

SOME THOUGHTS ON ADOPTION

Presented to the Adoption Support Group

By Kent M. Keith

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Thank you for the opportunity to be with you this evening to talk about adoption. For us, the process of adoption was very personal, very spiritual, and very bureaucratic. I understand that some of you have already adopted, and some of you are considering adopting. Each set of circumstances is different, so each story is different. I will talk a little about some basic issues and ideas that could apply to each process, and then I will talk a little about our experience adopting our oldest daughter in Japan and our son and youngest daughter in Romania. I hope that what I say will be helpful to you in some way.

I love to talk about our kids. They are interesting, energetic, chaotic, frustrating, and fun. Elizabeth and I really miss them when we have to travel on business, and don't get our daily hugs.

We adopted our oldest daughter, Kristina Eriko, in 1988 when she was almost three. We adopted her from Holy Family Home in Osaka, Japan—the orphanage that has been supported for 50 years by the U. S. Army Wolfhounds at Schofield Barracks here in Hawaii. Kristina is now 13. We adopted our son, Spencer, from an orphanage in Buzau, about 80 miles northeast of Bucharest, in Romania. He was 14 months old when we adopted him in 1991. Next month he will be 9. We adopted Angela at the same time, from a hospital in Bucharest, Romania, when she was 8 months old. Today she is eight and a half.

On the wall in our kitchen is a sheet of paper with the title: Keith Family Mission. The mission statement says:

1. Love each other.
2. Protect each other.
3. Help each other be all that we can be.
4. Have fun with your family.

We adopted the mission statement a few years ago. I mention it because I think

that a family is a group of people who love and protect and help each other, regardless of how they happened to come together as a family. There are biologically related groups that we call families— parents and biological children— who, unfortunately, are not real families. And there are groups that are not biologically related— parents and adopted children— who are clearly very strong families.

I call our family an *intentional* family. Our children did not just happen to us. We looked for them. We traveled to the other side of the world to search for them. It was our intention, our dream, our prayer, to find them. And we think it was not only *our* intention— we think it was God’s intention that we come together as a family. We think that what happened was supposed to happen. There are couples who cannot have biological children, and there are children who need parents, and we believe that God wants the couples and the children to find each other. We also think that Kristina, Spencer, and Angela were specifically meant to be our children. There were many little miracles and signs along the way.

The other thing about the mission statement that I wanted to mention was that each of our children reacted to it differently. Spencer said it was most important to love each other, Angela said it was most important to have fun, and Kristina said she would type it up so we could put it on the wall. Each of our children has a different personality, different potentials, different challenges.

I think it’s the same in biological families. The children may all come from the same immediate gene pool, but they can be as different, or more different, than children who have come together from different countries. I grew up in a strong family, but the three of us children turned out differently in our application of certain values, our relationships, our choices, and our careers. Biological children are more likely to look like their parents than adoptive children, but beyond that, it is difficult to predict the relative impacts of nature and nurture. Of course, as adoptive parents, we had nothing to do with nature, so we are totally focused on nurture!

In short, nobody knows how their children are going to turn out, whether the children are biological or adopted. All you know is that you want to show your love to them, and do your duty toward them, and explain life to them, and hope and pray for them. Whether they are biological or adopted, each child is his or her own person, with his or her own destiny.

People generally don't know much about adoption, and inquire about it rather awkwardly. I like to talk about it because I have seen children who desperately need parents, and I know there are hundreds of thousands of couples who desperately want children. I encourage people to adopt. I have also noticed that when others learn that you are interested in adopting, or have adopted, they will begin to talk about it—and you learn for the first time that they have adopted, or were themselves adopted.

When you first think about adoption, it may seem mechanical and bureaucratic, rather than natural and beautiful. Certainly, it is different than giving birth. Our experience was that the bureaucratic process we went through in adoption was the equivalent of labor— many months of effort and even anguish that led finally to the arrival of the child in our household.

As some of you know, there are lots of forms to fill out. If you are adopting through a social service agency, they have a fiduciary duty to the child, and they are usually pretty rigorous about meeting it. We had to provide lots of personal information about our attitudes toward marriage and child-rearing. We had to provide our finger prints for the FBI to review to see if we were interstate criminals. A social worker interviewed our friends, and came to inspect our house to see if it was suitable for a child. We had to provide a statement from the bank to show we had enough money to start raising a child. And so on.

