

The Commitment

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What's wrong with this picture?

Bob and Alice met through a popular dating service. Each had signed up-a bit reluctant at first-at the urging of friends. Each worked carefully on a "personal profile" to be posted for others to see-as a video, on a web site, etc. Each was "matched" a few times; sometimes those matches "clicked" and sometimes they didn't. When Alice emailed Bob in response to his profile, and he returned her email promptly, she considered this one a "clicker" and so did he. They emailed for several days, graduated to phone calls, and decided to meet. The meeting went well and led to several months of casual dating while each dated others as well. Then came a moment of truth: Bob and Alice decided that they loved one another and were meant to be together. They decided to marry and set a wedding date several months in advance. Each worked on the details of their coming wedding-there were bookings to be made, a caterer to choose, invitations to order, living arrangements to decide, and more. One day, however, Bob was shocked to discover that Alice was continuing to date others! When he confronted her, her surprised response was, "Bob, I'm so surprised at your lack of understanding about this! I'm 40-something and the clock is ticking for me. I've had one marriage fail already. Surely you don't expect me to put my partner-finding hopes on hold because we're engaged! What if you change your mind before the wedding or right after? I'd be back at ground zero! Besides, I'd be very happy to have both a husband and a lover! Why is this a problem for you? Our life will be wonderful!" Bob broke the engagement. Alice was stunned.

Now make a minor adjustment or two and read the anecdote again.

A pregnant woman and would-be adopters met through a popular matching service. Each had signed up-a bit reluctant at first-at the urging of friends. Each worked carefully on a "personal profile" to be posted for others to see-as a video, on a web site, etc. Each was "matched" a few times; sometimes those matches "clicked" and sometimes they didn't. When these particular would-be adopters emailed this pregnant woman in response to her profile, and she returned their email promptly, they considered this one a "clicker," and so did she. They emailed for several days, graduated to phone calls, and decided to meet. The meeting went well and led to several weeks of conversation while each talked to others as well. Then came a moment of truth: this pregnant woman and these would-be adopters decided that theirs was the right match for the coming baby. They decided to plan an adoption. Each worked on the details of the pending birth-there were doctors' appointments to go to, baby-arrival arrangements to be made, classes to take, post-adoption planning, and more. One day, however, the birthmother was shocked to discover

that the adopting parents were continuing to circulate their profile on line, and were continuing infertility treatment as well! When she confronted them, their surprised response was, “We’re so surprised at your lack of understanding about this! We’re 40-something and the clock is ticking for us. We’ve had multiple miscarriages and a failed adoption. Surely you didn’t expect us to put our baby-finding hopes on hold until after you give birth! What if you change your mind before the birth or right after? That would put us back at ground zero. Besides, we’d be very happy to have two children! No problem for us. Why is this a problem for you? We’ll have a wonderful life!” The birthmother broke the adoption plan. The would-be adopters were stunned.

Interestingly, though readers would almost universally criticize Alice and understand Bob’s position and decision in the first anecdote, many would-be adopters-and even a very few adoption service providers-would have a hard time seeing the parallel in the adoption anecdote. Yet the problem with each picture is the same-two vulnerable people in crisis think that they’ve made a permanent commitment to one another, and the failure on the part of one party to fully commit to the other has led one party to the arrangement to feel irreparably betrayed.

I’ve been putting myself on the line for years with my firmly-held, baby-centered position that it is important for would-be adopters to do their adoption decision-making as early as possible in the infertility treatment or family-planning process and to put adoption itself and then various styles and approaches to adoption in or out of the mix while still in treatment, then, no matter how large they hope that their family will actually grow, to actively pursue (the key word is “actively” here) only one family planning option at a time. Engage in treatments! Plan a private adoption! Accept an international referral! But do so one at a time.

Every child deserves to be wanted, to be dreamed about, to be prepared for for who he is, not as a substitute to a child one might have had, not as a prize in a race to see how quickly one can become a parent against great odds. Frankly, the biggest difference between these two anecdotes is not with the adults involved at all, and the adoption story would be just as applicable to single adopters as to coupled-adopters. Instead the most important difference between these anecdotes is that the various possible outcomes of the adoption story each put an innocent child at substantial, and completely avoidable, risk. At risk how?

- At risk physically because of the hormonal effects (increased cortisol and other stress-produced hormones) on his prenatal environment of this confusion and betrayal to his already-stressed birthmother.
- At risk because his adoptive parents didn’t “believe” enough in his coming to fully prepare themselves (through a psychological pregnancy) and their home and lives and their family and friends for him and him alone, and so they may be slow in developing a comfortable sense of entitlement and/or attachment.
- At risk for the negative effects of being “artificially twinned”-parental stress and divided attention for the first few months after birth are obvious, but artificial twinning carries potential long-term problems, too.

- At risk because his birthmother may or may not be able to resolve this crisis in his best interests over either the short or the long term. What if her sense of betrayal leads her to decide that the falling apart of a carefully made adoption plan means that adoption itself was the wrong choice; will she be prepared to parent effectively when she didn't think she was before? Even more, might she feel powerless, in the face of crisis, to change her mind and feel "forced" to place her baby with people she no longer trusts? What if she does say no to the first couple and follow through with a plan for adoption; will she have enough time and support to find another couple without feeling "pushed into it"? Will the second-chosen adopters have enough time to prepare adequately? Will the birthmother regain her ability to trust?

Many of the most important developments in the lives of adults require sacrificial commitment, but none more than parenting. Parenting requires putting the short and long term needs and best interests of a child far above the short term wants and conveniences of the adults in his life. Birthparents who choose adoption certainly recognize that, and in doing so set aside short term emotional and physical comfort during pregnancy and their long term emotional desires to parent for the long term best interests of a baby born when they simply were not prepared to parent that child effectively immediately. Because they are thinking in a child-centered way, birthparents choose a permanent solution to what, for them (but not for Baby) is a short-term problem.

Adopting parents must be prepared to make similarly difficult choices. They must risk devastating emotional disappointment by preparing for a single child's arrival in their lives. Once matched with a particular pregnant woman or having accepted the referral of a child waiting for them in another country, unless they are able to set aside treatment (at least until they and their child are both ready to add a sibling to their families), and set aside other adoption possibilities to focus on this single opportunity, they are not committed to adoption. Adoption is not about the wants of adults. It's about the needs of children. When those wants and needs come together unselfishly, we have *commitment*.