

The Other Half of the Mulberry Bird: Remembering Birthfathers

Eliza Carney, in an article entitled, *“Birthfathers: The Forgotten Half of the Story”*, writes about the classic children’s story, *“The Mulberry Bird”*. As the Mother Bird struggles to feed her baby bird, as she travels over oceans to seek counsel from the wise owl, and as she ultimately finds a soft, safe nest that welcomes her baby bird, it becomes poignantly clear that a central character in the story is missing: Father Bird. Sadly, so often in the stories of adoption, a child’s biological father is mentioned in mere passing, if at all. And yet, he is a critical part of the child’s identity and a character who, when missing, leaves an empty place in the most important story a child has to tell.

Until our children are able to tell their own stories, we as parents take on the role of narrator. We are responsible for setting the stage, introducing the players, and breathing life into the characters that are the foundation for our child’s identity. It is a monumental responsibility. But how can parents share with their child what they don’t know? How can parents encourage and inspire their child when they lack the knowledge necessary to assuage their child’s fears? If our focus is always on the *“best interest of the child”*, then isn’t it paramount for parents to be given the tools they need to educate? Isn’t it critical for parents to have as much opportunity to know the principal characters in their child’s story so that they can tell it with confidence, regardless of how heroic or tragic the story is?

A little information goes a long way. I am continually amazed at the fact that what children imagine to be true is always worse than what is actually the truth. When we push birthfathers away, when we hope and pray for their disappearance, when we refuse to acknowledge their existence, when we disrespect their role in their child’s life, and when we dance them out of the picture with fancy legal footwork, we rip pages out of our child’s life story and are left having to explain why the words are not there. But he is there – however removed, he is part of the story. I have been humbled time and time again by how many birth fathers I have met who genuinely care; how many suffer; how many have regrets; how many feel powerless; how many are angry because the sadness is too raw to feel; and how many simply want to be acknowledged, recognized, and heard.

Meet Anthony. Anthony, a 55 year old successful accountant, came to my office one day in the midst of a hot July afternoon. He sat down, took a deep breath and said, *“I’m here because I had a daughter who was given up for adoption when I was only 19...well, she found me...”*. Perhaps you’re thinking his next words were, *“...and I don’t know how to get rid of her,”* or, *“I’m angry that she tracked me down and I can’t risk my family finding out....”* What he said was quite the contrary, and his words, so full of anguish, will not be as easily forgotten as he was 36 years ago: *“...and I can’t bear to lose her again. Can you help me?”*

Anthony was 19 years old, in love with his daughter’s birthmother, Christine, but at the mercy of Christine’s parents and local clergy who were determined to make this problem *“go away”*. The lovestruck couple was separated and Christine was sent to a home for unwed mothers several hours away. Anthony was later told that she gave birth to a baby girl who would be much happier with the adoptive family that would raise her. He never had the chance to hold her, to touch her, to say good-bye. He never had the chance to say how sorry he was to Christine that he let the attorneys, the clergy, and her parents make

all the decisions while he sat in the shadows afraid to speak. He was sorry he couldn't share his pain with Christine at a time when she needed him so desperately. He quietly named his daughter, Sarah.

Anthony was full of despair and acted out his pain for years to come. He eventually married and had a daughter: *"The first thing I did when she was born was to take her from the nurse and hold her. Everyone was telling me that she needed to be cleaned and tested and weighed, but I refused to let go. I didn't give her back to the nurse for a long time, and when I finally did, I never let her out of my sight...."* Anthony celebrated the birthday of the daughter he never knew every year. Many times alone, and always with a birthday cake and a room full of presents. He never forgot her. He has hopes of bringing his first born to the attic over his best friend's garage that stores years and years of presents representing thousands of tears shed for the child he lost.

Anthony and Sarah continue to struggle as they make decisions regarding the role they will play in this new chapter of their life story. Anthony is finally grieving the loss of his first love and the loss of the opportunity to parent the child they conceived together. He has worked through many issues surrounding his relationship with Christine and has been able to give more fully to the relationship he has with his wife. Sarah, after meeting Anthony and Christine, has left her prestigious employment in engineering and has opened her own interior design business. She is becoming more authentically herself. Although Sarah may never sit at Anthony's Thanksgiving Day table as he would wish, the two will likely heal many of the hurts caused by their separation. This Father Bird can finally share his story about where he was, what he thought about, and how his heart broke as his little one found her new nest. And his Baby Bird, although frightened, is listening.