Biological parents have no forms to fill out, no permissions to obtain, no requirements related to their desire or their ability to be good parents. By contrast, adoptive parents are often viewed under a microscope. Then there is the bureaucratic process of adoption itself—the governmental process, that can take so long and be so excruciating. All of this is what I call the bureaucratic equivalent of the physical labor of a mother giving birth. One difference is that in an adoption process, both parents can share in the labor.

Couples who are willing to go through the process, are usually couples who really, really want children. That's why they are willing to stay the course, and not be frightened off by the bureaucratic problems. What this means, of course, is that children who are adopted are fortunate in two ways— first, they now have parents, and second, they have parents who truly want them. Adoption is not the result of a brief romantic relationship, or something that just happens naturally in the first few

years of marriage— it is the result of desire and determination and faith on the part of the adoptive parents. Adoptive children are lucky to have parents who have hoped and dreamed and laughed and cried on the way to finding them.

When we started considering adoption, a couple of friends revealed that they had adopted their children. One of the first things they assured us was that we would really love our adopted children, from the beginning. And they were right. We knew when we first saw our children that they were supposed to be part of our family. We started to love them even before we were able to bring them home. The only thing I can compare it to, is love at first sight in a romantic relationship. I think it is also true that love is a decision— that when we decided to adopt them, and made that commitment in our hearts, the love and caring began to flow, and hasn't stopped since. We believe it never will.

One of the problems of the adoption process, especially the long bureaucratic aspect of it, is that your sense of commitment and love for your child start before the legal paperwork is done, so you become emotionally vested before you become legally vested. That makes it hard— very hard— if something goes wrong, or there are delays and more delays. You also don't see the world the same way as the bureaucrats. The bureaucracy focuses on the proper paperwork, while you are focused on starting or expanding your family. That's a big difference.

Another thing our friends told us was that our adoptive children would really be *ours*. That is also true. It may be easier for us to feel that way, since the birth parents of our children are in Japan and Romania, and we don't bump into them at the mall on Saturdays. But the simple fact is that we are so busy loving and caring for them, it is obvious to us that they are ours. We hug them, we talk to them, we praise them, we get angry at them, we share daily life together. Of course they are *ours*. *How* we came together is less important than the fact that we *are* together. Because we are a family, as each year goes by, it seems less important that we came together through the process of adoption.

It used to be, decades ago, that every effort was made to keep adoption a secret. That meant that couples were matched with children who looked like them, and the children were never told that they were adopted. This is still the policy in Romania, where we adopted Spencer and Angela. They carry it so far that after the legal adoption process was completed in Romania, the Romanian government issued us birth certificates for Spencer and Angela, written completely in

Romanian, stating that they were born to us in Honolulu. It seems to us that it would be a little hard to explain to Spencer and Angela some day why their births here in Honolulu were recorded in the Romanian language on Romanian birth certificates issued in Bucharest.

By the way, Rep. Gene Ward led the legislative process and obtained the passage of a law which allows for the issuance of birth certificates in English here in Hawaii. That would have helped us when we had to send Spencer's and Angela's birth certificates to HMSA to get them added to our medical coverage. So far as we know, HMSA does not keep a Romanian translator on staff.

Obviously, we believe that it is not necessary for adoptive children to look like their parents. There are some people who think that Angela looks like my wife, Spencer looks like me— poor kid— and Kristina looks like her Japanese grandmother, but we weren't thinking about that at all. It wasn't a factor for us, because we believe that the children need to be told that they are adopted. We know some adults who were in their 30's or 40's before they found out that they were adopted, and they were not only angry that this had been kept from them— it had a very negative impact on their relationships with their adoptive parents. Some truths are so fundamental that they need to be shared.

There is an upside and a downside to being open with children about their adoption. The positive aspect is that adopted children know that they are truly wanted, and loved, and were sought out, and are special. They are also being told the truth, which is part of the integrity of their relationship with their adoptive parents.

The downside is that adopted children know that their birth parents gave them up. According to psychiatrists, many adopted children go through a grieving process over the loss of their birth parents, or their rejection by their birth parents. Why were they given up? Why didn't their birth parents love them enough to keep them? We don't see this as a rejection of the adoptive parents. It is a simply a question that many adoptive children need to address. For some, the grieving is a lifetime process of reflection and the search for self.

The first response we got from our children was that there had been a little mistake— not a bad one, just a minor error. One of the most moving moments in our life with Kristina occurred when she was three years old, a few months after

we adopted her. My wife, Elizabeth, was drying her off after a bath, and Kristina looked at her and said, “Mommy, where have you been all this time?” Kristina was happy about her mommy— she just didn’t understand why it had taken her so long to show up. There had been a little mistake of some kind, but now it was okay.

