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Diane J. Graves

Trinity University, dgraves@trinity.edu

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Of Birth-Mother and Daughter

Diane Graves

When Karen Waldron first approached me about this essay, she asked me to write about the adoption of our daughter. As I considered the assignment on and off over the following weeks, I realized that in adopting a child, I had shown very little courage and taken few risks. Yet, two others had shown tremendous courage and taken overwhelming risks, and I shall write about them. They are my daughter's birth-mother, and the daughter we share.

Here is what I know about my daughter Elena's birth and her mother. Elena was born in Chalchuapa, in the Santa Ana province of El Salvador on Mardi Gras day 1993. Our daughter's birth-mother was 30 years old when Elena was born. She was unmarried and illiterate. She had placed one other child, another daughter, for adoption four years before.

I know this about her life, too: She was part of a population that had no opportunities for education, personal and professional growth, or decent medical care. It is very likely that she lived with Elena's birth father, but perhaps because marriage licenses cost money, and they had none, they were not married.

She was a member of El Salvador's huge underclass—those who are neither among the ruling families nor the professional classes that support them. She had witnessed one of the bloodiest civil wars in twentieth-century history, and she had seen her nation's infrastructure gutted by it. She had very likely lost family members to the war and unrest. She had probably

been prevented from voting by a power structure that was more secure if she was disenfranchised.

Elena's birth-mother had made an adoption plan prior to the birth of this baby. She worked through her parish priest, who in turn contacted a Catholic church-run convent orphanage in San Salvador. Within three days of Elena's birth, she was placed with a foster mother—a wet nurse—and we were told that she was ours. The foster mother cared for her until Elena was four months old. After that, Elena moved to the convent orphanage, a bare-bones but loving facility where she stayed until my husband and I came to pick her up. She was there three months.

About a month before we traveled to El Salvador, the adoption was finalized in the Salvadoran courts. At that hearing, Elena's birth-mother had to appear in court and state under oath that she was relinquishing this child for adoption. Baby Elena was there, now six months old, accompanied by one of the sisters from the convent orphanage. She saw Elena, her baby daughter, and had to turn and walk away, because she knew what was best for that infant girl. That took strength and courage.

Elena's birth-mother was courageous, and she took the ultimate risk: She placed her child for adoption, to be raised by people she did not know, in a nation she will never visit. She showed enormous courage by putting the needs of her tiny daughter ahead of her own.

I have never met her, so I can only surmise what she thought as she made this incredibly difficult decision. However, in my mind's eye, I imagine these things: I imagine that she wanted her child to know how to read. She did not—she had to sign all of the legal documents with a thumbprint. She wanted her child to have good nutrition and medical care. She wanted her child to be educated, and to live in safety. She wanted her child to be able to vote, and to express

herself without fear. She wanted what every mother wants for her child—happiness and the opportunity to blossom. I don't doubt that she wished she could come to *el norte* herself, and raise her child here. Even though she was uneducated, she knew that the best way to ensure these things for her little daughter was to place the child for adoption by a North American couple. When I think about her, I cannot imagine the strength and power of such a person. I feel an incredible obligation to raise our daughter to be the best she can be, and to honor her heritage.

Our daughter, Elena, is also a person of strength and courage. When we brought her home, we were living outside of Chicago, Illinois. Elena came home with a bad cold and had a miserable flight. When we changed altitude over Cuba, her ears hurt terribly and she screamed from the pain. Within a few days of our arrival home, she developed chicken pox. (My apologies to all on that flight from Miami to Chicago who had not yet been exposed. . . .) Elena quickly demonstrated that she was a fighter, and she impressed our pediatrician and his staff with her strength when they tried to give her a shot. She was underweight, slightly anemic, and small for her age. But she put up a struggle!

As Elena has grown, she has faced her own challenges. We noticed that she had reading difficulties, and when she was 10 we learned that she is dyslexic. For two parents who read constantly and both majored in English, this was a significant revelation. It has been humbling to watch a child struggle, but persevere, with something that comes as naturally to us as breathing.

As we have lived with Elena, we have learned some wonderful things about her. She is an artist. She is visually gifted, loves dance and theatre, and has learned basic guitar and violin. She is active and coordinated in ways I envy. She is easy with other children and is a good friend. She loves animals, and they love her. She is particularly crazy about stuffed animals; in our collection of critters, each has its own individual name and personality. Elena is stubborn! When

she refuses to do something, it is a battle. When she makes up her mind about something, a freight train can not slow her down.

