

March 13, 2011

An Open Letter to President Clinton

Once again, tragedy strikes orphans – children who might have been adopted into a permanent home have had their hopes and dreams demolished. This time it's Ethiopia, where international adoption has been growing rapidly over the last six years, beginning with a handful of older children in the 1980's and 90's. By last year 2,500 children – sweet babies and toddlers - were adopted by American families.

Now, the Ethiopian government has announced that it is reducing the number of visas approved for adoption from 50 per work day to five. The outcry from those waiting to become parents, from adoption agencies and from for profit organizations advocating for children, is predictable and equally predictable, the world at large appears to be indifferent to the anguish this ruling is causing. And so, the numbers of children adopted from Ethiopia will decrease, the time it takes to adopt will increase, and international adoption in general, and the children in particular, are the losers.

The destruction of international adoption has become the cure for a misdiagnosed disease. Uninspired, bureaucratic, desperate decision-makers in governments, including our own, and in large child welfare organizations, raise the cry of “trafficking” and the rest is inevitable: to protect the children and stop the trafficking – stop adoption.

The real disease – the one not addressed - is much more complex. It involves developing nations, communities without social welfare systems or resources to help families living in extreme poverty, suffering from illness, depression and hopelessness. Without education, economic strengthening, and

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access to medical care, particularly HIV/AIDS care, families become desperate and relinquish their children to orphanages. And when the numbers are too large and the government is too embarrassed and when those who believe a child is better off rotting by the side of the road than living in a different culture, well, that's when we start hearing "trafficking," and that's when international adoption is slowed, then halted. All in the name of the children.

In my 20 years as an adoption medicine specialist, this scenario has been played out in Georgia, Romania, Cambodia, Vietnam, Guatemala, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Nepal and now Ethiopia. Adoption is vilified, demonized and then (the children are) crucified. And every time this happens there are children and adoptive families trapped in the last steps of the adoption process or others almost there and some not able to fulfill their lifelong dream of creating a family. If you look historically at all the countries that halted international adoption, you will find thousands of children left to rot in institutions. The trafficking stories never come close to even a small percentage of the children left to suffer for the rest of their lives.

People close to adoption knew the decision in Ethiopia was coming. There were murmurs everywhere that "irregularities, perhaps improprieties" were found in paperwork for children being referred for international adoption. New forms and more careful investigations were recommended by the US State Department, and the US Embassy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia worked diligently to ensure that the paperwork was prepared transparently.

But let's get real. The best paperwork in the world is not going to fix a tragic social situation which is about the disintegration and dismantling of families due to poverty, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, natural disasters, conflict, and war. Yes, there is trafficking, but with the Hague accords implemented, there just can't be the same degree of trafficking, otherwise we have all just spent millions of dollars on an agreement to protect orphans which has in effect accomplished nothing.

I think that there is a place for adoption both domestic and international, but I am not so foolish as to think that adoption is the solution for millions of social orphans whose families were so poor or ill that their desperate parents were driven to relinquish them to residential care facilities (also known as orphanages, institutions, children's homes, hogars,

leagans, dom rebyonka, mladost, crèches, etc.).

In the years that I've been helping parents prepare for adoption, I've always believed that we should have been investing in the social infrastructure of the "sending" countries. If we had done this 20 years ago when I first entered this field, we would have had more permanency, family preservation, group homes, kinship and non-related foster care, family-based care, and community-based solutions for children without parental care. And if we had managed this social infrastructure as a capacity/community building endeavor, we could have continued international adoption for those children who were abandoned/relinquished and completely without any vestige of identifiable family.

In any case, here we are again....doesn't anyone learn from the past? How childish of me to ask such a question! I can't help myself because I have watched all of this unfold so many times in so many countries and here we are witnessing another disaster. Thousands of kids will be left and parents will be stuck in limbo for months and even years...just look at each of the countries I noted above. You can go online and find the stories cached for years... as tragic as any earthquake or tsunami that leaves children stranded and alone.

No one wins. There is bitterness and anger and the orphaned children in institutions are nameless to most of us. There are families who know these children from pictures and visits and they all will suffer. I am privy to many stories of parents waiting years to get their kids out of countries around the world...even herculean measures for some where parents visit their children several times a year in the orphanages watching their children become teenagers....

In fact, this is a hostage situation. President Clinton, you secured the release of two young journalists a few years ago and I met them at the Glamour Woman of the Year Awards in 2009 when I was an award recipient. Laura Ling and Euna Lee were freed because you thought their situation was grave enough to go to Korea and personally negotiate for their release. That's what needs to be done now. We need some diplomacy to pry open the lid for a moment. The Ethiopian government's concerns must be addressed, but so must the concerns of the waiting parents and most of all, of the children. We need a strategic plan for de-institutionalization and community building. There are

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countless NGOs just like mine, Worldwide Orphans Foundation, prepared to sit down with government departments and other big NGOs to help come to the aid of the government to provide concurrent planning, adoption and social welfare infrastructure to fill in the gap so that we don't have yet another "Guatemala 900" and the continued bullying of adoption .

We need to use creative ways to help kids have permanency.

President Clinton, we need you.....

Dr. Jane Aronson

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