A couple of years later, when Kristina was about five, she asked Elizabeth if she had come out of Elizabeth’s tummy. Elizabeth said no, Kristina had come out of another woman’s tummy. A few weeks later, we had a distinguished guest from Japan at our house, and Kristina walked over to him and said: “I came out of the wrong woman’s tummy.” We thought it was probably fortunate that his English wasn’t good enough to understand what she was talking about.

The grieving process is not the same for all adoptive children— some aren’t very affected, and some are. Attitudes change over time, and in time, the adopted child may understand that giving him or her up for adoption was the most loving thing his or her birth parents could have done. That is clear in regard to all three of our children. Their birth parents were disabled or did not have the money to support them. If we had not adopted Kristina, she would have spent another 15 years in an orphanage, and then gone out into Japanese society, which offers fewer opportunities to women. If we had not adopted Spencer and Angela, they would have died, or if they had survived, they would have faced constant starvation and deprivation.

It is normal for adoptive children to ask about their birth parents. There are three large manila envelopes in our safe deposit box, one for each of our children. Inside each envelope is a letter to each one from us, telling him or her all that we know about his or her birth parents and the circumstances of their adoption, along with photos of their birth parents. As they ask, and want to know more, we have the information to share.

As our children grow older, and learn more about the world, we think they will come to understand and even appreciate what their birth parents did. My wife and I, of course, think that God meant us to be a family, and since that was only possible if the birth parents gave up their children for us to adopt, then that is what was supposed to happen.

We think that Hawaii is a great place for international adoptions, because Hawaii is so multi-cultural and inter-racial. People just don’t notice, or don’t care,

about different faces in a family. I remember once that we had a business associate over to our house for dinner, during which he and his wife met our three children. A week later, he called and said he had just learned that we adopted our kids, and wondered if I could tell him more about it. I thought it was fascinating that the possibility of adoption had not occurred to him when he saw our kids.

There are other little examples in daily life. Two of us fathers were standing around watching our daughters play a basketball game. “Your daughter’s pretty tall,” the other father said to me. “I guess she gets that from you.” I nodded and smiled and didn’t say anything. My daughter is 100% Japanese, and I am 100% *haole*, but it hadn’t occurred to him that she was not my biological daughter, and my genes had nothing to do with her height.

We remember how special Hawaii is when we travel on the Mainland, or when a Mainlander stops my wife at Ala Moana shopping center, points to our three children and says, “Excuse me, but are those your children?” My wife says, impatiently, perhaps even indignantly: “Of course they are my children.” The Mainlander looks at her a little strangely and then walks away. I tell my wife that her response isn’t very useful. She should say: “Yes. Three different husbands.”

Part of this is about language. People involved in the adoption process distinguish between birth parents or biological parents, and adoptive parents. Most people don’t know the etiquette, and they refer to birth parents as “the real parents.” This goes against the grain with adoptive parents. Adoptive parents are certain, as they do the laundry and drive their kids to soccer practice, that *they* are “the real parents.” People who aren’t familiar with the world of adoption will ask: “Are those your real children?” Elizabeth is likely to respond: “Well, they look real to me, don’t they look real to you?”

Children who are adopted right after birth are likely to have few developmental problems. Those adopted later *may* have problems as a result of their treatment during their early months and years before adoption. The prenatal to five-year-old period is an exceptionally important period for brain development and the establishment of fundamental attitudes and personality traits.

Even children who have suffered deprivation during these early years can recover if reached in time. My wife Elizabeth and I learned this firsthand from Spencer and Angela. Seven years ago, during the Gulf War, we traveled to

Romania. Elizabeth actually lived there for two months during the adoption process.

Our adoption agency helped us find Spencer in an orphanage in Buzau, 80 miles north of Bucharest. Spencer was a year old. His daily diet was a bottle of rice gruel, which was not enough to build muscles. His ear infections were not treated, so his ears were plugged, and he couldn't hear very much. He didn't know how to crawl, because he was always kept in his crib, and there was no place to crawl to. His crib was completely bare— no blocks or stuffed animals or toys. He was rarely held by any of the staff members. With nothing to see or do, and no place to go, all he could do was sit and rock his head back and forth. We saw children at one hospital who were literally beating their heads against the sides of their cribs, they were so desperate for stimulation.

