

Eileen's Story: Grief, Recovery, and New Loss

Background:

Eileen is in her fifties. She emigrated from mainland China about eighteen years ago with her husband Leo and their five year old son. They moved because they wanted to provide opportunity for their son; Eileen notes that *"in most Chinese people's view, immigrating overseas is good for children"*.

Eileen's family is Christian; Church and faith are very important aspects of their life. With a strong Christian faith, Eileen trusts that events in life are planned by God. Eileen is thus accepting of the hardships that the family encountered when they moved to Canada, noting that *"it was God that brought our family to Canada. And all the experiences in Canada are planned by God, including the difficult life as newcomers"*. Both Eileen and Leo her husband worked very hard to settle down in Canada; some people in Eileen's community even called her *"super woman"*.

Initially, Eileen's husband Leo worked at a restaurant. After a year, Leo studied to build his knowledge and he acquired the proper license needed to work in his field in Canada. However, Leo was not able to get employment that used his skills in his field. He was given a job at a low wage. Leo studied part time while working and is still currently with this company. As for Eileen, she went to work as a cleaner. This was a challenge for her as she was the *"baby"* in the family, growing up in a very nice environment, not even knowing how to cook. Yet, Eileen is thankful to God for providing both her and her husband jobs, *"the job was a blessing to us newcomers. God brought us to Canada. God protects us in our every step in Canada"*.

Related Struggles: Grief and Recovery

The family's major struggles started when Eileen's son was diagnosed with cancer at the age of nine. He was sick for about seven months and passed away before his tenth birthday.

Because of her faith, Eileen was able to be strong during this tragic time even though her heart was broken. She and her husband received a lot of support from their Church, their employers, the school, hospital and cancer society. Eileen says, *"though our son left when he was less than 10 years old, I give thanks to God we have had 10 years with my son"*. Eileen is even thankful to God for the ability to accept this hardship: *"We live within a thankful heart, not only because we are mature, but God planted thankful seeds in our heart and let us be full of spirit"*.

Eileen acknowledges that when she first heard about her son's illness, the blow was so hard that she could not express it in words. She sobbed; noting that even one sentence from her child at that time took her away from her struggle. The support from the church was immense: *"Pastors wife, sisters and brothers in our church, they were all there. I felt I was in the big family, including my husband's company. They said to my husband, `our company is your family, if you can come to work, you do that. If you cannot then take care of what you have to do".* The overwhelming support is noted by Eileen: *"At that time, the whole church led by our Pastor and Pastor's wife supported our family a lot",* while the support from her workplace is also recognized. Both the tangible and emotional support were valued and noted as preventing the need for mental health services at this time: *"That's why I didn't use other mental health services. My company, my husband's company, our Church, we got enough support from them".* Furthermore the support from the cancer society is noted: *"We got help from the cancer society. We couldn't drive by ourselves at that time I used their services. Those volunteers were very good. They transported us between Waterloo and Toronto. Thank God! I remember that. I will be a volunteer at the Cancer Society after I retire".*

New Struggles: New Loss

After her son passed away, Eileen and her husband Leo decided to adopt a child. They waited four years before making the final decision to adopt. The adoption was not to replace the loss of their son, but a way to open their hearts and to provide a home to a child. Prior to their son becoming ill, the family had talked about adopting but put this on hold when their son became ill. They put lots of thought into the decision to adopt, and the appropriate age of the child that they should adopt. They applied to adopt from overseas an older child, around age 6. They decided on this age because Eileen thought at the age of six, a child could still learn to adjust to life in Canada and that her and her husband would not be too old as parents for this child: *"Why I decided to adopt a child instead of a baby? I thought an older child needs a family too. But the child couldn't be older than 6. They needed to learn a lot of new things and adjust in a new country.... Also I thought I was not very young. When the baby grew up, I didn't want to be like a grandma to my child".*

They went through a private agency, paying considerable money for the adoption. Once the child was placed with them, they felt that something was wrong. She would oppose them and not listen to them. She would say that she did not need a mom, that she had her mom and dad. Eileen and Leo pondered that this may be due to the hardships that she may have experienced while in China but regardless, despite their efforts, she did not respond to them nor did she seem to bond with them. Her challenging behaviour did not present itself when they were with others, but only when they were alone with her. And they

did not get much support from their previous support system because the problems in this situation were so difficult to identify that it was hard to know what to do about it.

