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## **Permanency Matters!**

### **Affirming Every Child's Existence in this World**

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Greetings, and thank you for reading this issue of our ongoing analysis and commentary publication, *Perspectives on Our Work*.

In this essay I will attempt to explain, at the most fundamental level, why permanency is so important for children. To do so I would like to share a recent experience with you that, at least for me, highlights a very basic yet so important dynamic of permanency. For these purposes I will consider my own adoption experience, yet what I am trying to articulate is not really about me nor is it unique to adoption.

We should also recognize that permanency can include so many other types of relationships, including reunification with birth parents, kinship care, guardianship, as well as other forms of "permanent" relationships. We'll talk about that a bit more at some other time.

My older brother, Khari, and I grew up in Detroit, Michigan after being adopted when we were 1 and 2

years old. After graduating from high school, I went off to Washington, DC for college and have lived and worked in the metropolitan Washington DC area ever since.

I traveled home to Detroit, Michigan a few weeks ago to attend a meeting, and had a chance to visit my parents and brother for a couple of days before and after the meeting. My parents had just recently bought a new house and were beginning the process of packing and preparing to move.

When I arrived the first thing I noticed was that all of the art work had been taken off the walls and packed for moving. As I walked upstairs, I noticed

that all of the pictures had also been taken down for the move. This really stood out because my parents had a lot of family photos tucked inside of frames and displayed all throughout the house.

As we grew up so many of the family photos were of my immediate family as well as many other relatives and family friends. Several years ago I had the privilege of marrying my wife, Amina, and we now have two children, five and three years old. As you could expect so many of the photos in my parents' house are now of the expanding family (especially the grandchildren), with a sprinkling of the many older family photos still around as well. I know very well how excited our children get when they go see their grandparents and they get to see all of the photos of

them throughout the house, from birth through the present.

When I visited a few weeks ago it really struck me how bare the walls were, and that the images were

no longer up on the walls. It was at that moment that something very basic struck me about this thing we call permanency.

One of the basic reasons permanency is so important is that everyone, at the most fundamental level, needs to know that their existence in this universe is acknowledged, affirmed and celebrated by someone else somewhere in this world. Realizing the pictures were not on the wall reminded me how much I value the fact that my parents have always been there for me, have always loved me, and have always celebrated me and embraced me for who I am, even as I continued to grow and evolve over time. This basic

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truth is on display all the time in their house, capturing our growth through each developmental stage of our lives, and now those of my children and wife.

That moment reminded me how fortunate my brother and I have been. It also reminded me how fortunate our daughter and son are in comparison to so many thousands of African American children that continue to languish in this nation's foster care system.

While I have always realized and appreciated how fortunate my brother and I have been, I was not always as clear about the *meaning* of our experience, specifically the meaning inherent in our adoption experience.

Unlike too many adoptees, Khari and I always knew we were adopted. Our parents told us when we were very young and it never figured very prominently in my childhood and adolescent years. Certainly, I was thankful for all that our parents had done for and provided us along the way. It wasn't until I was in graduate school and began working in the field of child welfare, however, that I really began to appreciate the deeper meaning and significance of having been adopted.

Looking at family photos on the wall for many people would be pretty unremarkable. But hundreds of thousands of children in this country, disproportionately African American, have been shuffled from one stranger's (foster) home to another, a pattern that has continued sometimes for more than 15-17 years of their lives—their entire childhood. Many of us can only imagine what that must feel like.

Many of us look at something as normal as family photos on our walls and start to reminisce about the good times from different phases of our lives. We think about our childhood years playing with and learning from our mother and father, our siblings, cousins, friends, etc.. But so many children can only imagine what that is like. They imagine that their mothers and fathers still exist somewhere out there in

the world, but they really don't know for sure. They wonder if they have siblings out there somewhere, but unlike many of us, they can only wonder. All too often, they think about their friends with bittersweet emotion. Many of their closest childhood friendships get cut way too short with each change in foster care placement. Indeed, the notion of friendships takes on a different kind of meaning with these experiences.

I realize that not every foster care experience is the same. But so many foster care experiences are characterized by extreme instability and insecurity. For many children in foster care *permanency* is only a concept, a term used by social workers and legal representatives.

But what I know for certain is that all children need to be able to grow up and go out into the world, knowing that they belong somewhere and belong to someone. We all need to know that somewhere in the world there are other individuals that know who we are, care about us, and will be there for us in our times of struggle and need. We all need to know that our existence matters to someone else, and that we can always go back to that place we call home when times get rough, or when we just need to recharge and get centered again.

This is what I was reminded of when I was at home. I know where home is because I see my reality expressed in so many different ways throughout the house. I see the funny outfits, the funny expressions, the proud moments of celebration, and so much more. More than anything else, I know that someone there cares about me and takes pride in celebrating my existence.

This is why permanency matters. This is why we must re-dedicate ourselves to making permanency a reality for the many thousands of children that wonder and wait. Our children are crying out for us. We must reclaim our children and bring them home. - OAM

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