We found Angela in a hospital in Bucharest. When we first saw her she was six months old, only ten or eleven pounds, fighting the last stages of whooping cough, and so congested throughout her head and chest that she had difficulty breathing. Pus was oozing from both her ears. She was bound up in a mummy bag, so she couldn't move her legs. They didn't change her diapers very often, so she had bleeding open sores on her back side. She didn't move when Elizabeth first held her in her arms. She just looked up with her big eyes, and clasped her hands together as if in prayer. She was just barely clinging to life. They said she would die before we could adopt her.

We brought Spencer and Angela to Hawaii, and gave them food, medical care, lots of stimuli, and lots of love. They were very busy touching, feeling, and tasting everything within reach. Elizabeth stayed home from work so she could play with them, read to them, sing to them, and take them out to the park and the beach. She made sure they got the help they needed from the Zero to Three program, our family doctor, and several speech therapists.

As a result, Spencer and Angela began to grow at an extraordinary pace. During the first six months, Spencer went from 19 pounds to 31 pounds and grew 5 ½ inches. Angela went from 12 to 24 pounds and grew 7 ½ inches. To make a long story short, from an environment of total deprivation, from a deep learning deficit, they made rapid progress, until today they have mostly caught up. We were lucky— in terms of brain development, they made it through most of the windows of opportunity in time. Helping their transformation, helping them survive and then

thrive, has been the thrill of a lifetime.

I think all three of our children need lots of assurance and affection. We do lots of hugging. Every day we tell them we love them. Every night, when I tuck them into bed, I tell them I love them, they are good kids, I like being their Daddy, and I'm glad they are my children. Each of them began life without that assurance, without that daily loving and hugging. The need for affection and assurance may always remain strong with them. If so, it would certainly be understandable. In the meantime, I don't think I'll ever get tired of hugs.

Let me conclude with two stories, stories about two of the many little miracles or uncanny coincidences that helped convince us that God intended that all of us be together as a family. The first is just one story about adopting Kristina.

We spent seven months processing paperwork to adopt Kristina from Holy Family Home in Japan in 1988. When all the papers were in order, we traveled to Osaka, and spent a week at the orphanage, getting to know Kristina in her own setting there before bringing her to her new home in Hawaii. Everything was fine until we reported to the visa window at the American Embassy in Tokyo and presented our documents to obtain a U.S. visa for Kristina. The Vice-Consul, who was in charge of the visa section, looked at our papers, and said that we had met all the requirements for a visa. However, he was not going to give us one. He told us to go sit down.

A couple of hours later, he called us back to the window and said he was worried about the birth mother's rights. I showed him the Japanese court documents which made it clear that her rights were extinguished by the court, which assigned them to the birth father, who assigned them to us. He wasn't persuaded. I asked him what we could do to persuade him. He said he didn't know. He told us to put Kristina back in the orphanage while we tried to get a declaration from the Supreme Court of Japan on the issue. That made no sense to us, since the Japanese courts had already given us the parental rights. He said to come back the next day.

That was one of the longest nights of our lives. If a bureaucrat looks at you and says: "You failed to fill out section 14 (g) (1) of Form 2396. Now go fill it out, and don't show your face again until it's filled out correctly"—well, then, you know what to do. But if a bureaucrat says you have filled out all the forms

correctly, and have met all the requirements, but he won't give you what you are entitled to— then you really don't know what to do.

We called the Holy Family Home, and the sisters there went to the chapel to light candles and pray. Early the next morning, Sister Maurice and a social worker from the orphanage took the early train to Tokyo, and met us at the U. S. Embassy to talk with the Vice-Consul. He said he was worried about law and ethics and doing what was right for the birth mother. Sister Maurice told him that the birth mother had abandoned her husband and child and had not been seen or heard from for two years. Nobody knew where she was. Public notices had appeared in newspapers but there was no response. The Vice-Consul said sorry, he wasn't going to issue the visa. Again, he admitted that we had met all the requirements for a visa, but he didn't want to give it to us.

We were devastated. We had been through seven months of paperwork, we had done everything correctly, and we had become very attached to our little girl. This one man, second only to the Ambassador in rank, was preventing us from starting our family, for reasons which seemed to us to be totally arbitrary and capricious. We had been patient and understanding. We pointed to the evidence the Vice-Consul said he needed, but he refused to accept it. Finally, he didn't want to talk any more. He told us to wait at the window while he went to make copies of our documents to keep in his file. We had tickets for the three of us to fly back to Honolulu and begin our new life together that evening. But now we didn't know if we would ever be taking that happy plane ride.

