



## *Are You Listening, God?*

**I**t might have been sensible to stop with one daughter for awhile and adjust to our new life. But happily we didn't. Carol believed our family would not be complete until we had adopted a second child. "Three," she insisted, "is not a good number. We need our other daughter." I had learned that when Carol insisted she was usually right. So almost immediately we began the paperwork for the second adoption.

We were tired all the time, and we found ourselves with neither the time nor the energy to be sweet to one another after we had finally gotten Lucy to sleep. We took to mothering wholeheartedly, but learning how to find each other in the midst of all that responsibility and constant care took some effort. More effort, at times, than we could manage. Patient with Lucy, we were frequently cranky with one another. Easily, it was the most difficult year of our lives together. Despite all that, we forged ahead, persuaded by Carol that this was the right thing to do.

By June of 1990, nine months after we brought Lucy home and just a few days after Carol had express mailed the last of her paperwork to Peru, the call came from Ana Maria, our Lima attorney. She had a beautiful two-month-old baby waiting in an orphanage, a baby with no name. "Can you be here in three days?" Ana Maria asked.

“Of course I can,” Carol answered. “Tell her Mama’s coming.” She hung up the phone, bought her plane ticket, packed her bags, and headed for Lima.

At the orphanage, Carol was told to expect a baby who was beautiful and ate a lot. A smiling woman brought her out and laid her in Carol’s arms. “Hello, Gracia Esperanza,” Carol said, naming her at last. “Mama’s here, Gracie. Mama’s finally here.”

True to her reputation, Gracie was a fine-looking girl who vigorously drank every bottle she was offered. Drinking her fill was a new experience. Carol learned that the orphanage had fed Gracie a certain number of ounces of reconstituted powdered milk. If she was still thirsty, she got sweetened herbal tea. The babies in the orphanage were clean and conscientiously cared for but spent much of their days in their cribs. That first day Gracie seemed subdued. Carol took her to a pediatrician, Dr. Arribas-Plata, who found her healthy but a little slow to respond to stimulation. But within two or three days she opened like a little flower to the love and attention Carol showered on her. At her second examination, the doctor exclaimed over the rapid progress she had made and pronounced her “a showcase baby.” When she turned her bright smile on him, he added, “Oh, Gracia, with that smile and those eyes, you’re going to be able to get anything you want!”

Gracie’s adoption took two months. Carol spent most of that time in Lima, flying home once to keep from losing her job. While Carol was gone, Gracie spent a week with the same foster family that had cared for Lucy the year before. When Carol returned to Lima, she brought her mother along to help. Betty, who had said so little when we first announced our adoption plans, was steadfastly at Carol’s side during the remaining four weeks of the adoption, lending daughter and granddaughter her quiet, calm assistance. Their sojourn in Peru was fraught with all the ups and downs and challenges that typified these adoptions.

At one point, Gracie got quite sick with a nasty intestinal bacteria. Carol had to learn to give her a daily shot of antibiotic. She practiced by injecting water into an orange. When she was as ready as she knew how to be, she injected tiny Gracie. Carol felt that this was the most difficult thing she had ever done. One frightening night, she stood on a darkened street corner in desperate need of a bottle of Pedialite (an electrolyte-

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balanced drink that prevents dehydration in sick babies). She had tried several stores and pharmacies to no avail and had no idea how to find what she wanted in a city where a can of formula (on some days even a box of matches) could be scarce. Not knowing what else to do, she prayed, and an atypically new and immaculate taxi appeared before her. She told the driver what she sought, and he, in what seemed a miracle, drove her to a large pharmacy amply supplied with the necessary drink.

Carol and Betty also fought intestinal bugs—Carol with a daily dose of antibiotic and Betty by carrying her own fork with her to every meal and washing it herself with her own antibacterial soap. Betty was the only adult in a hostel full of American adoptive parents who never got sick.