Meet Ben. I met Ben in a practice hall at his music school for a counseling session after he received legal notice that a former girlfriend was pregnant and in the process of making an adoption plan. This was Ben's second letter of notice. By this time, there was a shared assumption that the legal process, having been duly followed, would preclude his further involvement. I could not make the same assumption after seeing the face of this 25-year-old. He was afraid and angry, both of which had paralyzed him and kept him from responding to the news of his imminent fatherhood. This Father Bird felt disrespected and brushed aside: *"Until you came here today, no one called me. No one told me what these papers really meant. Rachel didn't even call me and tell me herself that she was pregnant. It's as if everyone just assumed I'd disappear... that I could care less...that I'd just go away...well, that was my story and I won't let that happen again...."* Ben went on to share that his father was a very absent and uninvolved figure in his life. He was a convicted felon who spent most of his time during Ben's childhood and early adulthood in prison. His mother did the best she could, but her own mental health issues kept her from providing Ben with a safe environment in which to grow. Fighting back the tears, Ben stated, *"I'm not going anywhere...I'm not going to do that to my son."*

It became fairly clear to me early on in the assessment process that Ben was not necessarily going to fight for custody of this child; rather, I believed he was desperate to be heard. He was living near New York City, he was a blossoming musician studying sound engineering and composition. He was working hard to make his life more meaningful, to live more responsibly, to follow his own passions, and to be a decent and productive member of his community. As the adoption planning process continued without an effort to include him in it, he became resentful and full of hurt.

Ben needed to be involved. He deserved to be involved. The adoptive parents deserved the chance to tell the story of how they embraced their child's birth father and gave him every opportunity to speak from his heart about what he wanted for his son's life. Isn't that a critical chapter in the identity formation process? What a burden for an adoptive family to have to say that there was no way to shed light on the shadow of their child's birth father. Some well-intentioned adoption professionals may find false comfort in helping to create these shadows, but I find it hard to believe the best interests of the child are served in the dark.

I believe that giving birth fathers the recognition they deserve is not reckless or negligent. I believe it is an imperative part of the process and a way to avoid many contested adoptions. The risk of embracing a birth father is far less than the risk of a disruption after placement. I believe that it is incumbent upon adoption professionals to be ambassadors in bringing birth fathers out of the shadows and into the stories of their children. I believe we all work better, accomplish more, and live with more meaning and purpose when we can *see*. It is hard to see the truth when we are surrounded by the darkness that the shadows inevitably bring. And after all, isn't the truth the greatest gift we can give our children?

Remember, there is a story to tell at the end of all the strategic adoption planning. Wouldn't the story be more complete if we had a chapter to write on the birth father? Sadly, in some cases there are no words to write, but where there is the potential for a verse, we must invite it in. If Anthony or Ben's child had a voice, it's possible that they would have said, *"Please give my birth father a chance to speak for himself...don't shut him out...he is a part of me and I need you to recognize him so that someday I can better understand that part of myself."*

And so the story of the Mulberry Bird might have been told differently:

"...The Mother Bird went and sought counsel from the wise Owl who said, 'I will fly to Father Bird and ask for his help in finding a nest for your little one.' He flew to a place where the Father Bird sat wondering what might become of his Little Bird. The wise Owl helped Father Bird understand what was in the Mother Bird's heart. With Mother Bird safely at the Wise Owl's wing, the three flew the Little Bird to the home of the seashore birds where they welcomed the baby bird into their soft, safe nest. The seashore birds watched kindly as the Father Bird said his good-byes. And after he had gone, they offered Mother Bird a fig leaf to make her strong on her journey back across the ocean...and the seashore birds would not forget them, and they would tell the baby bird about the ones from which he came...."

-- By Kate Kaufman Burns, M.S.W., L.C.S.W.

