

Embracing the Grief of Adoption

by Michael Monroe

One father explores the deeply rooted grief of his son's adoption story, discovering a new depth and distance in their father/son relationship

I was reminded last night of something I already knew, though I often try to forget it. It is one of the more sobering realities of adoption — the fact that there is no adoption without loss and pain . . . and grief.

As an adoptive dad, like all adoptive parents, my tendency is to focus on the miracle, blessing and joy of adoption — and rightfully so. These are the undeniably beautiful realities of the adoption journey. But they do not negate the equally unavoidable reality that there is no adoption without loss and pain. Adoption is at the same time born from and a response to hurt, loss and sorrow.

Last night I saw through my son's tears and heard in his words the deep, heartbreaking grief that lurks in the shadows of adoption. It was an intense sorrow caused by the loss he feels and understands now more than ever before. My son's grief is for that which never was and for what will never be.

In trying to carefully walk a fine line between honestly telling about our adoption journey and protecting what is, after all, his story to tell, I dare not share the details of what was said. But it was all too clear that he has now

come to an age where the facts of his past no longer merely equate to a story that he feels some amount of curiosity, confusion and even sadness about. The books told us this would begin to happen at his age — for some children more than others. And yet, nothing could have fully prepared me for the flood of thoughts and emotions as I saw his grief come crashing in.

The loss and pain of his broken past are now more fully his loss and pain. His heart was breaking and as he cried I felt so helpless — I felt so small. There was nothing I could say and little I could do other than take turns with his mom holding him close and listening, being sure to acknowledge each and every emotion and longing he expressed.

The adoption journey certainly has its share of loss and pain for everyone involved. Our journey to our son has pain and loss, and even grief, but it is not the same as his. In that sense, we share the same adoption with him, albeit from different perspectives, but we do not fully share his same journey.

As I held him close I so desperately wanted to tell him that I understood what he was thinking and feeling . . . and God knows I

wanted to, but I can't. Not truly. He knows it and so do I. As a result, all we could offer him was our reassuring presence to help him run toward the loss and pain, not away from it. To help him own the grief that he feels, and to own it redemptively.

As a dad, everything in me wants to protect my son from such grief. As an adoptive dad, this grief can appear as an unwelcome intruder seemingly intent on pushing he and I apart — reminding us both of "another" as if to suggest the need for him to make an impossible choice. But I choose to believe that his grief can bring us closer together.

By choosing to let go of my desire to hold exclusive claim to my son's love and loyalty; by choosing to see myself not as an all-



THE MONROE CHILDREN include, from left, 5-year-old Carter, 5-year-old Kate, 9-year-old Miles and 7-year-old Grant.

sufficient substitute for what he has lost, but rather as an imperfect father dependent on God's grace to love him well, then, and only then, can I offer my son what he needs most, especially in the midst of his pain and grief.

I find that there is beauty in the pain and I know there is meaning in the grief. As a result, we will do our best to weave this pain and grief into the story that we tell and re-tell, being sure not to miss the beauty or overlook the meaning.

But last night as I fought against my instinct to try to make the pain and grief go away, all I could do was hold my son in my arms and reassure him that I love him — all of him. This includes his pain and grief. There was no nice and neat resolution to our time

together, no magic words that I was able to speak to make everything better. Instead,

Michael Monroe and his wife Amy have four children, each having joined their family

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as he cried himself to sleep in my arms all I could do was hold him, with his grief, tightly, and remind him that we are both in the arms of another.

through adoption. Together they lead Tapestry, an adoption and foster care ministry at Irving Bible Church in Irving, Texas. For more information, visit www.tapestry.irvingbible.org.