She faces one of the toughest challenges a child can deal with. She is a beautiful brunette being raised in our still-segregated culture by parents with northern European ancestry. Fortunately we now live in a region that is almost evenly Hispanic and Anglo, and there are many mixtures of families all around us.

Still, Elena knows she is an adopted child. She must often think and wonder about who she is, who her birth-parents are, what her life would be like if she still lived in El Salvador. She must wonder if her birth-mother would make her pick up her room the way this Mom does. She must wonder where she got her strong appreciation for color and pattern. She must wonder if she will ever meet anyone from her birth family, if she will ever know any biological relatives.

These are big questions for a child growing up in early twenty-first-century America. And yet she seems to be a pretty darn self-confident person. I'm not sure I could have done as well, and I admire her courage every day when she goes out the door. She is so determined, and so sure of what she wants in life, that she is an inspiration to me, her dad, and our extended families. I'm not the one who is courageous. Elena is. And we know that she got her courage from her mother.

No parent knows what is in store for her child, and I am the same. My hope for Elena is that she will continue to push herself to do her best. As we face the beginning of high school, I worry about what that experience will bring. Many friends of slightly older children have warned that adolescence is a phase to tolerate, and that all three of us may be stunned by how mean the girls are to one another. I worry that Elena's otherness and her reading disability will make these tough years, and could well undermine her resolve and self-confidence.

However, I try to take the long view and think about what kind of grown woman she could become. I hope that whatever she chooses in life, it will involve her creative side. I hope that we can help her nurture her vivid imagination in the face of standardization and “teaching to the test.” Elena will have to risk failure to reach her goals. The educational system tends to reward people like her dad and me, but it will very likely be an ongoing challenge for Elena, and it will require her courage and resolve to master it. The rewards offered by that system may not intersect with her talents and abilities. I can imagine that she will often feel frustration and be discouraged. If we are fortunate, she will benefit from that experience and become a person who can meet a challenge head on and stick with it. The risk is that she will become timid and leery of trying new things for fear of failure’s pain.

Like all parents, my husband and I wish Elena to be happy in life, and to be a person who will be honored and respected both in our own culture and in her native one. We hope Elena will be a responsible, caring person with a strong work ethic and a sense that one should always give something to those less fortunate. We have a wonderful role model in an unusual place. We have a friend and correspondent in El Salvador with whom we have kept in touch since we were there in 1993. Astrid Lopez worked as a hotel receptionist when we traveled there, but her work situation has been difficult since that time. The economy is quite poor and jobs are not stable. Still, Astrid has time to volunteer with orphaned and very poor children, and seeks to make their lives happier and more comfortable. She often writes to us about her experience and has shown us that even in a very poor country, people find ways to help those less fortunate.

In El Salvador, families are important, and children are treasured in a ways that are rare in the United States. When we traveled to pick up Elena, we were astonished by the number of people who offered to help us. Even the cabbies would hold her while I was situated in their cars,

or while I gathered my things to get out. I can't imagine such a thing in the United States. I hope the love of family and the value of children will always be central in Elena's life. Raising her in San Antonio, we are glad that she is exposed to a culture that emphasizes family so deeply.

At some point, we will have to talk to Elena about the realities of her native country—about the deadly civil war there and what role the United States had in that conflict. We will need for her to understand that even though terrible things happened there, she should still be proud to be Salvadoran. In some ways, understanding her nation's recent past may help her comprehend her birth-parents' decision to place her for adoption, and it can show her that courage and resolve can lead to good things. Her country has gained a democracy (though still fragile) and better rights to free expression by taking the ultimate risk.

My husband and I have talked about taking her to El Salvador when Elena is an older teenager—mature enough to comprehend the realities of the situation, but still young enough to allow us to visit together. That visit could require enormous courage on her part, as she will see the realities of life in a third world country and open up even more questions about what her life might have been. But it will let her see the lush beauty of her native land, and possibly help her understand herself even more—the origins of her creative side, the parts of her that are uniquely Salvadoran.

Our experience together, as it is with all families, is one of ups and downs, with the parents worrying about and trying to foresee the future as we make key decisions about Elena's education and upbringing. In spite of those concerns, our daughter is a gift and an inspiration to us. Her presence in our family is a reminder of our own responsibilities as global citizens, of the kinds of courage that exist in the world, and of the risks we all must take to give our lives meaning.