

THE SHAPE OF MY FAMILY

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A family is a thing with edges. The edges can grow, shrink, smooth off, and get spikey and sharp. The changes that happen can be full of joy, sadness, loss, trauma, comfort, or strength. None of those are mutually exclusive.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has a salvific core based entirely around eternally binding family links. While in recent years the less-than-ideal family circumstances are acknowledged, and even embraced, depending on the character of the ward or branch you are in, the 1980s and 1990s were a time that being married in the temple and having children were perceived as success, which meant that, of course, circumstances other than that were then understood to be failure. The only possible consequence of living within this paradigm was that shame and secrecy would shadow all mistakes, and repentance would be perceived as a herculean task to be embarked upon alone.

In my twenties, I found myself single and pregnant. My biggest thought was that I would need to tell my parents—they were good people, but they would be hurt. I wished that I could have contemplated abortion but at the same time knew that I could not do that, even though I longed to be able to not have to think about the situation. Marriage, or even partnership, was out of the question. I could be a parent but did not understand how I would financially support myself and another person. I was filled with feelings of terror and failure in equal quantities. Humiliation haunted me as I threw up, fainted, and wept my way through my early pregnancy.

Due to a move, my ward changed. I was five months pregnant and showing. After a couple of weeks, my new bishop called me in for a chat. He was gentle but straight-talking and wanted to know what my plans

were. The conversation emphasised the spiritual advantages and protection that being sealed to a family would give my child and pointed out that I was not in a position to provide that. The impression that I was left with was that deciding to keep my baby would be a selfish choice, as it would leave the child more vulnerable and exposed. I left with a leaflet about adoption.

My experience up to this point was that either marriage or adoption were the righteous choices if you were to find yourself in this situation. Single parenthood was seen as not a sensible decision, and I did not see young single parents at church. They seemed to vanish from view once their pregnancy was public knowledge. One girl was very rapidly married and, even more rapidly it seemed, moved to Canada. Abortion was not even discussed; it felt as though the discussion had already been made and that there was no need for further thoughts. The sacrifice of adoption and putting the child's eternal needs ahead of my own grief were perceived as the only real way to put right what I had done wrong. Sexual sin was still being taught as being second only to murder, and, as practically a murderer, I probably needed to be focussed on working on my own spiritual salvation rather than raising a child. And a child would be safer spiritually if they had parents they were sealed to. No mention was made of the child's possible feelings of rejection, self-worth, and confusion or how it might affect their mental and spiritual health. I do wonder whether those things were talked about with the adoptive family.

It took some time to feel resolved on a course of action. I lived alone in the house that my grandparents had lived in when they were alive. I was a distance away from family and friends, and I sank thankfully into the solitude that created. I knew that whatever decision I made, it was important for me to know that I had made the decision without their influence. I wrote lists of pros and cons, prayed, walked, rewrote, prayed, walked, scribbled out, prayed, and of course, cried. It is difficult to explain how I came to the decision that I did, but I do know that I worked hard to get there. One night, while I was praying, I just realised that I knew that this baby was not really mine. It seems counterintuitive,

but it was from that moment I developed a strong sense of the baby being with me. I felt certain he was a boy and felt his companionship and a sense of being together. When I first held him and looked into his face I felt, “So that’s what you look like!” rather than “Hello!”

We were together for three days. The nurses were kind to me and did most of the changing and feeding; one reminded me that legally I still had three months to make a decision and that I could change my mind and take him home. But I didn’t feel like a mother—the mother, a nurturer, the nurturer—I felt that I had done my bit. That is not to say my heart did not break. Oh, it broke. It still does each time I picture us sitting on the edge of the hospital bed, me in a too-thin National Health Service issue dressing gown and him tightly swaddled as I had learned he liked to be. I came to the point that I realised that the pleasant, inconsequential chatter of the LDS Family Services social worker was no longer necessary and that it was time to hand him over. I gazed at him, and he became still. I scoured his eyes for judgment, or accusation, or hate but saw wisdom, patience, and an eagerness for things to begin. We read each other in those moments, and I imprinted him onto my soul. I wanted to be sure that I would know him if I bumped into him in the street. Then I gave him to the social worker and got into bed. She left. I was still bleeding.

My mum took me back to my grandparents’ house, stayed a few days, and then went home. I didn’t manage well at first, but she and a couple of good friends checked on me by phone. Between them all, I got through those first grief-maddened weeks. I don’t remember those days individually, but I know that time passed and eventually I could put his photograph into a pocket, rather than need to keep it in my hand. My social worker from LDS Family Services helped me understand how to move on in little steps without having to leave him behind.