One Sunday Carol and Gracie visited an English-language church service attended by a small group of Americans. The hymn that morning was “Amazing Grace,” which seemed to Carol, holding our daughter, like some sort of special blessing. She created a new set of lyrics to this old hymn.

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,  
It suits a girl like you.  
We wished to have a girl so fine,  
And now you're here, we do.*

Lucy and I waited at home. Lucy was fifteen months old when Carol left and a fearless climber. She took only the briefest of naps and slept about two hours less each night than the books predicted. I had a full-time job that summer just trying to keep her from walking off a table or electrocuting herself.

Finally, in August, Lucy and I met Carol and Gracie at O'Hare Airport. Carol was skinny, pale, and exhausted but at the same time quietly triumphant. She placed in my arms our beautiful new daughter. We all hugged and hugged. As we walked from the airport, Lucy peered over at her new sister with a mixture of delight and concern. It would take her a little time to get used to the idea of another baby in our arms.

For the first few weeks, Lucy became upset every time Gracie got a bottle. Whenever one mom began to feed Gracie, Lucy would start to wail. She would run to the kitchen and, racing from chair to chair, hurl each one to the floor. We didn't have to guess what she was feeling.

Whichever mom was not feeding Gracie would go to the kitchen and take Lucy in her arms. “Lucy,” we would murmur, “Mama-Carol loves you. Mama-Jackie loves you. Granddaddy loves you. Grandmama loves you. Grandma Betty loves you. Grandpa Art loves you. Dee loves you. Aunt Jeannie and Uncle Doug love you. Aunt Sue and Aunt B. J. and Uncle Dave love you. Your cousins, Ardyce and Evan and David and Colette and T. C., love you.” Gradually she would calm down and let herself be held. When the storm passed, we would help her set the chairs upright again.

Carol and I brought to our planning for parenthood the same egalitarian model we had used to structure the rest of our relationship. We would both, we were certain, be equally involved parents for each child. We made these plans without considering the preferences and needs of the actual children. Like a lot of new parents, we inclined toward the *tabula rasa* theory of parenting, expecting our daughters to be shaped almost entirely by their environment and, most particularly, by us.

In practice, it soon became clear that both girls believed they had a first mom and a second mom. The number-one mom was the one who had come to Peru and remained throughout the adoption. It was to this mom that each girl turned first when she most needed comfort and this mom who, as the babies grew older, received the brunt of any attempts to separate.

With Lucy, we tried at first to resist the distinctly different demands she made on each of us. We were sure we were each going to meet her needs equally. But as time went by we learned that we did not, in fact, possess identical gifts to bring to these children. Each of us had her own parenting strengths and her own way of doing things. And we learned that even babies have something definite to say about how a pair of humans will relate. At the same time, we came to understand that the mom who had been there first had to make room for the second mom to develop her own bond with the new baby. For two strong-minded women like us, it took some careful negotiation, but gradually we figured it out. By the time Carol brought Gracie home, we had learned that we would need to be there for each girl without trying to control how close either of them would be to either of us. All this was made much easier by the addition of Gracie to the family and by the symmetry of each girl hav-

ing her own mom number one. Over the years, the preference for a mom number one would fade into a distant memory, but we couldn't know that then. At the time, the important lesson for Carol and me was to find ways to respect the connections we all shared without competing for top billing or control.

Carol had been right. Gracie did indeed complete our family.

The arrival of the children demanded of us a new level of public comfort about our lesbian lives. When we first brought Lucy home, we didn't guess how out we would have to be if we wanted our daughter to be comfortable with her family. We didn't realize just how quickly this baby would be repeating, commenting on, and questioning everything she heard us say. We knew we were both mothers to this daughter; we knew she would call us Mama-Jackie and Mama-Carol. We just didn't realize how quickly it would all become public. I'm embarrassed to admit it now, but in our first weeks at home we introduced Lucy to some of our neighbors as my daughter rather than our daughter. Soon, however, we recognized that unless we were going to begin our children's lives with impossible explanations about how wonderful our family was but how embarrassed we were about claiming it in public we would have to get ourselves entirely out of the closet and stay there. Small children don't understand homophobia, and they don't make refined distinctions between what you tell your best friend and what you tell the meter reader, but they do understand when they have a mother who is not claiming them or seems ashamed of her family.

