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In Juno, adoption pain is left on cutting room floor

By Jean Strauss

Ever since I watched it, the film Juno has kept me up nights. I know millions of people love this film about a pregnant teen and would skewer me for my concern about it. Yes, it's witty and Juno is a unique character. But the film doesn't portray important realities about adoption. Juno is a modern-day Pied Piper that could lure many young women to a far different reality than the one implied on screen.

(Photo - Girl, interrupted: Ellen Page was nominated for an Oscar for her pregnant Juno. / Reuters)

Supposedly representative of today's generation, wisecracking Juno's solution for her unwanted pregnancy is strangely wrapped in pretty paper from a half-century ago. When she decides to have a closed adoption (meaning that she'll never have any contact with her child again, nor will the child ever be able to know her), the film reflects not current adoption practices but a bygone era. When the adopting parents' lawyer suggests they're willing to negotiate an open adoption (with at least some contact between the parties), Juno responds, "Can't we just kick it old school? ... You know, like Moses in the reeds."

The adopting parents and the lawyer share a glance, like antique hunters at a swap meet about to make off with a treasured heirloom for pennies. Asking whether Juno means she wants a traditional closed adoption, she responds, "Sh— yeah. Close it up." Toss in a sweet ending where the audience is assured that Juno will be just fine as she strums her guitar on the curb, and she becomes a dead ringer for all those birth mothers of the '40s, '50s and '60s who supposedly gave up their babies and got on with their lives. The problem is, those mothers who relinquished children long ago would tell you there was never a "happily ever after."

After a quarter-century of listening to and writing about birth mothers' experiences, I am comfortable suggesting that Juno is pure fiction. No woman, whether 16 or 36, gives up her own child with the words, "He didn't feel like ours. ... I think he was always hers." This is simply dialogue made up by screenwriter Diablo Cody, a former stripper who has never relinquished a child nor even given birth.

In the film, Juno's baby is called "the thing." As an adoptee myself, I identified a bit with "the thing" and its impending closed adoption. I grew up with no knowledge of my birth family, no medical history, no past — and no right to ever know these things. Like anyone who feels she understands something from "inside" an experience, I cringed at the film's implication that preserving a lifelong connection

between Juno and her son was somehow less important than the adoptive mother's desperate need to have a baby, any baby. I cringed as the audience laughed at lines such as, "You should have gone to China. I heard they give away babies like free iPods. They shoot 'em out of those T-shirt guns at sports events."

But whether Cody got it right or not, my real concern is the influence this film might have on teenage girls and young women. They believe that Juno is a hero who blissfully returns to her young life, unaffected by giving up her son. This same myth was promulgated to Baby Boomer-era birth mothers. They were convinced by agencies, lawyers, social workers and even their own parents that they would forget about their babies and move on. But they didn't. As a birth mother in a recent USA TODAY article said, "We hoped the pain would go away, but it never did." Her experience is echoed in the stories of hundreds of thousands of birth mothers.

Juno would have us believe that a birth mother's offer of a closed adoption is a sign of the character's generous spirit. But openness doesn't imply selfishness. Openness exists in adoption today because the secrets caused too much pain. Today's birth mothers want openness — as do many adoptive parents — because they feel it is in their own best interests and their child's.

Don't misunderstand — I am not against adoption, nor am I against finding humor in painful situations. What I am against is the idea that secrecy benefits anyone, and I'm deeply concerned about the misrepresentation of adoption's realities. Juno makes an unwanted pregnancy look like a great experience, akin to a year in the Peace Corps. The film's light finale, with Juno unchanged by what she has gone through, is harmful fiction of the worst kind. She is seducing girls and young women into believing that they could — and even should — give away their own child, as if they were giving away a favorite toy, just to be nice.

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