

# Love Does Not End

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In January, as I finished giving testimony in our state legislature, the chair of the committee spoke up. She knew the dependency case involving my grandson had just ended. “Congratulations,” she said, “on finalizing the adoption of your grandson.”

“No,” I replied, “it wasn’t adoption, it was a guardianship.” And I thanked her for her work on HB 1747, a 2022 law that requires a court to rule out a guardianship before they can terminate parental rights.

Because of that legislation, which I had strongly advocated for, I was able to convince our state agency to allow me to resolve my grandson’s case with a guardianship rather than terminating the parental rights of my son Alexei. I was able to avoid adopting my grandson, which would have erased Alexei from the official record of his own son’s life.

In the hearing room in Olympia, I reflected on that legislator’s comments. I understood her confusion.

For so long in this system, success has meant *finality*, and finality has meant *adoption*.

But what I couldn’t possibly have understood in that moment, however, was how much more the idea of “finality” would soon mean to me. The next day I learned that Alexei was shot and killed by the Tacoma Sheriff’s Department while he was running away from a traffic stop. My world ended then. There are no words for it. I cannot make sense of the loss of my son, and I will not try to do that now.

But in this pain, I see this work of “child welfare” differently. It is clearer to me now that the current setup is for “finality,” this idea that things need to be concluded. That we can wash our hands of someone and believe we have done something good.

The United States does a lot of erasing: it erases people from their communities, from their connections, from their families. A central part of the American story is the legacy of erasing the

bodies and identities of Black people. Adoption, too, is an erasure; it erases parents from their child's birth certificate and replaces them with new parents.

I could have never known that an event would happen that would remove my son's presence from my life and from his son's life. But if we had not passed HB 1747, if I had instead adopted my grandson, there would be a sickening feeling every time I looked at his birth certificate. I would have been reminded that I colluded to erase my family's history—my own son. It is a disgusting proposition. Future generations need to know that my son's life mattered—that he was here.

Thinking about HB 1747, I feel a small amount of peace and some serious unrest. I'm grateful that my son lived his last days knowing that he had rights. And he was grateful to know that I cared enough to fight for him. I think about the frustration, the misunderstandings, and the volatility that I experienced along the way. It was all necessary to keep us intact.

Through this process, I have come to believe that, more than the legal truth, there is a spiritual truth at work in what we do in this system. A child is born with far more than legal rights; a child has a birthright: to their ancestors, to their history, to the legacy of their people. The law can't change Creation.

As my son returns back to his spirit, part of his legacy lives on in his child. It is for me to teach my grandson and to help him understand that his life is an offering to the ancestors, to respect all that was sacrificed for him to have what he has today.

When I think about the legacy my grandson has inherited, I think about my ancestors who endured the unthinkable. They fought, and they built, and they planned, and they believed that—one day—this would be different. Part of the legacy, for me, is teaching our children how much was sacrificed for them to have a life that wasn't built on enslavement, a place where they can prosper. I want to share with my grandson the strength of his ancestors.

But I must also help him understand how, even today, none of this is designed for his advancement. So much of the world he will walk through has been designed for his demise. That is also part of our story.

In this system of "child welfare," we can—we must—move closer to the beauty of Creation, to appreciate and love the people who have been

brought into our lives. And we must move away from the false belief that the law can design, deconstruct, or dismantle what has already been put in place by God. Our ancestors ask us to be in light, to truly love and be there for one another.

From the start of my grandson's case, I wanted him to be with his parents. I'll never forget the day that I sat on that phone and listened to the state terminate his mother's rights, with no attorney present, with no cross examination, no accountability. As I protested in that hearing the judge said, "be quiet," and "our business is terminating her parental rights; your care and concern has no place here." My care and concern had no place there.

Because of HB 1747, however, my grandson's mother's name remains on his birth certificate today. Since the case ended with a guardianship, there was no adoption, and there was no change to the birth certificate. My grandson has a mom and a dad, aunts and uncles, grandparents. He has a birthright to those people—that's his lineage, that's his legacy. I don't want to be a part of changing that, I want to be a part of supporting that. Care and concern should always have a place.

Often in adoption finality is not just about severing ties in the legal sense, it severs connections in the physical and emotional and familial sense, and by doing that it removes spaces and options for healing. But life has many unknowns. Actually, it's *all* unknowns. Closing doors, trying to securely lock them, leaves folks locked in just as much as it locks others out. As people age, we gather wisdom and experiences, and we change. *Finality* leaves no place for reconciliation, reconsideration, or healing.

The adoption story, which values finality, relies on an assumption: that everyone lived happily ever after. Yet, I believe that assumption hurts everyone involved. It fails parents who live with the wounds of termination for the rest of their lives. But it also fails the caregiver, who must live up to an impossible ideal. And it fails the child, who must perform a part in a fairy tale, without the freedom to acknowledge the challenges of real life.

On the other hand, HB 1747 recognizes something fundamentally true: even if the system wants "closure," families are evolving; they don't reach an end. Families and people are always in a state of change: messy, complicated, joyful change. If we leave the door open to change, we can welcome healing. But if we lock the doors, we deny ourselves the beauty of one another.