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The Agony and the Art of Becoming an Adoptive Parent

Here's how I thought it would be: I'm in a birthing center or hospital, with my husband, parents, and friends surrounding me. I'm holding our baby, perfect and healthy. Even though the baby's just been born, she's rosy and plump. Even though I've just given birth, I look gorgeous and feel well rested. After an overnight to make sure everyone's okay—and, of course, we are—we head home to happily ever after. My husband and I might talk a little about the miracle of birth, but we take it for granted, really, because that's how it's supposed to be.

That's how it *was* supposed to be, but the reality of our journey to parenthood was very different. Here's how it went:

On Thanksgiving morning in 1997, we got our wake-up call at 3:30 a.m. My husband Steve and I were already awake, anxious and jet-lagged. The van would leave our hotel in Saigon at 4 a.m. for the four-hour drive to Vinh Long, where our daughter waited for us. The three adoption agency staff and the driver loaded us into a van with an image of Quan Yin, the goddess of mercy, hanging from the rearview mirror. Cathy and Dave, the parents-to-be from Minneapolis, were as bleary-eyed as we were.

We bounced over potholes through dark Saigon streets. Someone mentioned a curfew. If there was one, we were breaking it. In the shadows, whole families slept on park benches and in the roundabout with the monument to one of the People's Heroes.

At 6 a.m., dawn pulled away the curtain of dark to show the countryside, totally green. Rice paddies with coconut palms on the borders stretched to the horizon. At home, our families would be eating pumpkin

pie and watching college football on television. In the Mekong delta, Highway 1 was crowded with motorcycles, bicycles, and pedestrians, with an occasional truck sharing the center lane with our van. Along the roadside, children walked to school carrying book bags. They wore white shirts, black pants, and—still—the red neckerchiefs of Communist youth. The girls had long, straight black hair, spilling down their white shirts. I thought, “Our daughter will look like them.”

Each village had a market, a line of little shops as basic as three-walled woven pandanus or bamboo with thatched roofs and dirt floors, most neatly swept and stocked with soft drinks, cigarettes, bags of rice, and hanging clumps of dried octopus. Mechanics’ shops had signs that read *Va Vo* or *Hon Da*. Open-air barbershops, complete with barber chairs, are known as *Hot Toc*. In this Communist country slowly opening to capitalism, everyone was in business.

We took a ferry across one branch of the Mekong, into the heart of the delta. Ours was the only van. Vendors crowded onto the ferry. Two women were cooking rice and noodles over portable stoves beside the van. A beggar opened the driver’s window, shouted something in Vietnamese, and thrust in a can that already had a few *dong* in it.

At 8 a.m. we arrived in Vinh Long, our daughter’s birthplace. We met our agency’s Vietnam director at a restaurant—a shed with a wooden floor and screens, set on pilings in the Mekong River. We had a superb view of the river and of a tropical island in the middle. It was a Viet Cong stronghold during the “American War,” they said.

After breakfast we drove to a two-story, yellow stucco building, with a tile roof and ceramic tile floors, the provincial capital building. Inside, the staff had lined up their shoes in the hall. We were ushered upstairs to the conference room. One wall was covered with red drapery with a large gold star in the center. Under the star stood a plaster bust of Ho Chi Minh, leader of the Communist movement that defeated the French, and then the Americans. Steve, Dave, Cathy, and I looked at the bust, then back at each other. Both Steve and Dave had been of draft age when “Uncle Ho” was the United States’ Enemy No. 1. The strangeness and irony of the scene left us speechless.

The room was long and narrow, with windows on both sides, all open to the river. Small electric fans stirred humid air around us. Steve and Dave

were starting to look damp in their long-sleeved shirts and ties. But we had been assured that long sleeves are a mark of respect, and that the ties would impress everyone since so few men in Vietnam wear them, or even have them.

A small woman, all in black, brought in a tray with Pepsis in bottles. She opened them and put a straw in each one, then placed them on the table in front of each chair. The bottles, too, were sweating. The straws bobbed like the junks on the river.

Everyone smiled at everyone else. The translator scurried from group to group. I was already sweating but my mouth was dry. Where was my baby? We all took seats, with the officials at the head of the table, the highest ranking man nearest the bust of Ho Chi Minh. An official spoke in Vietnamese, with pauses from time to time for the translator. During moments of quiet, we heard the Mekong lap the dock outside.

I kept thinking, “Where are the babies?”

Finally, they appeared, each in the arms of a Vietnamese nanny. The larger, more animated one must be ours, I thought. Cathy and Dave’s daughter was a month younger, so I expected her to be smaller. But the little one was our daughter-to-be. She was all eyes, her large head on a newborn-sized body, with very thin arms. She gazed around at everyone, then dozed off. I was instantly anxious, because she looked so small and fragile—and because anxiety had been a constant companion.. But I knew she was mine, and my happiness at finally seeing her mixed with my longing to hold her so much I cried.

More speeches. My husband spoke for the American parents, slowly and deeply, with appropriate pauses for the translator, as if he’d done this all his life. I cried some more. I listened only to little snatches of the other speeches. I just gazed at her, my baby, during the rest of the ceremony.

After we signed the official register—of what, I’m not sure—the nanny handed my baby gently to me. Her thin body felt hot and sticky in her ruffled white satin dress bought for this special occasion. Through my tears I saw the polyester rose stuck on the front of her dress. The center of the rose had silver glitter pasted onto it. Her legs and bottom were wrapped in a thin blue towel, printed with green roses. I felt ecstatic, and scared, surrounded by strangers from Vietnam and two people from Minnesota I’d known for twenty-four hours.

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The reality of my first moments as a mother were as different from my fantasy as they could possibly have been. But I have come to believe that my experience was absolutely right, the way it was meant to be. The important pieces were exactly as I had hoped, only more intense than I had ever dreamed possible. We were—and often still are—overwhelmed by the miracle of *her*, and by our incredible good fortune to be her parents. When our plane lifted off from Than Son Nhut Airport a week after her adoption, we were certain that we were headed home to happily ever after. It had taken my husband and me three years to repaint our original picture of parenthood to include our daughter’s Mekong River reality. In those years, we endured and were privileged to experience the agony and the art of becoming adoptive parents.

The Transition to Parenthood

The transition to parenthood is one of the most challenging that adults ever face. The arrival of the first child brings profound changes, whether that child is adopted or biological. Personal time nearly disappears. Scheduling becomes as complicated as air traffic control. Time with spouses or partners and friends is elbowed out by the baby’s needs and parents’ sleep deprivation. There is a constant rumble of suggestions from well-meaning people.

Before the child arrives, though, parents have an “expectancy” period. If you are considering adoption, you are already in this period—you are expecting to become a parent. Parents’ attitudes and actions during the expectancy period predict attitudes toward their new parenthood (Levy-Shiff, Zoran, & Shulman, 1997). In practical terms, the research of Dr. Levy-Shiff and colleagues shows that we adoptive parents have a golden opportunity to embrace the child who will be given to us—before he or she is even placed in our arms. With some preliminary work we can make a smooth transition to parenthood. This work has three main parts:

- 1) Re-visioning parenthood to include adoption.
- 2) Making the long series of difficult, emotional decisions that adoption requires.