After a while, we came to believe that as lesbian parents and adoptive parents we had a certain advocacy role. Whether we liked it or not, when we walked out the door people looked at us as different. We became, with or without our assent, ambassadors for different kinds of families.

Like other adoptive families, we quickly developed expertise in responding to intrusive questions and comments. In the park, people would look at us in surprise and ask, "Are they adopted?" "Yes," we would say, and sometimes we would add, "they're Peruvian." One stranger horrified me by saying through pursed lips, "They're really brown, aren't they?" "Yes," I answered, smiling calmly, although I wanted to bonk her on the head, "I can't get over how beautiful they are. I never get tired of looking at their gorgeous brown skin." "Which one of

you is the mother?" others would ask. "We both are," we would say. "We adopted them together."

A taxi driver surveyed me and my beautiful baby and asked, "Is your husband Japanese?" "I don't have a husband," I told him, doing nothing to clear up his confusion.

As the importance of educating people in our community became clear to us, we began to welcome opportunities to let the world know that families like ours not only survive but thrive. So when someone from WBEZ, the Chicago affiliate of National Public Radio, called to invite our participation on a program about single-parent adoption, we accepted without hesitation.

During our interview, we told stories about the barriers we faced as lesbians wishing to adopt. Adopting as a couple had not even been an option, and the process required us to act as if we were single parents. We also talked about how we worked with and against the grain of the systems put in place to support adoptions by heterosexual parents. A social worker on the program with us explained why she and many other adoption workers opposed lesbian and gay adoptions. The gist of her explanation went something like: "Adoption is designed to serve the needs of the children. Adopted children have already suffered at least one trauma—the trauma of losing their birth parents. Placing them in a lesbian or gay household exposes them to the risk of further trauma—societal homophobia. In addition, the agencies seek stable families, and a union not bound by marriage is inherently less stable than one that is."

I talked about the impossible bind such reasoning creates for lesbian and gay couples. First, there's the illogic of the argument that we can protect children from homophobia by keeping them out of gay families rather than by eliminating homophobia. Second, there's the marriage Catch-22. You must be married to demonstrate a truly committed and stable relationship, we are told. OK, we say, we'll get married. No, we're told, you can't get married, it's illegal. Meanwhile, children who need families go unadopted.

During the phone-in portion of the show, one caller expressed horror at the notion of "perverts" adopting. Other callers were supportive. Lucy and Gracie climbed in and out of our laps as the adult talk eddied around them.

For Carol and me, that radio interview was an important coming-out ritual. We left the station with a deeper sense of commitment. In the absence of other defining rituals, it helped us in the ongoing project of defining ourselves as a family. For the next several days, we encountered neighbors and coworkers who had heard us on the radio. We're all the way out now, we said to ourselves and each other.

We used language consciously with the girls to nourish their conception of their kinship ties. "Family," we said over and over. "Thank you for carrying that package. You are helping our family." "This party is just for our family." "In our family, we don't hit." "I don't care what anybody else's mother does, in our family, we don't start the car until everyone is wearing her seatbelt."

It surprised me to learn that people often act as if walking, talking toddlers cannot hear. "Are the girls sisters?" strangers at the playground asked us again and again. Again and again we answered yes. "Real sisters?" they would sometimes continue. Patiently, wearily, we answered, "yes, real sisters," as the girls roared past us to clamber up the slide. Biologically they were not sisters. And legally they were not sisters, for we had each adopted one of them. But in the reality of our daily lives they were most certainly sisters. "Hermanas de corazón," one of my friends explained to me was the Spanish term for biologically unrelated girls raised in the same family. "Sisters of the heart."

