

chapter VI.

Epilogue: Moving On

*“I guess doggies’ whiskers don’t
catch on fire!” (Jonathon)*

January 16, 2002

Dear Michael,

Jonathon Thomas is now a legal name. His adoption is finalized!

As I read the final adoption decree, I was shocked at the level of emotion that rose up in me. It was just a piece of paper, declaring something that I already knew to be true. But that one little paper, with one little signature, means the world to me. It makes legal the relationship between me and my son, and cements that bond forever. It is a precious paper, and I cried like a baby when I finally received it. Jonathon is my son!

Jonathon was happy that “the paper from the judge” arrived in the mail, and when I showed it to him he gave me a big hug. Then he and Maggie disappeared into his room to talk about something. Being the good mom that I am, I eavesdropped. I stood there, ear to door, listening to their conversation. Maggie asked, “Jonathon, do you know that I was adopted, too?” Jonathon’s reply was interesting. “Does that mean you lived with G. [a former foster mother], too?” “No,” Maggie answered. “I lived in Korea, in an orphanage. But when Mom and Dad adopted me, I became part of this family. Now this is my forever family, just like it is yours. That means I never have to leave. You never have to leave, either.” Jonathon screamed, “You mean I *really* never have to go back to G’s?” He ran from the room, and right into me, since I was still eavesdropping outside the door. He grabbed me, and held tight. “Mom, I never have to go back to G’s! Isn’t that great?”

“As I read the final adoption decree, I was shocked at the level of emotion that rose up in me. It was just a piece of paper, declaring something that I already knew to be true. Jonathon is my son.”

The hold that this one foster family has had over Jonathon, and the concern that has clearly remained deep inside him, makes me so sad for him. On the other hand, the response to our finalization was wonderful. I am thrilled and relieved to know that our adoption process is finished. This is a child who needs to know that he can stay in one place and work on life with some security. With a family that adores him.

So, we are all happy as can be, and starting this New Year off just the way we wanted!

Just wanted to share our joy with you,

Lori

January 17, 2002

Dear Lori,

It's amazing, isn't it, that what we offer to children in child welfare (protective services, adoption services, foster care) sometimes hurts them as much as whatever trauma, abuse, or neglect we were saving them from in the first place? Knocks me out that he talks so much about the experience with the one foster family. Undoubtedly, there is some transference; he may be able to conceptualize, to make concrete and conscious, his experience there, more than he can his earliest experiences with his mother. He may also be doing some serious splitting, as a defensive strategy to buoy his sense of safety now, or to help him feel clearer about his own feelings. Still, it is clear that, in the name of helping him, he must have gotten hurt again in that home.

Thanks for including me in this moment. I am thrilled for all of you. You must have been pretty impressed with Maggie's articulateness. I'm intrigued that this is not a moment of trauma for Jonathon; he seems to have been down the road (of doubt, terror about continued loss and anxiety about closeness) enough times that this court action hasn't thrown him for a loop.

I will be thinking about you all.

Michael

January 21, 2002

Dear Michael,

Yesterday and today have been reflective days for me, and I wanted to share some of my thoughts with you.

We are about to celebrate our church's 25th anniversary, and our pastor made mention of it during his sermon. While anniversaries are important, and looking back has great value, he wanted to encourage all of us to continue to look towards the future with our hopes, dreams, and goals. He said, "Dreams for the future must be bigger than memories from the past." It all brought to mind something that I have often heard quoted in the past: "Without a vision, the people perish."

The rest of the sermon was a blur to me, as I sat and considered his words, and the implications for children like Jonathon. Dreams for the future *must* be bigger than memories (of abuse or neglect, memories that are bad, memories that can be magnified in the mind for bad *or* good) from the past. So how do we create hopes and dreams in a child who has so little good in his past from which to draw? If there is no frame of reference for hope, can a child feel hope?

Clearly, the moment at hand, the present, is the place to begin. The holding therapy, the work of trying to build a sense of security: it is all about trying to build new memories and a basis from which to draw hope for the future.

Jonathon had some positive memories from his past which we could use and build upon. It made our work much easier, because he had some good to counteract the bad. What about the children who truly have no good upon which to build—or so much bad that it erases the good from their minds?

My thought pattern has been interrupted. I just learned that there was a shooting in Arlington last night, in which two women and a 6-year-old child were killed. It turns out that one of the women was one of Siobhan's former foster children (she was the social worker) and there was an 18-month-old child at the scene that is currently on her caseload. The baby was not injured (physically!), but it appears the mom was holding her at the time of the shooting. Blood all over the baby. Siobhan had to go and identify the body of the mom last night. And place the baby in a foster home. Pretty traumatic for all involved.

