



Telling, Talking and...Listening

By Jean MacLeod

“Mommy, why didn’t I grow in your tummy?”

I looked my almost three-year-old daughter square in the face and gave her the speech that I had rehearsed in my head for as long as she had been ours. The speech was short, gentle and sweet. I told her about her birthmother in China, how much she had been loved and how much we loved her now.

“But Mommy, why didn’t she keep me?”

I took a deep breath and explained that I didn’t know for sure, but that it might have had something to do with the China rule about having only one child. I described a few other possibilities and ended with my proclamation of faith – that we were meant to be a family, that I was sure that her birthmother wanted her to have a family for always, and wasn’t it wonderful that we had all found each other to love.

Coming down from my poetic rhetoric, I smiled wittingly at the tiny figure in overalls and waited for my hug and kiss. What I got: a look of icy outrage, arms folded in disbelief, and an attitude that screamed “what a load of c***!”

I was unnerved. This was supposed to be a mother-daughter bonding moment where we celebrated becoming a family. A moment of sadness was allowed, but then things were supposed to be joyful and loving. Why was I feeling like I had tried to tell a 16-year-old there really was a Santa Claus? And how could a three-year-old see through all of my carefully worded, positive explanations? I believed what I was telling her...why didn’t she?

She didn’t because she had lived her story and somewhere, deep inside, she knew the whole truth. My “old soul” little girl understood that a happy adoption is built on a heartbreaking loss long before I did, and she was cutting me no slack.

What Our Children Teach Us

Flash forward nine years: my daughter from China is now twelve years old, and I am an older and wiser mom. Somewhere between then and now my daughter taught me the truth about her story, and showed me that pain and loss can be more than evenly matched by a small child’s ability to bravely face both sides of her reality.



Adoption is happy *and* sad or, as my daughter would say, bitter-sweet. Helping our adopted daughters and sons create an honest story about their early lives while keeping communication portals open during the volatile throes of tween and teen-dom, does what I had hoped my idyllic, positive spin would do nine years ago for my (then) three-year old. I have had to learn how to support my daughter's personal journey, and have had to make myself speak directly about difficult truths. I have had to learn to listen to my daughter's perspective, to acknowledge it and to value her view. When we differ on adoption issues, I offer my beliefs and opinions, but I no longer expect my daughter, the real expert, to *buy* everything I have to say!

My daughter may someday decide to return again to her birth country, not as a tourist but as a searcher. She may need to process the few links to her past; she may need to try for reunion with her birth family. I have learned to let my daughter follow her feelings. By standing close I can try to catch her if she stumbles or falls, but this is more for my mother-heart than out of necessity. My job as an adoptive parent, I now know, is not to insist on living in an emotional happy zone, but to let my daughter boldly lead us with *her* version of her own life story.

~ Jean MacLeod

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