

Relinquish

Adoption begins in the dark. It begins with the decision to let go of a small one you're only beginning to love, but cannot keep. For so many women it's a kind of darkness, after months of gestating these fragile lives within our own bodies, to realize love might look like letting go.

We don't expect love to look like relinquishment. Often we say that when mothers let go, they abandon their babies, reject their children. Some paint these women as heartless monsters who walked away when things got tough. But few birth mothers would describe their act of relinquishment in such terms.

These women open the door to piercing questions about the nature of relinquishment not only in adoption, but also in the larger landscape of belonging. Might relinquishment be part of the architecture of belonging and not just an unfortunate anomaly? Does letting go prepare us for coming

close? Could relinquishment be a seedbed of sorts, a rich soil for redemption?



Relinquishment arrives uninvited, often in the wake of injustice. Biblical narrative offers an early record of the Hebrew women living across the Nile River from Pharaoh's house. They knew this truth all too well because of his harsh edict: every son born to a Hebrew woman was to be thrown into that river. How many let go of sons by force? Who were those unnamed women wailing under the swollen moon? One name, one story is given to help us understand the contours of letting go.

During this time, a Hebrew woman named Jochebed had given birth to a son. For months she had carried him in her belly, knowing the edict, and she birthed him with the stealthy assistance of the midwives. As long as she could, she hid him in her home. She studied his yet-unnamed face in the moonlight, singing old lullabies into his fresh spirit as she nursed him with her milk.

But the day dawned when he was too big to hide, his lungs too robust to hush. And keeping him wasn't an option. So Jochebed needed to decide soon how to nip his budding life—or risk the soldiers drowning him.

Such is the hardship of living under the unjust mechanisms of the empire, often fueled by the fears of one Pha-

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raoh or another. One woman finds herself forced into a corner, her babe buried in her chest, wondering what love looks like under such pressing, oppressive circumstances.

So Jochebed made a decision. At first light she took her son to the edge of the Nile River. While the world still slumbered, she'd sing a final song to him before doing the unthinkable thing that injustice required of her.

Her sweet-scented son curled into the crook of her arm as she scrambled down the embankment. Standing in the muddy space between dirt and water, she allowed herself one last look at him, seeing the goodness of creation on his cheeks in the sun's first glance. In that moment she knew what love looked like—it was God recognizing the goodness of her son, too. And love would conspire to save this boy from the grave of The Great River.

After constructing a basket of reeds, Jochebed placed her son on a bed of tender papyrus leaves. Then she bent low, the water lapping at her knees, and launched her son into the Nile. She sent him away from her, away from the death squad, away from the structures of injustice that shaped her life. This wasn't a rejection but a relinquishment. She let go of her claim on his life, trusting that God would make a way forward for her son beyond her own context and capacity as a Hebrew mother under occupation. It was a farewell wrought in the furnace of a fierce mother-love.

Jochebed, birth-mother archetype, mother of Moses,

leads us beyond stereotypes of rejection or abandonment. Relinquishment is more often a response born out of harsh and unjust environments. Sometimes the most audacious act of hope, the wildest trust, looks like a baby in a basket.



Jochebed's story isn't the only story in Scripture of a letting go. In the Gospels we see God the Father loosening his grip and allowing his Son to leave his side, entering into the experience of a birth mother, letting go. God knows that to fully belong to humanity, Jesus must leave the divine realm and the rights of heaven.

Imagine Christmas Eve. Jesus is born. Mary pushes him into the world, pondering what his birth means to her as mother, to her family, and maybe to the entire empire. But for now, her son rests in her arms. Joseph enjoys something quite rare for an adoptive father—being on hand when the child comes into the world. This boy is not his and also entirely his all at the same time. This is part of the adoption mystery born that starry night. The joy in that small outpost must have been akin to an adoption homecoming celebration. *Our child is here at last, right where he belongs!*

While the angels are singing and shepherds are hastily making their way to the stable, while the wise men from the East are still a ways off, another One witnesses the story unfold under the midnight canopy. For the first time ever,

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they're apart. He's just emptied his arms of his Son, entrusting him to Joseph and Mary, but also to humanity.

