



Elizabeth and Michael shared their views about meeting the biological family

ELIZABETH BARTHOLET

The right to say “Mom”

“What is a mother?” asked the ignorant Smee. Wendy was so shocked that she exclaimed. “You don’t know!”, and always after this she felt that if you could have a pet pirate Smee would be hers. -- Peter Pan, Chapter VIII

She is a full professor at Harvard Law School, where she specializes in adoption law and directs the Child Advocacy Program, which she founded. She is the adoptive mother of two Peruvian youths, Chris (25) and Michael (23). She was just in Lima for an experience that few human beings have: meeting the families of her children, including, in one case, the mother. In the presence of and with contributions from her son Michael, we spoke with her about this experience, about the question of the pirate in *Peter Pan*, and about a very serious report about adoption that she presented before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) last year.

By Fernando Berckemeyer

You came to meet Chris and Michael's biological families, including Chris's biological mother. This must have been a complex experience, to say the least, since until now you were the only person he knew as "Mom."

Yes, it has been a very powerful experience ..."complex?" It is complex. But as of now I feel completely okay with it, since I'm convinced that it was the right thing for the boys to make this connection, to know where they come from. I don't have doubts in my mind about having done it. Of course, there are moments of anxiety in the sense that I say to myself, "Wait a second, I have been the mother all these years..." but the boys have made me feel that everything is all right, that I'm not going to be all of a sudden abandoned like a mother that became unnecessary (laughs).

And what do you think the role of the biological families and mother will be who have now appeared in the lives of your sons?

We don't know. I think this story is still inconclusive. There is no way for the boys to know where things will go. In the case of Chris's biological mother, I have to say that I'm not only very happy that Chris met her, but I'm also very happy for her and that she was able to see that her son is doing well.

You give the impression that you and your sons are living this as an experience that is only adding to your family, without taking anything away.

That is how I feel. Although I also believe that only time can tell what we have gained. My sons have to continue deciding to what extent they want their biological families to participate in their lives. Just this afternoon Michael mentioned that he was interested in spending part of his future in Peru instead of just in the United States.



Chris and Michael have memories of a childhood full of happiness

"I have spent the last 25 years feeling that being a mother is being there; it's being the person who wakes up at night to care for the child, the person who raises him."



The happiness continues: the family today

Let me ask you a question that I think you are in a very unique position to answer. It is a question that an orphan pirate from the world of Neverland in Peter Pan asks when he encounters the "mother" Wendy: "What is a mother?"

Well...I have spent the last 25 years feeling that it is, above all, being there, it's being the person who wakes up at night to care for the child, the person who raises him. This is what I learned through adoption: that being a mother is raising your child and that there wasn't any difference between how I felt towards the children I adopted and the biological child I had before.

In this sense, would you say that the biological "instinct" that mothers always talk about, and that has to do with having carried your child in your belly, is not so central?

I always say that when I held Michael and Chris in my arms and they were these totally defenseless children who had come to rely totally on me, I felt exactly the same protective instinct as with my biological child. And I also feel that they view me in the same way that my biological child views me... Sure I realize that, in spite of this, it is important for them to know that there is another family that they came from biologically, but I think that if all of these years I have been a good enough mother to them, then they will continue to think of me as their mother, although they may end up adding on, now that they have the option of getting to know their biological families, another good family.

What do you think they were looking for when they decided to look for their biological families?

“There are institutions that have a lot of people whose funds and power depends on there being many children in orphanages, and they have an interest in maintaining the problem. It’s corruption. It’s sad and serious.”

The Case Before IACHR

In your presentation before IACHR you said that international adoption is a human right. Why?

Because it provides children who otherwise would not have this with one of the things that they most need to survive and develop well: a loving upbringing.

A loving upbringing that institutions cannot provide?

That’s right. I am referring to someone who loves them: to a connection with a person that is gratuitously unconditional. And this is not pure poetry: there are a series of studies that show that even in the better orphanages many of the children grow up with serious emotional and physical limitations. These include very serious neurological studies that demonstrate limitations of brain development. What a parent who chooses to care for a child as if that child were their own, as in the case with adoption, can give a child—even the best institutions and foster families could never give them that. And these “better” orphanages are few! The reality is that orphanages are typically terrible and that every year thousands of children around the world die because of mistreatment in orphanages.

You claimed that international adoption is being shut down. How so?

Because the State has come to monopolize adoption in the majority of countries in Latin American, eliminating the role of private intermediaries, typically lawyers who help you find children in orphanages and also help with the legal process. This monopolization makes the process longer and more complicated for potential parents. In 2010, in the United States, the country with the most parents in the world who adopt internationally, parents were able to adopt only half the number of children as were adopted in 2004.

And why have private intermediaries been eliminated?

There are two main reasons. First, it is maintained that intermediaries mean corruption in the system, which is a very poor argument because the same corruption can occur in the adoption process run by the state. Also the state can simply stop facilitating adoptions, as has happened in practice in many Latin American countries. Second, there are institutions like UNICEF that have a lot of people whose funding and power depend on there being many children in orphanages and, therefore, unfortunately they have an interest in maintaining the problem. They don’t say this upfront, of course, but they use, for example, the argument of the right to a cultural identity, that children should have the right to grow up in their own country, even if they are in orphanages, and they attack intermediaries because they know that in practice, eliminating intermediaries will end adoptions. It’s corruption. It’s sad and serious.

Elizabeth, when you came to Peru in the 80s you arrived in a different culture, with languages, customs, races, levels of development, and so many other things that were radically different from the world you came from, to adopt these two babies that didn’t have anything in common with you aside from being human. From there, how did you make them yours? It is possible to build a solid bridge across such distances? I ask you this because many potential international adoptive parents face these fears...

It’s true. When I arrived I had the classic fears. And overcoming those required an act of faith based in the belief that love has to do with two human beings and their relationship, not with me creating my genetic product. Love is about the other, not about me; to love is not to love another because that person is a version of me. Afterwards, the experience confirmed this act of faith. All of the differences became irrelevant from the first day I held each one in my arms, totally vulnerable and, in my case with Chris and Michael, sick. The maternal instinct kicked in automatically.

For you, then, this self-recognition in their children that seems to be so important to many biological parents is not an essential part of parental love.

Sometimes I think we would live in a better world if in the hospital they swapped babies at birth! And also, that parents, before conceiving children, had to consider the option of adopting instead. There are so many children for whom adoption is their only opportunity for a humane childhood!

Personally, for me, being the adoptive son of my mother – says Michael – has taught me that we are all much closer than we think.

I think you should ask Michael that (laughs).

For me – Michael intervenes – it was more like an instinctive necessity since I was a little kid. I wasn’t looking for this or that concrete thing. I simply wanted to know who these people were that I had been born with, whether I had siblings...those kinds of things. I wanted to know, whether it would be good or bad news that I would find. I was looking for my complete story. But since meeting them, it has been marvelous! I feel that I am going to gain another family,

although, of course, it is not like I am going to replace my Mom (looks at Betsy). She is irreplaceable.

There hasn’t been any moment of confusion in your mind over having two families?

No. They’re like two different parts of me. They complement each other, not contradict each other: one is where I come from originally and the other is where I grew up. Together, they explain me, and each one has its own importance.