*Sister* was a word that had a clear and specific meaning for both girls. One day when they were three and two, we were out in the backyard planting a row of Kentucky Wonder beans. I was digging the trench for the beans, and Lucy and Gracie were dropping the seeds into the ground and patting the earth over them. "Girls, be careful, you're planting the beans too close together," I admonished.

"We have to," Lucy explained to me patiently, as if to someone not too bright. "They're sisters." Beside her, Gracie tucked another white bean into the rich black soil. She nestled it snug up against Lucy's bean in the little trench I had prepared.

"Oh," I said, "OK, then." We had plenty of seeds. Beans can be thinned.

A few days later Lucy sat on a bench, barefoot, her knees bent out to her sides and her two feet touching each other sole to sole. "Look at my

feet,” she cried, “they’re sisters!” Gracie peered over at Lucy’s feet and then arranged her own to match. A sister, it was clear, was someone exactly like you, someone who grew out of the same soil as you, someone who must be kept close enough to touch.

In the early years of our relationship, Carol and I made Sundays our day. The chores were done, the papers graded or put aside for awhile. We drank coffee, read the Sunday paper, made elaborate breakfasts. We lounged around. We talked and talked.

Then Lucy and Gracie arrived. And, like all other parents who have moved away from their religious upbringings, we had to decide what we were going to teach the kids. Had they remained in their native Peru, they would probably have been raised Catholic, a version of Catholicism enriched by Quechua beliefs in the sun and the natural world as crucial sources of the divine. But that is not our heritage, and we would have been ill equipped to try to offer it to them.

Our first effort to take them to church met with mixed results. We tried a Chicago neighborhood United Church of Christ with a congregation so tiny that they met in the basement of their building. We brought Lucy and Gracie dressed in the black patent Mary Janes that I grew up calling Sunday shoes. They were only two and three and didn’t know much about sitting still. They slid off our laps and clattered about the concrete floor in their patent leather shoes. We decided we weren’t quite ready.

Carol and I, each in our own way, had at this time an uneasy relationship with the notion of organized religion and were hard-pressed to find a church that we found spiritually nourishing. But for all its faults, the church of my childhood had provided a solid foundation for many of my most cherished beliefs and values. I thought perhaps the same could be true for our children. I struggled in my own mind with what and how to teach the girls. I wanted them, as adults, to have access to the transcendent, to believe there was something larger at work in the world than the self or even a collection of selves, to have recourse to the strength and comfort faith can bring.

When the girls were small, I began their religious education by answering their questions and talking to them about the world the way I would have wanted someone to talk to me. Gracie, a present tense, here-

and-now girl, showed little curiosity about these subjects. Not so Lucy. "Is God a man or a woman?" she asked when she was three. "Both," I said, "and neither. God is a spirit and includes both male and female." Perhaps, I might have said, had I known how, God is the name we give to what shines out among and between us, what binds us into the mystery and power of life.

Just as we thought we might be about to settle down after all the changes we had introduced into our lives, Carol's job at Lands' End moved out from under her and up to Dodgeville, Wisconsin. A move for the whole family seemed impossible for us at this time, so Carol began working for the company part time, spending two days of each week in Dodgeville and one day working from home. Despite the challenges of a four-hundred-mile round trip and weekly two-day absence, this arrangement allowed her to spend more time with the girls and to postpone a decision about moving.

Eventually, pressured by the company to come back to work full time, Carol decided she needed to do so. When we look back now on how we tried to solve this problem of two satisfying but demanding careers in cities two hundred miles apart, we think we must have been crazy, but at the time it seemed to us our best course of action. I was willing to do almost anything to accommodate Carol's work short of leaving my tenured position at DePaul. So in the summer of 1992 we retained an apartment for my use in our two-apartment building in Chicago, bought a house in Madison, Wisconsin, and prepared to move our family there.