Eileen and her husband made considerable efforts to understand the situation regarding their adopted daughter. It seemed that no matter what they did, she did not respond to them and continued to reject them. Eileen thought that being surrounded by a warm family would be helpful but since this was not, she would have liked to be able to access other helpers. She talks about the help that they could have used then: *"I really needed a social worker who could speak Mandarin. But I couldn't find any support"*.

Eileen did speak to the family doctor and asked for support services for her to help with the relationship between her and the child, and she was referred to the hospital to speak to the social worker. However there was no response to her request for a social worker for the child. The struggles, which were so difficult to put into words, caused Eileen a great deal of emotional pain and hurt resulting in stress and depression.

Eileen struggled hard with making a decision about whether to keep the child or to relinquish her. She worried deeply about the child and her future if she were to leave their home, and questioned whether they had failed the child as they could not find a way to make the adoption work out. She also found that talking to the family doctor about her problems did not help. The doctor's view was that talking about the problem would help Eileen, but Eileen felt that she would have rather preferred someone who would give her more direction about what to do regarding the problem: *"The doctor let me talk about how the child drove me crazy. In his view, after talking it out, I could relieve the stress a little bit. But you know, I didn't want to talk about it at all. I needed support, but I didn't feel it was helpful talking to the doctor"*.

It was also hard to ask for help from their informal support system because, unlike the illness of their son and their care of him during his illness, they could not seem to help their adopted daughter no matter how much they tried. The emotional and relationship struggles were harder to pinpoint or to talk about this time and the couple did not know where else to turn to for help.

They traveled to Ottawa to meet with the person at agency who had facilitated the adoption. But this did not seem to help at all. The adoption agency employee reported them to child and family services but again Eileen realized that these services were not suitable for Chinese families. They learned that although they had requested for a child no older than six, that the child placed with them was probably nine. They worried that as the child was nine, she had to learn a lot to fit into Canadian life and that she would be more set in her ways than a younger

child. The couple felt that they could have been intentionally misled by the placement agency as they were being paid for the adoption. The placement agency was not helpful about the struggles that Eileen was experiencing with the child and soon suggested that the couple give the child up.

The decision to give the child up was confusing and was very hard on Eileen, as she felt that she had failed her adopted daughter and felt like a bad person: *"In the end, I said to God, 'Lord, you decide the child's future. Stay or leave, you decide'. The process was not good. It seemed that I was a bad person, and then the child was taken away... when the child was leaving my husband was crying too"*.

Ongoing Grief

Eileen continues to think about her adopted daughter even though it is many years since she was in the home. Some of the thoughts that goes through here mind are: *"If she stayed in the orphanage, she wouldn't become homeless, has she made some bad friends here, is she living well ... thank God that's good, then I did a good thing. What if the foster home did not want her! I could not imagine her future then"*. Eileen often thinks about her and misses her. She has asked her husband when the child would be going to university and ponders that since 6 years have passed, she would be at least 15 years old now. She wishes that one day she would come knocking at the door.

Suggestions for Support

Eileen suggests that: *"the government should give families who plan to adopt children more information. When the social workers are doing the home study, they should tell those families about what they could face after adopting children"*. She wonders though if this is not discussed as it might result in no one wanting to adopt. Eileen goes on to note the importance in her situation of having a Mandarin speaking social worker or counselor, not only to speak to her, but also to her adopted daughter. She was unable to find this in Waterloo. Although Eileen found some places for where she could go for help, a place where her daughter could have received help would also have been helpful. It is to be expected that a young child who has left her country of origin, moved into a new home with new parents, who does not speak the language, who may have experienced trauma in the past needs some kind of emotional help to settle into the new environment. Aside from the above, cultural differences in parenting have also been noted both by Eileen and by the support people and perhaps a Mandarin speaking counselor from a similar background would have greater understanding of these issues.