

What we're learning from a long wait to adopt

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The other month my spouse and I received a packet in the mail from our adoption agency. It came in a large, white, important-looking envelope—a hopeful envelope. *Maybe something good is about to happen*, we thought.

We read the enclosed letter together: “We know how difficult the wait can be and because your adoption profile has been in circulation a somewhat longer time than usual we are offering you extra services that may help shorten the wait.”

Jamie, always a bit quicker of wit than I, immediately said, “Well, I guess we’re officially in the pitiful category.”

We entered the process three and a half years ago. We had two guidelines: we wanted an infant, and we wanted an open adoption. *How hard could it be?* we thought. As it turns out, not every agency does open adoptions. And not every agency will work with same-sex couples (even if we are Christians).

Nevertheless, we found an agency with 30 years of expertise in both areas, and their closest office was only five hours east, a straight shot on I-70. When we met the adoption social workers for our introductory interview, we knew it was a match. To every question we could think to ask, they responded thoughtfully, with great attention to the relational complexities of adoption: hope, fear, waiting, heartbreak, silence. As a bonus, they could rival any hospital chaplain in the non-anxious-presence category.

*This is going to work*, we thought. On our way out the door, we took a picture by the agency sign. *Parents, soon*.

One intensive orientation, two “Dear Birthmother” letters, one home study, two home study updates, 12,000-plus dollars, and two years of waiting later, we can scarcely find the remnants of our initial optimism. They’re probably hidden in some dusty corner we never visit, along with hope and trust in the process. We are officially in the pitiful category.

These days we spin around and around in our own kind of grief cycle: *What have we done wrong? Who can we blame? Should we just quit now? What can we do to speed up this process? Let's not think about it for a while. Why wouldn't someone making an adoption plan choose us?*

We comb through our psyches, at times desperate to construct reasons that make sense. It's because we're ministers, and people are scared of ministers. It's because we live in Missouri, and people don't know where Missouri is. It's because...

Other people search for reasons, too, and sometimes share their theories liberally. My feelings on this are about the same as those of most would-be parents who are taking the long way to parenthood. No, please don't tell me the right one hasn't come along yet and the wait will be worth it once we meet our forever child. No, I'm quite sure this is not part of God's plan for our lives. Yes, good advice. We have thought of that—and tried it—twice.

I wish I had the quick wit and direct demeanor to return those comments with a withering look and a verbal correction. *Wrong. Try again. How about this next time: I'm sorry it's been so long. Could I help by sharing your adoption profile?*

When we talk to family and friends we always wonder: *are we obligated to give an update? I hope they don't ask. Wait. I hope they do ask. Wait. Why didn't they ask?*

And there's really no answer to the question of what to do or what to say or even how to be. It depends on the day, our levels of grace and vulnerability in a given moment, whether one of those dusty hope particles has floated into view lately.

The other month I was on a video chat that included my mentor, a retired Mennonite pastor and Benedictine oblate. He is a man who has cultivated the contemplative life, and he shared this with a group of pastors two generations younger: "I used to think that over time the conflicts and interpersonal issues in the congregation could be resolved. But I've learned that not everything is resolvable." I think another way to say this is that not everything makes sense, some questions will never have answers, and some things we will never know.

There are many lessons adoption is teaching us, not just about adoption but about life and ministry, and this is perhaps the most difficult one to learn. Some days I wake up having forgotten the lesson entirely. Other days I get a little bit closer. Here's hoping that the longer the wait, the greater the teaching.