

Recognising the gift of pain

I have received two important gifts in my life from two important men in my life. The two men are my father and my son. My relationships with these two men have, in certain ways, been painful. I believe, however, that pain can represent a gift for us, if we can only understand how to accept it. It was only after my father's death that I appreciated the gift which came through him and it was only after I was reunited with my son that I appreciated the gift which came through him.

Throughout his lifetime, I did not have a close relationship with my father. When I was a child, I believed that my father was a bully and his treatment of me hurt me and caused me pain. My father believed that praising a child would result in complacency and that appearing to be unimpressed with your children's achievements was the way to spur them on to greater heights. Throughout my father's life, I resented what I perceived as his failure to recognise any of my successes. My father's view was that if he appeared to expect me to fail, I would then be more determined to succeed. It was only after my father died and I reviewed my life and considered my achievements, that I was able to understand the nature of the gift which he had given me.

There have been several occasions in my life when I have succeeded in spite of the expectations of others that I would not. I recall the time when my marriage came to an end. My husband told me that I would be unable to manage without him in my life. I divorced him, however, raised my children alone and saw them become productive and confident adults. When I wanted to return to study, my children told me that I was too old. I enrolled at university regardless and completed my degree. When I decided to publish my first book, publishers told me that it would not be marketable. I chose to publish it myself because I knew that it was. I learned from my father not to rely on the approval of others and to have faith in myself when others appeared to have none. This has been my father's gift to me.

When I lost my son to adoption, I thought that my sadness and pain would last forever and that my life had been ruined. Looking back, I believe that I was separated from my son by adoption because I was uninformed and because I lacked the strength to resist those who pressured me. This experience has led me to inform and strengthen myself and to inform and strengthen others. Both of those are on-going projects.

After being separated from my son by adoption, I carried my sadness and pain locked inside me for many years. Finally I allowed myself to unlock my grief and to experience it. I can now say that I have used my pain and my suffering to heal myself and to help others to heal. Many others, I know, are doing similar work in ways which are honest, respectful, compassionate and supportive. I applaud those people. After my reunion with my son, twenty-one years after our separation, I began to realise that the pain of his adoption had brought with it its own gift. It allowed me to recognise my needs and the needs of others and to learn how to meet them.

I also learned from my relationships with both of these men how to care for myself. As a child I felt bullied by my father and as an adult I felt that I had been manipulated by others into giving up my son. Some mothers, who had similar experiences, are still locked into attitudes of submission and compliance and have not yet learned how to resist bullying and manipulation. Similarly, some who have been abused as children go through life being victims. Unfortunately there are also some mothers who learned from their adoption experiences how to bully and manipulate others, in the same way that some victims of childhood abuse, themselves become abusers.

I learned from my relationship with my father and from the adoption of my son not to tolerate bullying. I have not tolerated it, either in my personal relationships or in my employment relationships. I would rather have no marriage or no job than allow myself to be the victim of bullying or manipulation again.

I believe that we can find a lesson from every experience that we have in life. As I review my life thus far, I can honestly say that there has never been a dull moment and that I have faced many challenges. If I were asked whether or not I have gained strength, wisdom and compassion from having faced those challenges, I hope that I can honestly say that I

have. In spite of the difficulties in my relationship with my father, I chose to care for him after the death of my mother. In spite of the pain of being separated from my son for twenty-one years, I have chosen not to allow that pain to overshadow my pride in being a mother.

Although I have endured painful experiences in my life, I have chosen not to become bitter. I have not become so attached to my pain that it has been able to prevent me from understanding the gifts that the relationship with my father and the loss of my son have brought to my life. I have chosen to celebrate my survival instead of apologising for it. I have chosen to be proud of being both my father's daughter and my son's mother. Both of these roles have given me great opportunities for growth and learning.

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Evelyn Robinson, who is a counsellor, educator and author of

Adoption and Loss – The Hidden Grief

Adoption and Recovery – Solving the mystery of reunion

Adoption Reunion – Ecstasy or Agony?

Adoption Separation – Then and now

welcomes contact from interested readers.

Postal address: Clova Publications
PO Box 328
Christies Beach
South Australia 5165

E-mail: erobinson@clovapublications.com

For further information about Evelyn and her work, please visit her web site:

Web site: www.clovapublications.com