There were moments when I felt comforted and held by each of my grandparents, and I was glad that I was in their house, with some of their things that had been part of my childhood. It felt like a safe haven. One day, I walked to the cemetery to say hello. It was a bright

early spring morning, one of the first of the year that had tempted me out, and the gardener had hung his coat on my grandad's headstone. He was embarrassed when he realised that it was Cyril I was there to see. He apologised and said that he had thought that Cyril wouldn't have minded. I agreed and asked him to keep his coat there. My grandad hadn't met and married Nana until my mother was sixteen and had left home, but he enjoyed the surprising number of grandchildren—by birth and through fostering—she supplied. He was a quiet man, full of acceptance and love and his friend, the gardener, summed him up. Nana was trickier when alive, but I felt her strength when I needed her that winter. A couple of years later, it suddenly felt urgent to go to her grave to say thank you. A kind friend asked no questions and drove me a hundred miles so that I could do that. It felt good to acknowledge the part she had played—her house, her village, her friends, and herself.

Since 2014, LDS Family Services has evolved into a largely counselling service and is no longer run as an adoption agency. Its focus is helping those who need help whatever the circumstances. This feels like a move away from deeming people and their families as successes or failures, and that can only be a good thing. It needs to be made clear that my local leaders were full of love and that I do not feel that I was forced, coerced, or manipulated by them into handing over my beautiful baby boy to the LDS Family Services, though I still cannot believe that I did it. I can play the last moments that I had with him over in my mind, and it feels as though we are both there, in the moment. That would be heaven.

But that cannot be. Eighteen years later, he killed himself. Overdose. It is not known whether it was accidental or not, but he had been struggling with his mental health. A telephone conversation he had with his adoptive mum a few days before suggests that possibly something had been a last straw for him.

When it happened, I was living overseas with my family—my married-in-the-temple husband and born-under-the-covenant children. A week before we were due to return home, the phone rang. My

daughter had messaged a few minutes before the call to ask if I could take some books to school that she had forgotten to put into her bag that morning, and as I was walking past the landline gathering her things, it rang. My baby's mother introduced herself, and I told her that I needed to finish what I was doing and would call her back. Not daring to think, I drove to school, dropped off the books, drove back, and called her. She said that a couple of days earlier our son had been found on the floor of his university accommodation and that it had been too late for anyone to help him. We cried together and talked. I missed him all over again. I was also blindsided and angry. Angry that I had to grieve twice, angry that I had to comfort his mother, angry that she wanted a copy of the photograph I had from those too few days at the hospital, angry that I had been so sure that I had made a decision guided by the Spirit and that this was the result. I was angry with my husband for being so kind and sad with me. I was suddenly angry that my baby's family knew him as a baby, boy, and man, and I only knew his newness. I was angry that his newness was gone when that was all I had of him.

Not many years later in the run up to that anniversary, there was a message from my youngest brother telling us all that he had done a DNA test and found that we had another brother! The new half-brother is older than me (I was the eldest up until this point), and he had been adopted. He had also done a DNA test at around the same time, and my brothers found each other. As siblings we rallied around our dad. We knew that he needed to know that he was loved by us, and so we hugged him and told him how excited we were to meet our new brother. My dad aged visibly and could barely meet our eyes. It has taken him more than two years to feel anything other than shame. What a shame! For I have found the new formation of our family life-affirming. After a while our new brother came to meet us, and it was wonderful. He looked like us and laughed at the same things as us, and our family has changed shape making room for him, his wife, and daughters. One of them is getting married this summer, and our shape will change again.

We are becoming more supple, leaning out and pulling in, rather than haughtily peering over defensive crenellations at intruders.

I am now friends with my baby's mother and his sister. His sister has children, more than half of whom are adopted. His mother is married for the second time. My youngest brother and sister-in-law adopted their youngest child, and I held him during their sealing.

My family is bendy and that has been our salvation. Our soft edges are our strength. I do not understand why the family is the sacred thing that it is, and I do not fully understand the essential nature of the sealing power of temple covenants. I do know that a sealing does have both the power to save and to destroy, depending on how we use it. If we embrace with love the changes that we and others choose to make, either wisely or not, as well as those that are imposed upon us and our families, it is then that it has the power to save. It is sharp, unyielding edges that create tension and discord, feelings of rejection, and confusion about belonging. My family is not even distinctly shaped enough to be the square peg trying to fit into the round hole of the traditional nuclear family, but as we grow in all sorts of directions, and are willing to share family space with all, I find we have the possibility of a life abounding in love. To misquote Wendy Cope and her lovely poem "The Orange":

I love you. I'm glad we exist.¹

1. Wendy Cope, "The Orange" in *The Orange and Other Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 2023).

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