Grief after Placing a Baby for Adoption: a personal experience

Aine Haughey, BA, SRN, DNCert
Lecturer, Department of Nursing and Health Visiting,
University of Ulster at Jordanstown, N. Ireland



When a colleague asked me to read an article she had written on bereavement, I was totally unprepared for my reaction; suddenly my memories came flooding back with a vengeance.

My loss is something so painful that I find it hard to write. My pen is poised but my hand is an inadequate tool with which to demonstrate my grief.

I lost my daughter four-and-a-half years ago. She is not dead, she is hopefully very much alive. She is adopted. I carried her for nine months and when she was born they took her away. I never saw her nor held her in my arms, but I heard her cry. I was discharged the next day and I went home with nothing but an empty tummy. What had been large and full and vibrant was now flabby and spent and dead. Today the scars are there to remind me of what I gave away, and the emotional pain is worse than that of childbirth.

I am crying as I write this. The words are spilling as quickly as my tears. I never knew I could love someone so much whom I had never seen. Yet I loved her. I lay awake at night and I would feel her move inside me. I would cradle my belly in my arms and plead with her to understand, to forgive, most of all not to hate. When I left the hospital ward to go home I felt I had betrayed her, but I was worse than Judas because I'd not even given her a kiss. My 30 pieces of silver were the freedom from single parenthood, an expanding career and an overwhelming amount of family approval. However, I've been hanging on that tree for a very long time and the noose around my neck never tightens sufficiently to let me enter oblivion, because her cry never goes away. Neither does the guilt. Nor the fear.

Her father left me when I told him I was pregnant. I had loved him like no-one else, but he told me I had to choose between him and the baby. I felt unable to leave either; both meant so much to me, and I believed that I meant as much to him. The night he left me outside his house, to go off with someone else, I was dazed. Strangely, I vividly remember being surrounded by houses full of sleeping people, being blown by the wind and chilled by the rain, and being struck by the drama of it all. Then I was sick.

Hiding away

That's when the nightmare began: the total loss of self-esteem, of self-confidence, and of a will to live. There was just emptiness and worthlessness. I began to fantasise about driving fast on a wet dark night and not stopping until I hit a tree and the pain would be gone. The fantasy became longer in duration and the interval between each one dangerously shorter. My family protected me from myself. I was closeted away for five months. My antenatal visits were the only temporary absences from my self-imposed isolation. I had no inner strength, no sense of self-worth. And when my confinement was finally over, I left my 'prison cell' for years of solitary confinement.

'Through psychotherapy I have found the courage to tell people what has happened, but the effect of doing so leaves me exhausted. There is the ever-present fear of rejection, of people turning away from me because of what I have done. And I grieve for my baby.'

My family loved me, but part of that love was conditional on no-one finding out about my disgrace. By the time my daughter was adopted, I was utterly convinced that indeed I had been, and still was, a disgraceful person. I could tell no-one about the past, so the ache inside me became larger and more infected with self-disgust.

Four-and-a-half years later the pain still has the ability to cripple me, both physically and emotionally. I sometimes find it hard to believe that all this actually happened to me. Through psychotherapy I have found the courage to tell people what has happened, but the effect of doing so leaves me exhausted. There is the ever-present fear of rejection, of people turning away from me because of what I have done. And I grieve for my baby. The love does not diminish, nor does the sense of loss. I have had no public demonstration or accepted ritual of my loss, so the grief feeds upon itself unhealthily. Then something happens, like reading my colleague's article, and the ache returns, the emotional dam bursts, and I plunge into darkness.

I haven't forgiven myself yet, nor do I really love myself. This negativity is not only detrimental to self-development but also to any new relationships I may make. Meeting someone new and growing fond of them is a dangerous thing, because of the fear of them leaving me, and not knowing how I would cope with that loss. Now that my parents are getting older I'm haunted by their inevitable deaths, of being an orphan, of having no-one to hug the hurt away, and no-one to love me.

Beginnings of recovery

I'm getting better. The darkness is lightening and sometimes even gives way to bright sunshine. Precious days. I'm not a recluse and my friends seem to like me. I've learned from this experience and I've grown. I have learned that we all carry grief and pain and loneliness, and especially the fear of getting hurt again. So I'm grateful to my colleague for helping me by asking me my opinion on her bereavement article. It doesn't matter what day it was, the memory still has the ability to flatten.

Someone once told me 'It's a long hard road, baby'. But it's a road with no turning back.