



Based on NPR's long-running radio show, THIS I BELIEVE, an eclectic group of City Congregation members offered their own reflections and joined this international conversation. Presentations were shared at Shabbat, Nov. 20, 2009.

I Believe We Weave Our Own Red Threads

Carol Sternhell

When my hulking hairy teenage son Ben was in first grade, his friend Noah was over at our house for a playdate. The boys were dumping out piles of Legos when Noah suddenly asked out of the blue, “Ben, are you sad that you don’t have a dad?” My heart kind of wobbled; should I intervene, change the subject? But Ben shrugged, overturned another tub of Legos, and said, “Nah. You get what you get.”

You get what you get. I love this story, and really wanted this to be the topic of my talk, but when I thought about it a bit I realized that it isn’t at all my philosophy of life: I don’t believe we should just bear unhappy circumstances, or accept the status quo, or not bother to fight against injustice. And I *certainly* don’t believe that people deserve what they get; I’ve always hated that New Age-y view (that people cause their own cancer, for instance, or must really want to be poor). So not my philosophy of life—but I guess it is my philosophy of family.

As most of you know by now, I adopted Ben as a single mother. When he was born in that Iowa snowstorm just before Christmas—and just before Chanukah too, but no one much cared about Chanukah in Sioux City—his birthmother said she was giving me the greatest Christmas gift in the world. For me, after years of pursuing motherhood by all means conventional and non, this baby was of course a remarkable gift—but there was also something random about it, this baby out of all the others, Sioux City instead of Fruitland or Horseshoe Bend. Hey, you get what you get. That’s true for bio parents too, of course—this egg, this sperm, this kid—but it somehow doesn’t feel as random. If my parents had never met at the Hotel Evans in the Catskills that weekend, sure, I wouldn’t exist; but Ben would still be here in the world, living his life, whether I had adopted him or not.

Many people in the adoption community, when they talk about this process, will tell you about the red thread, a magical thread snaking through all the universe that leads them at last to the one child who is meant to be theirs.

I don’t believe there are any red threads.

But I believe something I truly think is much more wonderful: I believe we weave our own red threads. Every adoptive parent I know—with children from Omaha and Beijing and Guatemala City, with children from upstate New York and Ethiopia and Kazakhstan and east Texas—thinks that their child, their particular child, is the perfect child for them. This is true even when the match is a tad...eccentric: when a book-loving mother like me gets a kid who sees poetry in the undulation of subway tracks. Religiously inclined people believe that this choice was somehow made for them; that they followed the red thread wherever it led. That would be amazing, I guess, but I believe in human-centered miracles. I believe we get what we get—but whatever we get, we weave our own red threads out of love.