TIES

How's Our Girl?': On Loving a Foster Child and Letting Go

Every time we choose to love other mortal beings, someday, we will have to give them back.

By Sarah Sentilles

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"Cute baby," strangers said when they saw her.

"Your first?" they asked. And when we told them she was our foster daughter, that we might have to return her to her biological mother, I watched them step back.

"I couldn't do that," they said.

"I'll pray for you," they said.

I didn't know if I could do it, either. But I also knew it's what we do every time we choose to love another mortal being. Someday, we will have to give them back too.

On the first of many court dates, we met her biological mother. In the courtroom hallway, I raised the blanket covering the stroller so she could see her daughter, the baby she'd birthed just two weeks before.

"Could I please hold her?" she asked.

She was tender, cradled the baby's tiny body, cooed. She cried, held the baby close to her chest. "I love you too much," she whispered, again and again.

I took the baby to visit her mother once a week. I packed everything she might need — diapers, wipes, bottles, formula, pacifier, blankets — and was ready to tell her mother everything she needed to know about her baby for the 90 minutes she'd get to spend with her — how long it had been since she'd eaten, how much formula to feed her, which blanket was her favorite, when she might need a change of clothes, what her different sounds meant. But she didn't ask any questions, didn't want to know a single thing.

After a couple months, the once-weekly visits became twice-weekly. Her bio mother looked different every time. One day she'd look put together — newly dyed and straightened hair, a shirt that read *Let's Make Today Amazing*, high heeled boots, a leather jacket — and the next time I'd see her, sometimes the very next day, she'd be wearing baggy sweatpants with holes in them, an even baggier sweatshirt, and a jacket 10 sizes too big, her hair uncombed, her face exhausted. On those days, before I'd even closed the door to the back seat, she'd sit on the curb and smoke.

When she looked good, I thought, *We'll have to give the baby back*.

When she looked bad, I thought, *We'll get to keep her*.

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How's my little princess? her bio mother texted. *How's my perfect baby girl?*

“I’ve never been worried about you like this,” my husband Eric said. I was leaning over the kitchen island, resting my cheek on the butcher block countertop. “You have to promise to tell me what you’re feeling.”

“I want to die,” I said.

“Do you mean you’re suicidal?”

“No,” I said. “I’m afraid I’ll die if we have to give her back.”

I called my therapist. I was crying so hard I could barely talk. “I want to keep her,” I said.

“I need you to listen to me, but you’re not going to like what I’m about to say,” she said. “The best and most enlightened thing to do, energetically and emotionally, is to be hoping and wishing and praying” that the baby’s biological mother would get her life together and be able to take the baby back.

I had been hoping and wishing and praying she would disappear.

“She is exhibiting the desire to raise this child, to change her life,” my therapist said. “We have to root for that. If we don’t root for that, we’ll be doing harm to another person. And we can’t do harm to another person to get what we want. That’s not who we are.”

“But what if it is who I am?” I asked.

“You have to take the high road, or you will perish,” my therapist said. “You need to shift your thinking. You need to start cheering for her, for this human who has suffered so much. Then, if she makes it, if she gets her child back, you will walk away clean. Will you be sad? Yes. But you won’t be sad and mean.”

I couldn’t speak.

“Think about it this way,” she added. “This child might save this mother’s life, and you don’t need your life saved.”

Months before we brought the baby home, when I was still on book tour for “Draw Your Weapons,” a book about art and war that asks how we ought to respond to images of people in pain, I talked with audience after audience about the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. His family was killed in the Holocaust, and Levinas dedicated his life to developing an ethical system that would make another genocide impossible.

This was his proposal: When you are in the presence of the Other, a stranger, someone you don’t understand, someone who scares you, someone you think might kill you, when you feel the Other is so different from you that their life might not even count as a life, then that is the sign you are in the presence of God. The life of the Other must be protected at all costs, even at the cost of your own life.

When I became a foster parent, I’d thought the stranger — the Other — I had been asked to care for was the baby. But the stranger wasn’t the baby. The stranger was her mother.

Look who has a tooth! I texted her mother. I sent a picture of the tiny whiteness breaking through her bottom gum.

That makes me want to cry, she texted back.

I took the baby on a walk almost every day, and though there was still snow, I could hear birds. Flocks of cedar waxwings flew from tree to tree. Red-winged blackbirds called to each other in the tall grasses. “Can you hear that?” I asked her. “Wherever you are, there will be birdsong.” I pointed to the moon crossing the sky in the middle of the day. “Wherever you are, there will be moonlight,” I said.

The twice-weekly visits between the baby and her mother became overnight visits. One Monday morning, I drove the baby to spend the night with her mother. In the living room of her apartment, we sat on the floor across from each other with the baby between us, rolling a toy back and forth, making the baby laugh.

On the kitchen table was a sewing machine. “Do you sew?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Come look.” She showed me a quilt she’d just finished — purple on one side, a pink heart pattern on the other. In the crib next to the quilt was a stuffed monkey. She pressed a button on its back.

“That’s the sound of her heartbeat when she was still in my womb,” she said, and we stood there, all three of us, and listened.

People who donate kidneys to strangers have different brains than people who don’t, scientists report. The region in their brains known to produce empathetic responses is larger than average, bigger by 8 percent. Scientists suggest it’s having a different brain that makes people more empathetic and therefore more likely to donate an organ to someone they don’t know. Donors are more sensitive to distress, scientists say. But because they study donors only after they’ve given away their kidneys, how do scientists know it’s not the giving itself that transforms the brain? Maybe what renders you more sensitive to the suffering of others is having one of your organs in someone else’s body. Maybe it’s knowing there is no such thing as *mine*.

How’s our girl? her mother texted me.

Everything in our worlds is designed to keep our foster daughter’s mother and me apart. We aren’t supposed to like each other, much less love each other. But now we love the same child. Now we’re in this together.

Sarah Sentilles is the author of the forthcoming memoir “Stranger Care: A Memoir of Loving What Isn’t Ours,” from which this essay is adapted.