption, they can choose to explore for themselves how to process the nuances and individuality of their particular situation. It allows them to be more than just adopted kids. They are special, chosen children who use adoption vernacular such as *birthmother* in a way that gives their lives credence and their story validity. Telling their adoption story then becomes familiar and comfortable. It is simply the uniqueness of their own family.

Second, we must understand that a majority of our fears are self-protective and reactionary. We are concerned with how we will feel and how we will handle possible rejection. We are afraid that the birthmother will not like us, while she is most likely worried that we will not like her. It is human nature to become self-absorbed and self-conscious under pressure and stress. This is

taken to an even higher level when we are talking about exchanging the parental rights of a vulnerable, defenseless, and helpless little baby.

The birthparents are usually already feeling a certain level of shame and guilt for their decision to place the baby for adoption. And they wonder if the adoptive parents will sense how guilty they feel and judge them for it. Meanwhile, the adoptive parents often believe that the birthparents will not like them, and will decide to keep the baby or will give it to another couple once they see how pathetically vulnerable and powerless the adoptive parents really are.

It is a vicious cycle of self-doubt and insecurity, which leaves the precious gift waiting tenderly in the balance. But the cycle serves as an important part in the child’s future, and I believe children has the right to learn about their parents’ feelings and fears.

This is why for decades society chose to avoid this contradiction altogether, as if the woman who gave the gift of her child was not worthy of a return gift of openness and inclusion. How can we justify such selfishness in the wake of her undeniable unselfishness?

There is no doubt in my mind that open adoption is, in a majority of non-crisis adoption placements, the healthier and wiser choice. I pray that you would be open to open adoption!