Another phone call today was from a mom of one of the wrestlers on Jonathon's team. They are new to the area, and are having trouble with their child, who is about Jonathon's age. She called me for advice. She wanted to know if I could help her because she is impressed with what a gentle, sweet boy Jonathon is! Her child has tantrums, and is pushing her to her limit. She is yelling a lot, losing control, and wants to know if we have ever experienced that with any of our children. I am meeting with her tomorrow morning. I plan to share some of our struggles with her, let her know how successful "The Attitude" and holding have been in dealing with Jonathon, and recommend a couple of books.

Anyway, back to the issue of building dreams for a future in our children. I just thought it interesting on this, Martin Luther King's birthday, to talk about dreams for a better tomorrow. I DO HAVE A DREAM, and in my dream I see a grown up, well-adjusted Jonathon. He is a positive member of society, and he is happy. I think he sees that dream, too, and it thrills me!

Lori

January 24, 2002

Dear Lori,

You are right, of course, that therapy often takes long, in-depth looks at the past. But one of the things I am always searching for is *The Exception*: that person or event, sometimes only briefly-known, that stands out amongst all the mess and violence and deprivations, and says to the baby, or child, in effect: “Yes, much of your life has sucked. You are probably fast on your way to deciding that all of life will be like this, that you have no defense except to stop expecting anything good to happen to you, and to everlastingly prepare yourself for loss. But, hold on. Remember me. Can you save room for this experience that we have had together, and not quite fully despair, yet?”

When I teach, I call it “The Aunt Rosie Syndrome”, in honor of one of the first cases in which I learned about the phenomenon. Sometimes Aunt Rosie is, literally, a family member to whom the child escaped from time to time (when mom or dad was drunk or being abusive); or a neighbor on whose lap the toddler would sometimes find an unfamiliar comfort; or a relative who stopped over only every few months, but whom the child knew could influence mom or dad to beat less or hold more; or a person at the orphanage; or, of course, a foster parent. I don’t hold any fantasies that Aunt Rosie can turn the child’s life around. But I have seen, over and over, that such an exception in a child’s life can come back to haunt them, in the most positive of senses, years later. I’ve been with children and grownups in therapy when the feeling will come back: of being held, of being looked at, of being praised, of being *seen*. It can be mighty powerful.

The whole question of how to build/create hope in a child is such a tough one. You and I have talked before about the transactional nature of development: truly negative early experiences sometimes create such shifts in the child’s sense of self, in the child’s expectations, that he begins to negatively influence his caregivers, and others. People pull back, withhold commitment, don’t want to be around him. Self-fulfilling prophecies abound. A foster parent, or adoptive parent, or therapist who tries to stop that locomotive of self-destruction has an overwhelming job. Sometimes we get lucky, and sometimes we don’t.

*“A dream, then,
is hope put
into action.”*

One of the things that came to me when I was writing my own dream about children and culture was that dreams are not just idle fantasies. Dreams, in my view, become expectations, visions of the world as it should be—and *as it's going to be, if I have anything to say about it, which I do!* I really believe this is why Dr. King had such an impact with his speech. He wasn't blowing smoke. He actually expected that the things he was saying could happen, and you just knew that he was not about to be stopped in his quest to make it so. He would never lose his vision, because it would inform his every act, every day.

We should continue this conversation...

Michael

January 24, 2002

Dear Michael,

What is a dream, anyway? I looked in my children's dictionary, and found very incomplete definitions. My thinking is that a dream is something that you want so badly that a plan is formed, and *nothing* can stop you from moving forward with that plan. Temporary setbacks and slow progress are not deterrents. They are just times to take a deep breath and build up the courage to move forward again.

A dream, then, is hope put into action.

I have a dream to open a community where children who have been hurt by life will have a chance to be loved, to heal, to be a member of a family that cherishes them just because they are who they are. This dream is taking form here in northern Virginia, largely because others share the dream.

Lori

April 8, 2002

Happy spring, Michael,

James just headed off for a day of school after Jonathon, James and I had a particularly great breakfast together. As we chatted, Jonathon started telling us the rules of life. It began with safety. Buckle up, sit in your seat, and wear the seatbelt across your belly, not around your neck. Then he reminded us of the crossing-the-street rules. Once he got started, he was on a roll. He talked about the rules of appropriate yelling (outside is best, and don't yell at your friends). He just kept going. Table rules. Safety rules. How-to-treat-your-dog rules. Rules that I was quite sure he did not know: Don't play in a car without a grownup there. Rub Gidget's head and she will love you.

Jonathon has recently celebrated his one-year anniversary in the Thomas family (January 19), his sixth birthday (March 30), and his first big drama production. He had a few lines as part of a crowd scene in our homeschool's production of "Hello Dolly". It was a grand production, with an audience of 250 people, and Jonathon handled his role splendidly.

