

Learning from experience

When, as a child, I considered my future, I knew that what I wanted more than anything was to have an interesting life. While my life so far has not always been pleasant, it has certainly always been interesting. I have had my share of a variety of emotions and experiences. I am grateful to all those who have helped to make life interesting for me and to all those who have taught me useful lessons. I never expected, of course, that my future would include separation from my first child through adoption. For a time, I felt that my life had been “ruined” by that loss. Since being reunited with my son, however, I have gradually come to change my perspective. I now realise that, although the adoption was a major loss event for me, which had lasting ramifications, it was also an experience from which I have been able to learn some very valuable lessons.

I learned that life will not necessarily give us what we wish for or what we feel we deserve. I learned to be prepared for the worst whilst working towards the best. I learned that not only pleasurable experiences, but also painful ones can present us with valuable opportunities for personal growth. I learned, too, that there are some crises in life which, no matter how willing others are to help, belong to us alone. I have not yet faced a crisis in my life which has taken a greater toll on me than the separation from my son, although subsequent loss experiences have recalled for me that early loss. Many years after my son’s adoption, I learned the value of productive grieving and, with that understanding, I feel that I have successfully managed the challenges which I have faced since that time. I am sure that those challenges have seemed less momentous to me, because their intensity fades in comparison with the impact of the loss of my son. I believe that every experience in our lives has its place and its purpose and that we can always find something to be gained, even when we have suffered. Every loss can be seen as an opportunity for growth.

I was forced recently to endure a very hurtful and distressing situation which resulted in the loss of my employment. I have found several parallels between my youthful experience of an unplanned pregnancy and my more mature experience of what I believed to be grievous and unreasonable treatment at the hands of an employer. Both experiences caused me to feel a deep sense of betrayal and disappointment. I felt that I was denied natural justice. I was aware of feelings of anger and disbelief, which are common to loss experiences. Both situations took me by surprise and consequently I was completely unprepared. I felt isolated, stigmatised, unfairly blamed and accused. I suffered not only an enormous sense of loss but also a feeling of disempowerment, as it seemed that others tried to intimidate me and make me feel inadequate. Both events involved concealment and deceit. Although some friends proved to be genuine, by supporting and defending me, others proved to be faithless, by turning away from me. I was struck by the fact that all of these aspects were common to the two situations.

There were notable differences, however, in my reactions to these two losses. When I lost my son, I did not understand what was happening to me, did not have confidence in my own abilities, was not able to validate my own feelings, did not express my grief and was therefore unable at the time to process the experience or to find a place for it in the sum of my life’s events. I felt responsible for the separation from my son. I also felt ashamed and guilty. Because of those feelings, it was many years before I was able to grieve, to assimilate that experience and to take the opportunity to learn the valuable lessons which it had offered me.

In my more recent loss situation, however, although this time I was traumatised not only emotionally but also financially, I was able to understand and articulate what was happening. I had by that time learned to trust myself and to be aware of my capabilities. I was also able to express my feelings and appreciate that they were appropriate and so I did not try to suppress them, as I had done so many years before. Although on this occasion also I suffered as a result of the loss, I was able to acknowledge my pain and grieve my loss. I was able to survive the situation with my integrity and sense of self-worth intact, with no sense of guilt or shame and with a clear understanding of where the responsibility for the unhappy outcome belonged. I now realise that this experience has taught me to be more resilient and to be able to draw on my inner strength, even in such difficult circumstances. The experience did, however, reinforce for me what I had learned when I became pregnant in 1969, that if we

expect life to be fair and to reward us for our efforts, then we risk being disappointed. I know that the sadness from both of these losses will always be with me, but I believe that now it will be manageable.

For others who have suffered because of an adoption separation, I hope that my thoughts on learning from experience will help them to assess what they might have gained from their experience in terms of inner strength, personal growth and self-awareness. I believe that it could be useful for all of us to consider how we can put those gains to use when we are faced with other challenging situations and painful losses in our lives.

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