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UNDERWHELMED

Archaeology of a Dream

By **Sandy Asirvatham** | Posted 12/26/2001

On Sept. 15, 2001, still zombified by grief and fear, my husband and I drove to D.C. to attend our first information meeting about adoption. I cried in the car the whole way, convinced the world was soon going to end and there was no point in making plans. But then we arrived at the meeting, and there, among the extremely kind, competent social workers and the calm, happy adoptive parents with their infants and toddlers from all over the world, I got a very immediate, concrete sense of the usually abstract notion "Life goes on." I blubbered all through the meeting too, but these were tears of hope.

After a few years of infertility-related heartbreak, we've decided that parenting, not pregnancy, is our ultimate priority. Although we're both sad at the loss of our dreamed-for lovechild, we're grateful to find ourselves equally comfortable with the adoption option. I've come around to believing--as strange and psychologically suspicious as this may sound to those deeply vested in the idea of procreation--that adoption is not a second-best or last-resort strategy at all, but a genuinely appealing notion all by itself, something I was meant to do and will be good at. At the risk of sounding uncharacteristically mystical, I'll go one step further: My inability to get pregnant forced me to remember that, as a girl, I had never once dreamed of giving birth but had always assumed I would adopt.

I know better than to claim absolute understanding of all the murky motivations at work inside me, but I can point to factors that got my young self thinking this way. For one thing, I was a sensitive and morose little girl, and after my family's first visit to India when I was 11, I believed (in that ruthless, absolutist way children believe things) that it was morally wrong to bring more people into a world already teeming with malnourished masses.

But the inchoate bleeding-heart sentiment may have been public cover for a more private insight I'd picked up right at home. By my early teens I already understood a basic unfairness pervading my household: Although both my parents were hard-working professionals, only my mother was saddled with housekeeping and child-care duties as well. Girlish squirt that I was--at this point I was still calling myself "Sandi" with a big heart over the "i"--I already envisioned a future as a woman of serious artistic and intellectual ambitions. I got unspeakably angry thinking about some jerk like my father presuming it was my job to clean his underwear, cook his meals, and burp his babies. I wasn't visionary enough to imagine a different, more equitable kind of relationship with a man; I think the adoption dream had something to do with the idea of being a single mother, a fully independent career woman whose child was all her own and not the irrevocable biological link to some lout with his feet up on the couch.

Or maybe--to get one layer closer to bedrock--it was about something else entirely. My parents were both grossly mistreated as children, and both turned into control freaks as adults. I will spare you the gorier emotional details of how this played out in my childhood. (Here's a very mild case in point: Recently my mother telephoned me, her 35-year-old daughter, to tell me not to wear jeans to her 65th birthday party, which she was characteristically orchestrating by herself and for herself. She later called again, when she knew I wouldn't be home, to tell my 36-year-old husband not to wear jeans.) I will tell you, though, that early on I did not feel loved or respected by my parents as much as I felt *owned* by them. I was a strong little personality with my own ideas, but I was their first child and bore the full weight of their heavy expectations and their over-identification with (and disapproval of) nearly everything I said or did. Adoption, I suspect, represented the idea of escaping the narcissism of the blood bond. I believed that in an adoptive family, it would be harder for parents to presume to force their children into a mold of their making. In my sad and desperate little theory, an adopted child would be watched, nurtured, listened to, and respected rather than controlled, disciplined, and judged.

I have since been informed (by a friend who's a psychologist and adoptive father) that my sad and desperate little theory doesn't hold water. "A real narcissistic monster can unfairly project their needs onto anybody," he told me. Still, one of the main questions that prospective adoptive parents are asked to ponder goes something like this: Are




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you prepared to raise a child who may be very different from you in talents, tastes, abilities, and opinions, whom you absolutely can't assume to be a small replica of yourselves, whose values and priorities you can't entirely control?

Coming from where I come from, I can't understand why this question isn't asked to all prospective parents everywhere.

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