For the first time, God becomes, in a sense, an onlooker. God sees Jesus cradled in Joseph's arms. For now, he's not the Father. He's the Relinquishing One. And when the angelic choir breaks out in the hallelujah chorus, it's a broken hallelujah, without his Son. It is a moment when we might imagine God at odds with the world, plunged into a solitary grief.

God, who knows what it is to create life and give birth, to brood like a hen over his children and deliver his people like a midwife, now feels bereft and barren. In relinquishing his only child, he feels the pangs of loss every birth mother knows all too well. He enters into the pathos of these women and shares the sorrow only a mother can understand. He's given his Child up for a salvific future, but given him up nonetheless.

When we see that God's experience of family includes relinquishment, it opens the door for us to accept the darker corners of our own family histories, the places where we felt left out or left behind. We can name our own role in relinquishment and speak about the hurt. Family formation can embrace the truth of loss and the practice of lament. This is, after all, not foreign to God's own experience of family.

In lockstep with birth mothers who never forget their relinquished children, God knows that sometimes love looks

like letting go. It looks like inviting the wider community to help protect the child you grew in your own belly. It looks like a brave act of trust. Believing this child has a future beyond you, even without you, bespeaks a rugged hope and an undeniable selflessness.



Jesus, biological son of Mary and adopted son of Joseph, is the Adopted One. Relinquishment is part of his own story of incarnation. This isn't only a story about Jesus taking off his divine wardrobe to be clothed in humanity; it's also about confronting the truth of being let go—at least for a time.

All those years in youth-group Bible studies when we poured over Philippians (the always popular, upbeat choice of Paul's letters), this is something I never considered. Quick to talk about how Jesus temporarily emptied himself of divinity, I completely missed the first instance when his Father momentarily orphaned him. As he passed through the heavens en route for Bethlehem, he traveled alone, like any relinquished child awaiting adoption.

Jesus' initial encounter with relinquishment was in the passive voice: he was relinquished. That passive voice precedes every adoption. It's the minor note in even the greatest symphonies of belonging. Even the divine Son knew the pangs of loss and some sensation of rejection.

But then, Jesus also emptied himself. In order to enter

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into the human experience with all the vulnerability of a child and all the humility of a servant, he stripped himself of all divine prerogatives. We call this *kenosis*, an emptying, a pouring out of the self. To live a fully human life on earth, he gave up power or some measure of privilege. The self-sacrifice seen in the Incarnation never ceases to amaze me.

One of my professors in college talked about Jesus “abdicating his power.” His word choice conjured up the image of a king leaving his throne, walking away from the power, the pomp, and all the privilege of royalty. When a king abdicates, he severs his tie to an inherited position. He may not disown his father, but a distance is created between them when he vacates the seat of power bequeathed to him. I can’t help but imagine Jesus stepping away from his Father, accepting the impending change in their relationship.

Jesus relinquished his equality with God; he detached himself from the divine presence of his own Family. In this light, I now see *kenosis* as a kind of letting go, connecting *emptying* and *relinquishing*. But neither should be mistaken for abandonment.

What if living through relinquishment created a capacity within you to more easily let go of whatever stands between you and belonging? Did Jesus’ free-fall from his Father’s arms allow him to abandon anything standing between him and us? Did leaving the riches and royalty of heaven for our

sake prepare him to let go of his own life, for a deeper kind of belonging to us?

Jesus holds deep compassion for all the relinquished ones because he, too, carries this body memory within his own human skin. Whatever his experience of being let go, whether a biting pain or a faint sting, we will never know. But residing somewhere within the body of Christ is the fact of relinquishment and the capacity to comfort us in places where we feel shut out, left out, or pushed out.