The girls were too little to have any worries about a move. We had told them what our plans were, and it sounded to them like a great adventure. At dawn on moving day, Lucy roused us to action with, "Moms! Wake up. It's moving day!"

For our first six weeks in Madison, I was on summer break. After that, I left our girls at day care each Monday morning and returned to Madison each Thursday in time for supper. From Monday through Thursday, Carol was a single mom, one who had to commute forty miles to work every day. I applied for a research leave for the following year, and we hoped we could manage this disjointed arrangement for nine months.

The Preschool of the Arts, where the girls spent their days, was really their first foray into the public world. They had been home with their

moms and Delia, a wonderful in-home day care provider, until the move to Madison. For Carol and me, it was a new experience to have to explain to the teachers who worked with our children that we were, in fact, a family.

Our adjustment to our new community was eased considerably by the existence of a large, vibrant, lesbian moms group. We learned about that group from a Chicago friend who knew one of the moms even before we moved. Word of our arrival preceded us to Madison, and on our first Saturday in town one of the moms approached us at the Farmers' Market and asked if we were Carol and Jackie. "How did you ever guess?" we kidded, knowing that once anyone had our description—two tall, thin, androgynous-looking moms with two tiny, black-headed, Peruvian girls—they could pick us out of most any crowd.

Soon we were spending one Saturday a month with the moms and kids group. There were a few other families with adopted children, but most of the children were biological. In any case, we had a lot to talk to each other about as we navigated what often seemed the uncharted seas of raising children in a lesbian family. At our meetings, the moms spent the time talking about parenting while the children played together. We quickly made friends.

Shortly before Christmas, I heard one of the little girls in this group say to Lucy, "You didn't come out of your mom's tummy." I held my breath and listened intently, wondering what Lucy would have to say to that.

"That's right," she agreed. "I came out of Maria Chacpa's tummy. But my moms were waiting for me." What a gal, what an answer.

Lucy's preschool class was hard at work on a holiday program, the focus of eager anticipation and weeks of careful rehearsal. Lucy danced around the house for several weeks singing "Here Comes Susie Snowflake," complete with a whole series of choreographed hand movements. She brought home a copy of a carefully crayoned invitation to the "Moms and Dads." At last the long-awaited performance date arrived. Carol took the day off work, and we both arrived, equipped with a regular camera and a video camera, just like every other pair of parents in the room. Every child but ours seemed to have a mom and a dad, and all the parents looked at least ten years younger than Carol and me. We sat down on our tiny chairs with all the other parents and clapped for our happy,

busy children. I videotaped it all. I guess this made me the butch that day since all the other video camera operators were dads. Lucy and all her friends, it goes without saying, were magnificent, brilliant. The teacher thanked all of us “moms and dads” for coming, and we joined our budding performers for some snacks.

In the kitchen that night, as I prepared supper and Lucy and Gracie colored and drew at their little table, Lucy suddenly announced, “My mom and dad came to see my Christmas program today.”

I was dicing an onion. I paused, raking onion bits onto the cutting board from the side of the chef’s knife as I turned toward Lucy and blinked against the sharp scent of the onions. “Oh yeah?” I grinned at her. “It looked like your mom and mom to me.”

“No,” Lucy said firmly. “Carol was my mom and you were my dad.” She studied me to see what I would make of this.

“Sweetheart, any time you need me to be your dad, you just say the word, and I’m your man or woman or whatever. When you need me for a mom, I’m your mom. When you need me for a dad, I’ll be your dad.”

Lucy said nothing to this, but I saw her face relax. She was relieved, perhaps, that I hadn’t launched into some technically accurate but emotionally irrelevant speech about the fact that she had two moms, not a mom and a dad.

Again and again when we filled out forms, Carol and I crossed a line through the word “father” and replaced it with “parent,” before writing down the second mom’s name. In that split second between Lucy’s assertion of a mom and dad and my reply, I wondered what on earth I should say and why in all those shelves of parental advice there wasn’t a manual for any of our situations. Her look of relief assured me that through some special grace extended to lesbian and adoptive parents I had found the words she needed to hear.