A few minutes later he came back and said we could have the visa. Just like that. He had met another member of the embassy at the water cooler, on his way to make copies, and that person said that the Japanese are not litigious, and the birth mother would never sue, so he didn't have to worry about her legal rights. On the basis of that brief conversation, he changed his mind, we got the visa, and we made our plane flight that evening. We don't know who that person was at the water cooler, but we think we know who sent him, and we're grateful. We refer to him as our angel.

That demonstration of arbitrary and capricious bureaucratic power only partly prepared us for the trauma and chaos of adopting in Romania. It is a very long story of a system characterized by changing rules, constant bribery, and cruel indifference to the children themselves— as many as 150,000 of them, starving

and dying in orphanages and hospitals throughout the country. There were many little miracles that helped us through that harsh environment, but let me tell you about the last one: the miracle fax.

Romania in 1991 was technologically far behind the United States. Typewriters and typing paper were pretty rare; computers even less available. There was no place to develop photographs. The postal system was so unreliable that couples going into Romania became couriers, taking documents, film, and needed supplies to couples who were already there. If you wanted to make international telephone calls, you had to go to the government post office, sit in your assigned booth, and wait until a government official made the call and then turned it over to you.

There were apparently only two fax machines in the entire country, both in Bucharest—one in the U.S. Embassy, and the other in the Inter-Continental Hotel, which catered to foreigners. The fax machine at the Inter-Continental was known to work only occasionally. Even when it was working, they didn't always remember to put paper in it.

We went to Romania to adopt one child but fell in love with two. That meant that I had to come back to Hawaii to re-file all our papers, changing the word “one” to the word “two.” So after we found Spencer and Angela, I came back to Honolulu and started the new paperwork, which had to be completed before we could bring the two children home. With immense courage and faith, Elizabeth was successful in completing the adoption process for both Spencer and Angela in the Romanian courts, and brought the children to her apartment in Bucharest. But we could not bring the children back to America without visas for both of them, and to get visas for both of them, we needed that last piece of paperwork.

A few days before I was scheduled to fly back to Bucharest in hopes of bringing Elizabeth and the children home to Hawaii, the document arrived. If I could get it to Elizabeth, she could get the visas in time for us to come home on schedule.

I remember standing at the fax machine at my office in Honolulu, remembering the Inter-Continental Hotel and its fax machine. It was a long shot, but I had nothing to lose. I punched in the numbers and sent a copy of the document. Then began a series of little miracles. At that moment, on the other side

of the world, the fax machine in the Inter-Continental was working, and had paper in it. Furthermore, the clerk at the desk called Elizabeth to say she had received a fax— even though she was not a guest at the hotel. Furthermore, she was at home to receive the call— a critical fact because her phone did not have an answering machine. Furthermore, when she went to the hotel, they were able to find the fax. Furthermore, when she took it to the embassy, she was able to persuade them to accept the fax as an original or true copy of the document— a nice legal point, still not clear back here in the States. Furthermore, they issued the visas immediately.

When I arrived in Bucharest and learned of this series of little miracles, we had time to go visit St. Joseph Cathedral, where Elizabeth had gone many times to pray, and had led friends there to pray as well. We took our children to the cathedral to thank God for our good fortune. We lit candles in the dark entry chamber, and then walked into the nave. The organ was playing, the choir was singing, the candles were glittering, and the sun was shining brightly through the stained glass windows. We just stood there, holding our children, while tears rolled down our cheeks. I had never felt so grateful, I had never felt so peaceful, and I had never felt so close to God.

Our children have now graduated from having special problems to having normal problems. We worry about them the way all parents do. They are vulnerable and sensitive, especially because of what they did not get in their early years, and yet they are also tough— they are survivors. We can't wait to see who they will become and what they will do in the future. Meanwhile, being a parent is an amazing, humbling, confounding, and joyous experience for Elizabeth and me. I can't imagine *not* being a Daddy. Something profoundly important would be missing from my life.

I have shared some thoughts about adoption in general and told you a small part of our particular story. The decision to adopt is a serious one, arrived at in many ways, including prayer. It may be a difficult, frustrating process, but it is also a process that can be richly rewarding and spiritually enlightening. If you truly want to have children, and have been unable to have biological children, then maybe that's just God's way of pointing you toward the exciting and fulfilling life available to you through adoption.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to be with you this evening. God bless you, and Godspeed!