Now I find it all the more compelling when I read about Jesus as our high priest, “who has passed through the heavens” and can sympathize with us in these tender places. Jesus passed through the heavens, passed through relinquishment, and remembers what it is to struggle with this part of the human story. His own body holds the memory of being let go and carries the scars of crucifixion—testament to a man relinquished by a Father, by friends, and by the world he inhabited. In solidarity he sits with us in our pain, helping us wait for redemption, because he knows relinquishment does not get the last word.



Our family was enjoying another Burundian summer—the season when we host friends and my husband showcases the lush beauty, athletic drummers, and robust coffee of his homeland. On this balmy evening, friends gathered round

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the dinner table at a favorite restaurant on the edge of Lake Tanganyika, the laughter thick and spicy like incense.

Justin comes alive around other people, and he could hardly contain the merriment pulsing through his extroverted eight-year-old body. He laughed at all the jokes criss-crossing the table. His eyes darted back and forth like fireflies in the deepening dusk.

I turned my head to order a Fanta, and a mere moment later, noticed his head down in his arms on the crimson tablecloth. As I leaned in, I heard quiet sobs. His sister was chatting on the other side of the table with friends, so I knew she didn't provoke his tears. Nothing discernible had happened, but he was suddenly gripped with sadness.

Rubbing his back in a steady circular motion, I waited for his face to emerge from the pillow of his arms. Slowly it did. "Why did she leave me, Mom? Why didn't she want to keep me?" The heart-crushing words every adoptive mother dreads to hear, but more deeply dreads to answer. Because how do you explain to a small child why his birth mother let him go?

I took his hand in mine and walked with him to a chaise lounge near the small pool. I held him close, his head of tight black curls burrowed into my chest. And I cried with him. We cried together. It wasn't time for words yet, just hot tears. Feelings of rejection sting; how can a little heart weather such sensations?

I remember telling him it was good to cry because it's sad when a mother can't keep her son. It hurts to be left behind. I knew that no amount of reason would fully quell his queries anyway. Our tears mingled on the chaise as the water swallowed the sun, leaving us in the dark.



My son's thoughts still drift to his birth mother. Now that he's older, he's concerned about her poverty. He dreams of finding her and rescuing her from her troubles. He also dreams of her coming to him, inviting him to her house for supper and a game of soccer. But there are moments when he mourns because it's hard for him to believe that letting him go was love, that giving him up meant giving him life. So he questions. He laments. And he hopes.

My daughter, though she is the same age, is only beginning to consider her birth mom, but with a more matter-of-fact curiosity. She wonders what she looked like. Do they share the same sable skin tone, curly eyelashes, and curvy shape? Recently she asked what her birth mom's name was, and though I checked her original Burundian birth certificate, it offered no answer to her question. "It's not fair that I don't even get to know her name, Mom," she said through her tears. So much about relinquishment isn't fair.

I myself was never upset by my relinquishment. I assumed my birth mother was too young to raise a child or

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maybe too poor to afford a baby. I imagined her going on to finish college and getting married after she arranged for me to be placed in the hands of a couple in waiting, giving us both a chance at a good life. I never harbored any anger or resentment toward her—maybe the imagining helped.

In fact, I applauded her choice. Her willingness to carry me to term, to allow me to stretch her body, to twist and turn inside her, altering her appetite (and waist size), made me think she wanted me. She wanted me to know life, even if it couldn't be under her watchful eye. So I never felt shunned—indeed, quite the opposite. She gave me what she could, and it was enough.

I will probably never know what societal pressures weighed on my birth mom. What I do know is that when confronted by the stress and shame of it all, she made a loving choice. Even when cornered with life's worst, she determined that I would live. Even if that meant I couldn't be with her, she would usher me into a better kind of life. That's love. That's guts. And I hope some of that gritty love of my mom's lives in me.

Those of us in the company of the adopted learn early that love can look like relinquishment. This doesn't diminish the sting some of us feel, because the letting go involves hurt and often leaves a bruise on the soul. But the ache can become a locus for another love. Redemption is possible, like a sprout coming from a stump.



