

Trusting in God through the adoption wait

Heidi Schlumpf | Nov. 27, 2009



The occasion of my in-laws' 40th wedding anniversary was my 4-month-old niece's first visit to Philadelphia. Although I was excited to see her, I was also nervous since my sister-in-law's pregnancy had come as something of a surprise to my husband, Edmund, and me in the middle of what had become a years-long wait to adopt a child.

After the plane ride and my niece's first night in a strange bed, the poor little thing's schedule had been thrown out of whack and she was a bit cranky.

It turned out I was good at calming her; maybe I had the walk-and-bounce down just right. Twice I was able to rock her to sleep when others couldn't stop her cries, and my sister-in-law even asked me for mothering tips. Perhaps she did this just to make me feel better, but I sensed she was sincere, and it did make me feel good.

It was hard not to wonder if my infertility was a sign from God (or the universe) that I am not meant to be a mother. The increasing number of roadblocks to adoption only reinforced this fear.

Then someone would say, "You're so good with babies," and I would realize God doesn't give talents to people to let them lie idle. I could trust that I would be a mother one day, and I would be a better one for having waited and for having practiced with little Elena.

At least my in-laws "got it." Those who have not adopted themselves tend to compare the wait for an adopted child to pregnancy, the way of forming families that is most familiar to them. Jokes like, "This is the longest pregnancy ever!" may be clever, but they fail to understand how an adoption wait differs from the more common way of bringing a child into a family (that, and they get old pretty quickly).

Although adoption, like pregnancy, is also a joyous event, the excitement is almost always tempered by anxiety until your child is physically in your arms and legally yours. The decision to adopt often comes, as it did in our case, after months or years of infertility problems, miscarriage or other pregnancy difficulties. Even those who choose adoption after having biological children are somewhat nervous about how it will differ from their experience with birth children.

Once you decide to adopt, the process resembles applying for a mortgage (times 10) more than preparing for a

child. The "paper chase," as it is commonly called in adoption circles, can be invasive, time-consuming and expensive. It is not the same thing as shopping for baby furniture or other things pregnant families do to prepare for a child.

After the paperwork phase has ended, prospective adoptive parents wait.

Although there are estimates about how long an average family waits for a child, they are just that: estimates. No adoption is the same, and as adopting parents hear over and over again, there are no guarantees in adoption. Just because your neighbor's friend's cousin knew a lawyer who found them a birth mother in two weeks doesn't mean it will happen to you. And just because some major celebrity can sweep into a country that doesn't even allow international adoption and leave with a child the next day doesn't mean it works that way for us regular people.

With wait times increasing for international adoption, the fastest-growing type of adoption in the United States, a fair estimate would be that the average adoption takes anywhere from one to three years -- some more, and some less. We waited four years before bringing home our first child, Samuel Dieu, from Vietnam.

How did we cope? Not always that well. More than once, I wanted to give up, but my husband was strong for the both of us. I could not have made it through those years without such a supportive partner. And I have had a few, select friends who have been extra helpful throughout this ordeal. Our families, too, have treated us gently, knowing when not to ask too many questions while still staying excited about their future grandchildren, nieces and nephews.

But ultimately what has helped me through the succession of grievings that followed each new announcement, "No, you're not going to have a child yet," has been my faith. Believe me, some days I was so angry at God and stooped to wondering if this was punishment for some wrongdoing.

But just as God has been with me through all the other small and large tragedies in my life -- hardships that eventually helped me become the stronger person I am today -- I trusted that God was with me through this painful part of life too. I saw God's presence in so many different ways: in my husband's strength, in the distraction of beauty in the world, and in the mere fact that I was surviving and staying ready to love the children for whom we waited so long.

As a Catholic, I have always found spiritual sustenance in Jesus' example, in our tradition of saints and mystics, and in the sacraments. When I decided to write a book of reflections for those waiting to adopt, the title, *While We Wait*, was inspired by the prayer during Lord's Prayer in the Mass, in which the priest prays, "Protect us from all anxiety, as we wait in joyful hope ?? Anxiety, waiting, hope -- these have been the hallmarks of our adoption journey, and God has been with us through it all.

Heidi Schlumpf teaches communication at Aurora University outside of Chicago and writes and blogs for NCR. She and her husband are now waiting for their daughter from China. This article was excerpted from her book While We Wait: Spiritual and Practical Advice for Those Trying to Adopt, published ACTA (www.actapublications.com) in September 2009.

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