



The Beautiful Agony of Foster Care

Foster care taught one family that loving a child fully means accepting the possibility of grief.

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PARENTING

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She was the first baby the stork brought.

Her delivery was induced by a phone call. Underweight but healthy, they told me. Two days old. Meth exposure.

I frantically prepared the nest. I pulled out a box of clothes, most of which would be too big. I put a clean sheet on the cradle mattress. Then the case manager was at the door.

Our stork was a large woman with an aura of authority and, at that moment, annoyance. The directions I gave to our house had not been very good. The baby had become fussy

during the long drive from the hospital.

Baby had big brown eyes and wispy hair, perfect tiny fingers, and bitty feet shorter than my index finger. I already had four daughters, but she weighed several ounces less than the lightest of them at birth. She fussed with tight fists as I unfastened her from her car seat, her small body full of need.

As the case manager gave us information, my husband, daughters, and I clustered around like a flock of hens, clucking and curious. We changed her diaper and prepped a bottle. A few minutes later, she was fed and burped, and my husband, Ben, then rocked her in a cushy recliner while her eyelids contentedly fluttered shut. The kids were playing in the room, occasionally rushing over to tousle her hair or coo over how her tiny hands clutched their fingers. The case manager explained the baby's history over their chatter. She gave us the overstuffed bag of diapers, binkies, and onesies that the nurses had packed, then had us sign paperwork. As the stork prepared to leave, she assessed my husband. He was gazing at the swaddled baby nestled in his arms with clear adoration. "Don't fall in love with this one," she said. She told us that everyone loves babies. An aunt, a grandma—someone was likely to come forward to claim her, and she advised against becoming attached. Ben didn't even look up. "Too late," he said. Too late.

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It hurt to love her so instantly and completely. It was two weeks of midnights walking the hallway—shh, shh, shhhhh—and sloppy, sleepy 3 a.m. feedings before there was a scheduled visitation with her mother. I knew what we had signed up for. I knew I wasn't her mother, not really. But Baby's need eclipsed any resolve I'd had to hold some distance. I unapologetically fell. "Shouldn't we love them recklessly?" I asked myself. What's the alternative? An infant in a home where care is mechanical or half-hearted? I couldn't sever just a piece of my heart to give her. It had to be all of it—beating like a hummingbird's, maybe—but completely surrendered to loving her.

There is science to all of this, though I was just beginning to learn it as I lived it. Early attachments are fundamental for healthy brain development. We were created to crave connection. It's a fundamental biological need. Dr. Bruce Perry, an expert on attachment theory, has [written](#) that "childhood experiences literally impact the biology of the brain." Baby needed me and my family to be responsive, available, and nurturing.

Nothing could be closed off. Nothing could be protected. A heart with no armor. Love on a tightrope, no net.

I was apprehensive as I packed up the diaper bag, loaded all the kids into the car, and drove to the library where a case aide would supervise the parent visit. What I didn't anticipate was the rush of compassion I would feel toward the very young woman I met by the door—those same big brown eyes! She was on the balls of her feet, neck craning to see the baby in the car seat. Her smile was tentative and nervous. She lit up when I surrendered the infant carrier where Baby slept.

The Atonement of Jesus Christ bridges the chasm between what should be and what is.

I left feeling so conflicted. I wanted this young mom to be successful. I wanted the baby I already adored to stay with me. I didn't know what was proper to want. I took my girls to the park to play while we waited out the visit. I snapped pictures while they climbed rock structures and dug in the sand. Time crawled. Finally, I rounded them up and returned to the library. Mom was holding her baby, and familiar adoration was palpable between them. For her, the time had passed too quickly. Another foster mom had advised me to ask for a photo at the first visit: I could keep it if the baby left our home or preserve it for the baby if her mother was no longer in her life. She told me you never know how rapidly things will change or how.

It's the only picture we have of her mother. We never saw her again.

This wasn't the end of the roller coaster ride. Although the rights of the biological mother were terminated quickly, establishing paternity took more time. More than 18 months passed before anything became clear. The case moved at the sluggish speed of the overtaxed courts.

Those months were so vulnerable. Would she stay? Who would she go to if she left? There was potentially an interested grandmother. Shouldn't she be with [her family](#)? After a year, though, weren't we essentially her family? Dr. James Kenny, a psychologist with more than 50 years of clinical experience, has [written](#) that for foster children, bonding is possible after three months, probable after six months, and almost certain

after a year. The stronger this bond becomes, the more damaging its severance is, causing potentially lasting harm.

Had we reached the point where time spent with our family trumped real kinship? We knew she liked squash, but not green beans. We knew which diaper cream she had an allergy to. She held my index finger tight in her fists as she tottered around the room, and I cheered her first unassisted step.

Latter-day Saints have a powerful [doctrine](#) about the importance of families. Families are [ordained](#) of God and are central to His plan. In an ideal world where everyone chooses correctly, there would be no broken families. But we live in a fallen world where the chasm between the ideal and the real holds broken homes and shattered relationships.

The Atonement of Jesus Christ bridges the chasm between what should be and what is. It should not be surprising that, as disciples of Jesus Christ, many of us feel the call to march into the dark, broken spaces and do what we can to heal the hurt we find.

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When we do this, we can't expect the armor of God to keep us invulnerable to the pain we wade into. After all, [what words describe](#) the healing act of our Savior in Gethsemane and on the cross? "Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink."

If we are truly embarking on spreading the peace of Christ, we can anticipate that doing His work will require us to be exposed to at least a modicum of His agony. Being a foster parent was oftentimes [agony](#). Beautiful, raw suffering. It taught me more about the deep complexity and power of God's love for us and the lengths to which He will go to help us heal.

Those poignant first weeks as foster parents were merely an opening salvo for the wide range of pain and triumph, heartache and comfort that we would experience over the next 10 tumultuous years until we finally felt released from that calling, even as we were

neck deep in the complexity of raising adopted children with post-traumatic stress disorder, disorganized attachments, and valuable, vulnerable hearts.

“Don’t fall in love,” the stork had cautioned. But isn’t that exactly what the Savior asks us to do?

About the author



Vickie Lee

Vickie Lee is a full-time 'trauma mama', raising growing children with complex histories and resulting diagnosis. She and her husband have eight children, half of whom are theirs through foster care and adoption.