Relinquishment is the shadow side of belonging. Letting go and leaving, loosening a tie or losing someone altogether, remind us that orbiting the other side of relationship are the seasons of estrangement, the possibilities of disconnection and the likelihood of loss.

Dear friends of mine raised two sons just a few years apart. One son grew into their exact likeness: he was kind and responsible, became a teacher, and eventually fathered his own children. The other son struggled most of his life with an acute drug addiction that kept him in and out of treatment centers and group homes, in and out of relationship with his parents. Over a long lunch in their backyard one day, they shared with me the searing pain of creating distance between them and their son during the worst of his using days in order to protect the rest of the family and not further enable his addiction. Relinquishing her son, even for a season, flayed my friend's heart open. And the sting of that loss can linger for years. To this day my friends are marked by relinquishment.

Who doesn't know a family torn asunder by divorce? Whether amicable or hostile, the rending does damage. A community created by biology and love and mystery disappears. In its wake come disorientation and confusion. The parents may only intend to relinquish one another, but

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inevitably they unravel the only community of belonging their children have ever known. Now each one is adrift, unattached in one or more ways from their original center. Each divorce further rends the fabric of belonging as all of us once knew it.

Sometimes we relinquish involuntarily. This is the story of my daughter's birth mother. Because of her station in life, she was exposed to HIV/AIDS. Her poverty prevented her from accessing medication that would have helped her and protected her unborn child from transmission of the disease, which became advanced and attacked both their bodies. And even as she marshaled all her strength to get to the hospital once labor started, her sickness presented complications that couldn't be overcome. She died in childbirth, and my baby girl entered this world with no mother to smile at her arrival, no one to cradle her close. The relinquishment was final—not at all what her mother had envisioned.

Not too much later, my daughter's birth father also succumbed to AIDS, further compounding her loss. As we know, death is an unintended relinquishment visited upon all of us. We are left by those who would have given anything to stay. Diseases, accidents, and all manner of violence rob us of loved ones and catapult us into the arms of relinquishment. We stand by the graveside, grieved, forced to let go before we're ready. We're bereft of belonging.

If we know what it is to belong, then chances are we

know, too, what it is to not belong at all, to feel orphaned by someone or some circumstance. This is the underbelly of belonging that must be named.



From Jochebed to my own birth mother, injustice corners many women and pushes them to let go of their children. And oppressive realities worldwide push people to let go of other elemental things. Not so many years ago, the economic meltdown in the United States forced many of us to let go of our homes in a flurry of foreclosures and short sales. For years before that, farmers across the heartland had been losing land, losing family homesteads and the rhythm of the farming life to agri-business and inequitable trade agreements. More recently, the world watched as nearly 300,000 Burundian refugees left their homes, their land, and their country to find safety elsewhere. A cocktail of predatory economics, political violence, and despotism cornered them into believing that relinquishment was their only or best option.

In her book *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa*, Antjie Krog writes about her experience as a journalist covering the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the aftermath of apartheid.¹ Black and colored people suffered deep and pervasive abuse under the institutionalized injustice of the

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apartheid system, a structure that spoke in the dominant language of Afrikaans. Day after day the witnesses would testify, in graphic detail, to the atrocities they were subjected to. The words of oppression were all Afrikaans.

As Krog listened, she realized how much her mother tongue was now wedded to the evils of apartheid. A poet as well as a journalist, she explains how she once wrote poetry in Afrikaans, but now wondered if she ever could again. Her native tongue was so soiled, so disgraced, she felt she could no longer speak it or write it. In her words I hear a woman struggling with the pain of relinquishment, of letting go of her mother tongue, the very language that once marked her cultural belonging.

It seems that any time we move toward belonging, we stumble against relinquishment. Our own relationships might provide the best evidence. It's also visible in the ways we yearn for home—culture, country, and our own plot of land, our own house to anchor us to this place. What emerges? Relinquishment often sits on the other side of justice, revealing what little we have left after injustice steals its dark portion.