Jonathon just now climbed up on my lap, and is singing, "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star, How I Wish I could go to Disney World". In real life, he will be flying to California with me and James on April 19th. We will go to see Joshua and Robin and baby Heidi, who was due to be born on March 30, but has not chosen to make her debut just yet. While in California, I plan to take the boys to Disneyland. We will have a chance to love the new grandbaby, while we're at it. Jonathon will be an uncle!

Jonathon is, at this point, a lot of fun and a huge challenge. There are so many issues that we are still dealing with, and some weeks I feel like all I do is hold Jonathon, and try to see the light of day. But those weeks are becoming the exception, rather than the rule. Routinely, Jonathon is difficult and a handful. But he is making such wonderful progress! His sweet side is showing up more and more.

And then we have mornings like today, when all is right with the world. Jonathon's progress has been more than I would have dreamed for, a year ago. It has been a year that I would prefer to never repeat. But, then, again, it was a year that was so very much worth living.

This is the current state of the Thomas family: happy, relatively well settled, enjoying life as it is in this moment, looking forward to the future, thankful that the past has been lived just as it was, thankful to God for all our blessings, with our six children being at the top of the blessings list. We cannot imagine life without any of them.

I just got THE CALL. Heidi is on the way!
Lori

April 8, 2002

Dear Lori,

You are very sweet to think of sending me a progress report. Hard to believe how fast the time has passed. (Easy for *me* to say, since I wasn't living *your* life!) The summary sounds exactly right: had to happen, wouldn't want to do it again, astounding progress, still an enormous challenge, can still remember why you're doing this, even when the feedback isn't always there. And, in the middle of it all, life is being lived, history is being made, memories are being laid down, principles are being absorbed...

I had a minor stroke a month ago. It has thrown our family for a loop, as you can imagine, tho' we're doing OK. Jeremy greeted me at the back door when I arrived home from the hospital with a list he had made of all the things he thought I might not be able to do, anymore, and offering his help with each one. You could have knocked me over with a feather (well, actually, you could have *anyway*, due to the unsteadiness of my gait!): a child with his history and customary self-absorption, showing empathy.

Thanks for letting me have a place in your lives.
Michael

April 8, 2002

Dear Michael,

You are in the Thomas family prayers. Full recovery, peace for your family, and all of that good stuff. I am assuming that you are doing well, since your email was vintage Michael. Sounded just like you, which I will take as a good sign.

Have you considered publishing an edited version of our correspondence? I sure would love it if your wisdom, and our collective experiences with our children, could help those that don't have you available to them the way we did.

Lori

April 11, 2002

Dear Lori,

Looks as if I get to keep my brain and my speech, my face doesn't sag, and I can still do most things. I have no feeling on the left side of my body, I wobble some, fall over occasionally (you can imagine that I try to be dignified about it!), and experience a tremor from time to time.

Indeed, I have often thought of what creative thing should be done with our letters. The fact that I so often think of things you have said or Jonathon has done, while consulting with families, makes it seem as if such a publication would have a purpose, and an audience. But I don't know.

Michael

*“If we had been
presented with
the whole
picture up front,
Jonathon would
never have
entered our
door. We would
not have been
willing. But now
changed life is
appearing right
before our eyes.”*

April 13, 2002

Dear Michael,

I was thrilled to get your email, and hear your positive attitude shining so brightly in the midst of what has to be a very difficult time. There are at least a gazillion people who are thankful that your brain was not affected, and that your speech and sense of humor are intact! The stumbling from time to time, while a problem and something that we pray goes away, makes you more human to those of us who look up to you.

Last night, I became intensely aware of the spoken word and its import and impact on those with whom we have the opportunity to speak. My spoken words were directed at Jonathon, and it was in the midst of a very sad and intense situation. Some of my children were in the back yard, burying Gimli, the recently-departed hamster. Jonathon and James did not want to be part of the funeral, and were headed upstairs to get ready for a bath. Suddenly, we heard hitting and screaming. James ran downstairs, with Jonathon right behind him, denying that he had done anything wrong. James ran to us, sobbing and saying, “Jonathon hit. Jonathon hit.” There were several red marks across James’ back. In the matter of a few seconds, Jonathon was able to hurt James, and shake us all up, rather significantly.

Paul tended to James, and I sat down, face-to-face with Jonathon. I was angry, and, in my mind, the words I formed were all wrong. I took a couple of deep breaths, and thought before I spoke. What I wanted to say was, “How *dare* you hurt my James! He is my son, and you can’t hurt him. I love you, but I will not let you hurt my James again!” Actually, I did not want to say those words. I wanted to yell them. And then follow up with consequences. Severe consequences. That is what I wanted to do and say.