That spring Lucy began coming home from her preschool complaining about her brown skin and black hair. Although Madison prides itself on its diversity, in the girls’ preschool there was such a preponderance of blond children that diversity seemed to mean a child with brown hair. There were at most two or three other brown-skinned children in the entire preschool. One night, when Lucy said yet again that she hated her black hair, I said, “Oh, I love your black hair. I wish I had black hair.

Wait,” I commanded and ran from the room. I dug a pair of black leggings from my dresser drawer and returned to the living room wearing them on my head like a hat. The long black legs hung down over my shoulders. “What do you think? I have black hair now, too.” Lucy started laughing.

“Don’t laugh at me,” I said in mock dismay. “I want long black hair and this is as close as I can get.”

“Mama-Jackie, you look ridiculous. You’re wearing your pants on top of your head.”

“Oh, OK,” I said, pulling them off. “I thought it was worth a try.” After the girls were tucked into bed that night, Carol and I talked about Lucy’s worries. “We’ve got to get outta here,” we said to one another, “and back to the city where we belong.”

It was not just Lucy’s remark about her hair and skin that worried us. None of us seemed quite able to find her place in this new community. Carol’s company had grown larger and gone public. The easy collegiality of her early years there was no more. We missed our old friends and, although we attended a church in our neighborhood, continued to feel like outsiders. And it was hard on all of us to have me gone from home so much.

In December, Carol resigned from her job, and we sold our Madison house and moved back to Chicago. On a bitterly cold day just after Christmas, I was driving the girls to the dentist. During the holidays, we had talked to the girls about the importance of giving gifts as well as getting them. We had told them that part of our Christmas celebration is to share with people who do not have as much as we do. We had explained about the money we send to organizations working to feed hungry people in Chicago and Peru. We had carried cans of food to the preschool and put them in food drive boxes. Suddenly, Lucy piped up from the back seat. “We should send a check to Maria Chacpa.” Her birth mother had been in her thoughts often that year.

“That would be a great idea, but we don’t know her address. We’re still trying to find out how to get in touch with her.” I waited for a moment. “Lucy, are you worried that Maria Chacpa might be hungry?”

“Yes. We need to send her some money.”

“I wish we could, sweetheart. We will have to keep working on finding a way to write to her.”

At dinner, I mentioned Lucy’s concern to Carol. Carol brought out a brochure for a food kitchen in Peru. People in the pictures were lined up to get food. “We sent some money for these people,” Carol explained.

Lucy scrutinized the faces. “Maria Chacpa is there. She’s getting food,” Lucy announced with glee.

There was no one in the picture who looked like Maria, but Lucy so wanted there to be. She wanted to take care of her Peruvian mother.

“Let me tell you something, Lucy,” I said. “Your birth mother is a smart, strong, resourceful woman. She is a survivor. She will find a way to take care of herself and get the food she needs whether or not we are able to help her.”

An hour later, I checked with her again. “Are you still worrying about Maria Chacpa?” I asked.

“No,” Lucy told me. “I thought about what you said, and I knew that it was right.”

“There is something we can do for Maria Chacpa even when we do not know how to send her money. We can say a prayer for her.”

“And for my daddy,” Lucy suggested.

At bedtime, we said our goodnight prayers, especially remembering Maria Chacpa and Lucy’s daddy. “What is his name, God?” Lucy asked. Then she said, “I know his name. Mr. Man-Man.”

“That will work fine, for now. Anyway, God knows his name even if we don’t.”

Lucy continued with her prayer. She included a petition on behalf of Aladdin and the two hungry children he shared his bread with. She put in a word for children everywhere. Her heart held so much, I worried that it might burst.

“Goodnight, God,” I said.

“What are you doing, God?” Lucy asked. She was going to have the last word. “Are you listening, God? Why are you listening, God?”