One May morning I had the opportunity to talk with Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar and my theological hero, who was speaking at my alma mater, Fuller Theo-

logical Seminary. We both entered the chapel at the same time, well ahead of the others still finishing their coffee in the courtyard. I reminded him who I was and mentioned a mutual friend. Instantly he filled in details with a hearty laugh. He asked if my husband was still in Burundi amid the current political conflict.

Claude is the kind of person whom Brueggemann had been describing in his conference talks: a person committed to justice and active for the sake of neighborhood. While many were fleeing Burundi, Claude determined to stay as long as possible to be with his people. The late-night texts we exchanged between Bujumbura and my guest room in Pasadena confirmed that things were deteriorating fast—armed youth militias, attempts to silence the press, protests producing casualties.

My heightened concern must have been written across my face as I spoke with Brueggemann. He leaned in, looked straight into my eyes, and said, “Your act of justice is to relinquish him.” His words, like a whoosh of the Spirit, left my insides trembling with a prophetic rightness.

While Claude labored in and among the collection of protesting neighborhoods to advance the cause of justice, my work was to let him go. This meant not trying to control him or dictate his choices, but to trust that he was actively listening to the Spirit for direction. I disciplined myself to not second-guess his decisions, trusting his discernment

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and commitment to a more just outcome for Burundi. My contribution to the work of justice was to not impede Claude's pursuit of peace.

In those days I also recognized Claude didn't only or wholly belong to me. He wasn't only my husband or the father to our children. He also belonged to the people of Burundi, to the soil of his childhood and land of his highest hopes. His solidarity with his people emerged as integral to who I knew him to be. He stood with the people of Burundi in the thick of the conflict—and so I stood with them, too. As I relinquished Claude, I found myself more tightly woven into the color-block fabric of Burundi, belonging in a way I never had before.

Deeper still was my realization that Claude belonged to God; I could not have ultimate claim on him. I had known, of course, that he belongs to God in a general sense. But in reality nothing ever trumped my wedding ring, which declared us to belong to one another exclusively. Until people were looking to my husband for the kind of help that could cost him his life, I never experienced a counter-claim. Yet here were his kin needing him to be available and attentive to them, and here was God calling him to center them for the sake of *shalom*. And because Claude belongs most wholly to God, my work was to relinquish my claim and free him to be a person of peace. It was a risk for both of us.

Maybe I was my mother's daughter after all, able to re-

linquish the love of my life when the situation in Burundi cornered us, entrusting Claude to the hands of God. The kind of solidarity empowered by the Spirit, who binds us all together, wills justice for all his adopted ones.



If we enjoy a robust marriage, a close-knit family, a church rich in fellowship, or a community of committed neighbors, we will inevitably feel the jarring loss when divorce or death comes, the congregation splits, or someone moves away. We will feel the sting when relationships are fractured due to our own imperfect humanity, the many ways we hurt one another and break faith with those we most love. Birth mothers aren't the only ones acquainted with relinquishment. Coming close and letting go, owning and disowning, cleaving and leaving—these are all part of our dance with one another. Relinquishment is part of living in relationship to others—the harder part.

Most disruptive to the larger human narrative of belonging is the relinquishment that results from various forms of injustice. When someone is cornered and coerced to let go of a child, a home, or a homeland, there is reason to name and lament such loss. But we also recognize that relinquishment under such dire circumstances is often the strongest love that can be offered in the moment, when letting go or leaving looks like—and is—love.

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Belonging and relinquishment rotate on a shared axis, each taking their turn in the sun. For all the times we're brought close and share the bonds of human communion, there are times we find ourselves estranged or compelled to leave someone behind. We are lost, we are found, and in tandem relinquishment and belonging instruct us and shape our understanding of life together.

The practice of relinquishment offers no guarantees; those in the company of the adopted will testify to that truth. But we can say that letting go is seldom the end of the story. Beyond our sightline, redemption comes, sometimes soon and sometimes slow, but it comes as sure as Sunday.