

ORLANDO

I finalized my son's adoption yesterday, thirty-nine plus weeks after he moved in with me. There would have been some sort of meaningful synergy to that, don't you think, had I first met him in the delivery room: maybe thirty-nine seconds after he was born? Or, if the doctors had brought him out to me in the waiting room, thirty-nine minutes after his delivery? Even had he been thirty-nine days old when he was handed over to me by the social workers at an adoption agency, there still would have been that extra added meaning to his finalization yesterday.

But he was none of those. He was older than that when I brought him home. Had he been thirty-nine weeks old, there would have been families for him, and plenty of them still. Yet, if he'd been thirty-nine months old, a whole lot of families who'd have been interested earlier would have just disappeared from the waiting lists of folks looking to adopt. A family would have been found for him, no doubt, even at that relatively late age. But by thirty-nine months, he'd have already had the knowledge that at least one foster family (the current one) wasn't keeping him - which would have meant he'd have already experienced the multiple rejections that foster kids all experience. Already, there would have been a toll taken on him: on his trust in adults - see Erickson and such - and on his conviction about his own worth as a human.

But Orlando wasn't adopted by thirty-nine months old, either. He was older than that when I took him into my family. Old enough to have experienced years of multiple foster care placements; and repeated rejections by folks who'd said they would adopt him, but always found a reason - legitimate, of course - to send him on his way. At one point, he ended up in an institution, completely and totally alone. Not a single soul visited him, called him, or wrote to him. He could have died and no one outside the institution - except bureaucrats - would have even known, let alone cared. He had no next of kin.

Orlando used to live next door to me, in one of those foster homes. One day, I heard about him being in the institution, and I wondered if it was any business of mine. I thought maybe I should send him a birthday card, but I didn't. However, at Christmas, I did write to him. I sent him a card, a few bucks, and a short letter.

He responded with the most heart breaking letter I'd ever read. He wrote about his gratitude to me for reaching out to him; about his complete sense of abandonment and isolation: nobody, but nobody - except me - had reached out to him since he'd come to this institution. I wrote back. And, unexpectedly for me, with time, a relationship developed that went way beyond what we'd ever had when he was the foster kid next door. Ultimately - a little over thirty-nine weeks ago - I took him into my home, into my family. I'd already long taken him into my heart.

And yesterday, a little over thirty-nine weeks from his release from prison, I finalized his adoption.

He is thirty-nine years old.