

## **Juno: Open Adoption, Closed Communication**

By Bob Bamman, LCSW

The film “Juno”, which opened this week in New York City, has garnered several independent film festival awards and is indeed a moving, very funny, and - for those of us in the adoption field – at times a very disturbing portrayal of a young teen birthmother and her process of planning the private adoption of her unborn child. Jennifer Garner and Jason Bateman play the supporting roles of the adoptive parents with the lead role of birthmother Juno being skillfully and beautifully acted by Ellen Page.

Emphasis on the word “acted” – this is a work of fiction, an important point to be emphasized to the public in general and particularly to those couples and individuals who are contemplating or in the process of pursuing the adoption of a child through private domestic adoption. The film succeeds in providing comic relief to a process that is inherently intense, emotionally painful and profound to those involved, and at once sad and glorious. After all, adoption is about families being broken apart and new families being formed.

Early on in the film Juno is seen sitting on a park bench and cavalierly going through adoptive parent classifieds in the local Penny saver newspaper with a friend, reading and weighing the ads, many of which are absurd. This is a moment that prospective adoptive parents fantasize and agonize over with endless revisions of a 15 word appeal that they hope will result in the baby of their dreams, and the over-the-top ads add a welcome levity to the process without muddying the line between fact and fiction.

Ultimately, Juno selects a prospective adoptive couple and a following scene shows her and her father arriving at the doorstep of the prospective adoptive parents’ home to meet them. This is where the film deviates from what has been the reality in open adoption for the past 25 years – protective anonymity for all parties involved - and gives us a glimpse into the future of some adoptions. Increasingly, primarily on the West coast at this time, adoption professionals are removing this cautionary anonymity and fully sharing the identity (last name) of prospective-adoptive parents to prospective birthparents, and even meeting at the prospective adoptive parent’s home, as depicted in the movie.

This emerging trend in open adoption represents a next step in the ongoing evolution of open adoption, which has historically been built on the concept of honesty and mutual respect for all parties involved in the adoption process – prospective adoptive families, prospective birth families and, most importantly, the child. This is a powerful idea, the merit of which is supported by family systems theory and practices that views distrust and secrecy as antithetical to healthy families.

However, for prospective adoptive parents, this new transparency in open adoption as depicted in Juno could look very scary. The film does not include the nuts-and-bolts of responsible adoption practice - that of ongoing communication and negotiation of each participant’s role and boundaries within the proposed new adoptive extended family. Does the adoptive family want the birthmother/couple popping in at any time? Does the prospective birth family want that? How much contact does each party want before and after the placement of the child, and what kind of contact: pictures, emails, visits? How frequently and where and for how long? These essential aspects of responsible open adoption, with the well-being of the child as the focus, are completely neglected in the film.

The result is a cinematic success, but leaves the impression of a “shotgun” adoption, not an adoption plan that is carefully thought out and orchestrated by the parties involved. This is important for viewers to understand, particularly prospective adoptive parents. Also know that an essential aspect of the process is free choice. At any time prior to birth and the signing of adoption papers, either party can decide to back out of the pre-adoption process if it doesn’t feel right for them. For the well being of the future adopted child and adoptive family it is essential, particularly when identifying information has been shared either up front (as in the film) or further into the process, that a mutually trusting relationship has been established between prospective birth and adoptive parent(s). All

involved must understand and accept their roles and boundaries in this unique extended adoptive family that is being formed. In practice this is a lengthy and very carefully considered process orchestrated by the professionals overseeing the adoption.

The character of Juno is at once funny and sad, a portrayal of a pregnant teen that is largely in denial of the emotional gravity of the profound act in which she is preparing to engage - that of relinquishing her child at birth. Her denial is buttressed by her loving but quirky and matter-of-fact father with a "let's get on with it" attitude and her angry step mother who can't wait to eventually get Juno out of the house so she can get a dog. Both are caricatures of loving but disconnected parents of a pregnant teen who thinks she has it all figured out, until her well laid plan takes an unexpected detour.

While this sort of blanket denial of the emotions of relinquishment in adoption can at times be a realistic birthparent scenario, the fact that no adults in this adoption – Juno's parents, the prospective adoptive parents, or the adoption lawyer - urged her to seek counseling and really consider the gravity of the decision she is making is another place where the film takes a blatant detour from the reality of responsible adoption practice. To her fictional credit, Juno's step-mother does at least once offer her some counsel regarding her actions, letting her know that her jaunts to the prospective adoptive parent's house to hang out are not appropriate. That is where any realistic assistance to this pregnant teen and her huge decision to relinquish her child ends. Adoption practice over the years has shown that pregnant women/couples who are considering making an adoption plan for their child, and who do not receive counseling to grieve the losses associated with relinquishing a child, both before and after childbirth, can have a greater incidence of depression in the years following relinquishment. They can also be more likely to make ill-considered snap decisions at birth that have life-long consequences, whether they decide to proceed with the adoption or decide to parent their child.

A responsible approach on the part of the writers and producers of this film would have been to include some sort of disclaimer following the film, at least acknowledging its fictional portrayal of adoption practice and urging those interested in adoption, future parents of both the "birth" and "adoptive" ilk, to consult a qualified adoption professional. As a cinematic experience Juno is funny, heart wrenching, and well acted, but prospective adoptive parents should go in to it with the knowledge that it's portrayal of adoption practice is largely inaccurate, and should be prepared to have their emotional heart strings, often already frayed by infertility and disappointment, further tugged on.

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