

"WORSHIP IS LETTING GO"

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I recently saw a piece of digital art by Anthony Gurrola, whose beautiful and thought-provoking work and ethos has inspired me profoundly over the past few seasons.

I was struck by a recent image that Anthony posted on instagram. The image is a person standing waist-deep in water, bent over with eyes gazing into a basket that floats in the grip of her hands. A tiny hand reaches out toward her. The words beneath the picture say, "Worship is letting go."

The caption of the post adds, "Worship is letting go of the thing we love the most and looking towards him, trusting it will be ok. It is letting go of our preconceived good ideas before we've had a chance to search his heart."

The caption goes on to say, "Worship is letting go of the son you hold in your hands and knowing he will be caught in God's heart. It is the freedom of the next generation by way of surrendering your will for the current one."

I couldn't help but ask how those ideas might relate to our current understandings of adoption and mediating narratives associated with relinquishment and permanency.

The notion of what is worship (and what isn't) may be a partner to the guidelines that inform the child welfare system as it's practiced in and outside of the church.

JaeRan Kim posted a document, "Placing the Child for Adoption" that was published in 1942, by the U.S. Department of Labor Children's Bureau, written by Florence Clothier, M.D.

The third paragraph explains, "The adoption worker's chief concern is how to find the right home for the child with such sufficiency that the child is placed early and permanently and the adoptive parents are satisfied that he will be in truth one of them and not a stranger among them."

I do agree that there are responsibilities outside of the scope of any social worker's role, in their organization and within the community. It's also generally agreed that a child benefits significantly by having access to a warm, attuned, consistently responsive caregiver, throughout pregnancy and ongoing after delivery. Any discontinuity should be repaired as early as possible.

And, since 1942, individual differences have been reported and discovered regarding how "permanence" is interpreted and experienced by each adoptee. Not to mention the impact of "permanence" language on adoptive parents' notion of birth teach and reunification.

Positive Adoption Language is no doubt related to those reports of best practices asserted in the 1942 publication.

Additionally, it was the case that it was the parents' satisfaction of whether a child was "one of them and not a stranger among them" that seemed to be a social worker's chief concern.

Undoubtedly that belief has shared the way prospective adoptive parents were taught and incentivized (thinking about Sharon from Child-Catchers for those who've read it) in their commitment to "raise her like our own" and "we don't see color."

In her book *Torn Apart: How the Child Welfare System Destroys Black Families and How Abolition Can Build a Safer World*, legal scholar and sociologist Dorothy Roberts describes how child protection authorities hold and exercise "one of the most terrifying powers a government can exercise: the power to forcibly remove children from their homes and permanently separate them from their families." (Roberts, 2022)

Roberts explains further: "The state deploys this disruptive force disproportionately on Black families. Black families are at high risk-far higher than white families-of being reported, investigated, torn apart, and demolished."

Governments in other countries have begun regulating those types of dynamics more diligently over the years as they shape child welfare practices and outcomes in the U.S. and abroad. "They were responding to numerous complaints about unethical adoption practices, including allegations of child trafficking after one unlicensed US Christian adoption ministry - the same ministry Sharon had hoped to use for her adoptions - was accused of trying to fly children out of the country without authorization." (Joyce, 2013)

That's part of what made "Worship is letting go." stand out to me.

Worship is a tricky word.

Words are innately tricky, too.

Isn't it fascinating that Scripture, as we know it in English, is a large-scale process of putting words to ideas and experiences that English-as-first-language speakers would otherwise not have ways to access, enjoy or pursue?

And so if we frame "worship" as this one thing, ESPECIALLY as it applies to adoption, we're in danger of saying it could never be another.

We might just as well say, "Worship is holding on." To family. To their child. The gift God fearfully and wonderfully knit together in their womb. Won't you help someone worship today? Neighbors, nations even?

Maybe it's holding onto the whole family, not just their baby.

Maybe "loving you like one of our own" is possible because we already love "the strangers among us." And we can "love you like one of our own" without having to adopt. "Love you like one of our own" can include the whole family.

This does invite the whole family into the picture, too.

[SPOILER ALERT FOR EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE] There's a climactic scene near the end of this amazing film in which a daughter, Joy (played by Stephanie Hsu), is determined on walking toward an abyss, presumably toward some kind of self conclusion, which exists at the top of a set of stairs.

Debris is whirling around and everyone is beaten up from the outrageous battles they survived in the previous scene. But, with all of their might, at least three generations of family members, who now see the world through new eyes and clarified priorities, including Joy's mother Evelyn, pull her back from the black hole that lures Joy further toward it, daisy chained up the stairs by each family member pulling the clothes and shoulders of the one in front of them, inching their way back toward the bottom of staircase.

Joy lives.

I think that's a picture of worship, too. They held on. Somehow, she was worth holding onto. And they were willing and able to do so.

Worship is holding on.



Maybe we hold tight because we've first been held tight like that. My mom in Korea wasn't so fortunate. The church's stigma about single mothers (my dad had died). The stigma around parenting outside of marriage. The fear of what others might think. The church's link with international adoption at the time. The black hole was too strong and my mom lacked the supporters to protect her from it. Perhaps they were worshipping something else? And in that sense they did let go.

Whatever "good" that would happen in her life, or mine, as a result shouldn't give organizations the license to neglect opportunities to help families press on together; to hold on tight during those seasons in a child's life when they need that kind of embrace the most.

And yes, worship could be letting go of privilege, money, and empire - shifting those and other resources to specific and situational needs - in efforts to help keep those little ones in tact - lovingly and without judgment or partiality.

But we might not consider that if we were to completely submit to "the social worker's chief concerns" and the satisfactions of adoptive parents. There's a song by Jimmy Needham that says, "Anything I put before my God is an idol."

"Clear the stage and set the sound and lights ablaze if that's the measure you must take to crush the idols"

"Jerk the pews & all the decorations, too until the congregations few, then have revival"

"You can sing all you want to and still get it wrong; worship is more than a song"

Worship could be more than relinquishment. More than adoption.

Love your neighbor as your self, might mean you adopt them - but it's flexible enough for us to imagine other expressions of worship, too.

And maybe it doesn't need to be "radical."

"Radical love" can sometimes distract us from basic practices of fellowship. In that sense, worship can be basic. Worship could be helping someone pay their rent. It could be giving them rides to parent training classes. It could be routing some of the mental health resources at your adoption agency to families who've made the decision to parent.

Worship *can* be letting go. We, especially mental health professionals connected with the local church, can do right by our communities by heralding the widths, lengths, heights and depths of what worship could be, in our own hearts and to the ends of the earth.

Anthony's art is truly amazing and I have the utmost respect for their calling and craft. And more than listening for problems, yes we are listening for solutions. Here's an [example from Children's Bureau](#) that does that well.

Thank you for taking time to consider all of these ideas; for you and for those who may be trying with all their might to hold on and worship in new directions this season. Please [browse options on my page](#) for continued adoption- and mental health resources - see you in November!

-Cam

A decorative abstract background featuring teal and gold colors. It includes wavy, marbled teal shapes and numerous small gold dots and speckles scattered across the lower half of the page.

Works Cited

Joyce, K. (2013). *The child catchers: Rescue, trafficking, and the new gospel of adoption*. Public Affairs Books.

Roberts, D. E. (2022). *Torn apart: how the child welfare system destroys Black families--and how abolition can build a safer world* (First edition.). Basic Books.

