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**FAITH AND ADOPTION: APPLYING THE PRINCIPLES OF ALAN
KEITH-LUCAS**

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Faith and Adoption: Applying the Principles of Alan Keith-Lucas

Alan Keith-Lucas stopped writing and contributing to the literature almost twenty years ago. And he was old then. As a social worker educator, I regularly tell my students that they need current resources; anything written and published longer than ten years ago is not current. So, what in the world are we doing talking about the teachings of someone who has been dead for years and whose writings are dated decades ago? The question alone makes me smile. As Christians, I submit that we are in the habit of talking about the teachings of someone who lived centuries ago and whose teachings were even written by others. Alan Keith-Lucas loved that teacher and drew from His wisdom and lessons. Our tradition recognizes the value of learning from the timeless teachings of Jesus Christ. My experience in social work and in residential child care and adoption taught me to recognize the continuing value of the work of Alan Keith-Lucas.

Helen's Story

This paper is not just a recitation of the wisdom of Dr. Keith-Lucas, however. It is a testimony of change directly in response to his principles and wisdom. I met Dr. Keith-Lucas as a very young case worker, recently out of college, at the South Texas Children's Home. He was a consultant to the Children's Home and came once a year to help us think about our work, improve our interventions and outcomes, and connect again to the faith that motivated us to be there at all. Keith, as he liked to be called, shared with me that he came to know Christ as Savior as an adult. The experience was transformative for him. As Christ loved Keith and changed him, so Keith committed to love others. There was no guile or judgment in him. And yet, he thought critically, was amazingly insightful, and was able to connect with children and adults alike in ways that left them both affirmed

and changed. I did not always understand what he was teaching right away. He never judged me for that. He responded gently with questions and insight while reloading his pipe and handling it thoughtfully.

I did not realize it at the time, but the lessons I was learning about unconditional love for the children, for their parents, for the house parents, and for myself were lessons not just for work, but for my personal life as well. I was a serious student and a “fan” of the Keith-Lucas principles. I discovered that valuing the strengths in the children’s parents helped the children see themselves more positively. More than that, it was impossible for them to feel good about themselves if they could not identify anything good about their families of origin. Keith taught me that. But he was not teaching Pollyanna stuff. He did not ignore reality. In fact, he was insistent that we cannot help children without dealing with their reality. Even when it is painful, children need to deal with their own reality. Parents who are in prison, or have abused them, or struggle with alcoholism, or make promises to come and do not are all realities of children in care. Keith taught me that we do not do children a favor when we pretend that those realities do not exist.

However, dealing with reality is cruel when not matched with compassion, or in the words of Keith, empathy. Allowing children to experience the pain of their reality is not without pain for the worker or the house parents. We lived that many weekends. And it is tempting to avoid it by either not scheduling visits, or putting barriers in place that discourage families from visiting, or blaming parents and families when they did not come. Tempting, but not acceptable, according to Keith. So I learned from Keith to deal with painful reality by providing empathy and support.....to the children, to their parents,

and to the house parents who live with the children when they cry themselves to sleep at night. And I learned that Keith was right; that children need the reality, respond to the empathy, and heal with the support. Parents and families can do something about reality, make hard choices and follow through when they know they are cared for and cared about and that we will support them in the difficult decisions. I remember Keith responding to my question about how to contract with a parent with a painful history. His answer to me has crafted my response many times through the years: "Given what has happened, what needs to happen now?" (Keith-Lucas, personal communication). Even house parents responded to the ability of staff to empathize with the pain they experienced when the children in whose lives they were invested were so wounded and more tangibly when we showed up for respite, relief, and conversation.

Some time after I left the employment of the Children's Home, I married and several years later my husband and I decided to become adoptive parents. Like so many others, our decision to adopt was born of our own painful reality; I could not bear children. We made application, completed the adoption study process, and waited for someone else's painful reality to provide our opportunity to be parents. We were chosen several times by birth mothers who changed their minds at various times in the process. We tried to rest in the reality that God was in control and when possible, these children needed to be with their families of origin. It made sense in our heads; it was painful in our hearts. An unkind neighbor in our small town once called me "old empty arms."

Then a beautiful newborn boy was placed in our home, our lives, our hearts. As a consequence of my exposure to Alan Keith-Lucas and his wisdom, I decided that our son would know his reality and the gift of life and love we had all been given. I created his

narrative as I understood it and it became one of the stories I told him at bath time and sometimes at bedtime and sometimes at rocking time. You know the story. “Once upon a time there was a mommy who was going to have a baby. But she was worried about her baby because she could not provide everything he needed. She tried to figure out how to provide a daddy, a home, money for food and clothes, and everything her baby needed. She could not figure it out until she talked with a social worker who knew a mommy and daddy who could not have children. She asked the social worker if this new mommy and daddy could be a mommy and daddy for her baby and take care of him and give him what he needed. The new mommy and daddy could take care of him all day and night and he could have his own room and a house and medical care. She knew she would miss her beautiful little boy but she knew she was making sure he had everything he needed for a happy life. And the new mommy and daddy loved him and he loved them and they were so grateful for the mommy who cared so much for her baby that she got him what he needed.”

It seemed an inadequate story and yet normalized the adoption. And the telling of it was with love and gratitude for her and for her loving gift. I asked the social worker if I could send a letter every year to give her an update about his life, his development, his accomplishments and our deep gratitude. She said of course. And so I did. The little boy grew strong and happy but began to ask God in his prayers for a little sister. And then the opportunity came for Beth to join our family. Her story was very similar with the added component of an older brother who prayed for her and waited for her. We were grateful to be chosen again. And I wrote two letters a year, one to each birth mother.

Through the years, there were times when the children asked about their birth families, especially their birth mothers. We held each other, prayed together, sometimes cried together and always celebrated the great love that provided life for them and care through us. There was a day when Daniel decided he did not want a reunion. He did want to meet with the social worker who placed him to learn more about his medical history, his family history.

When Beth began her senior year of high school, she began to ask in earnest to find her birth mother. We talked through the scenarios. What if we can't find her? What if her circumstances have changed and a reunion is not possible or best for her right now? And if she is willing, what are the options for best time, best way? We contacted the social worker at the agency. The social worker met with Beth and they talked through the possibilities, the preparation, the process and the search began. I heard in her search the questions about herself...why did she place me? Who am I like? I realized in a way I had never understood that the narrative was incomplete. We had not given Beth everything she needed. She also needed to be connected with her roots.

We rejoiced together when the social worker found Jennifer and Jennifer agreed to and even embraced our contact. The social worker recommended that I talk with Jennifer first and said that Jennifer wanted to be sure that she and I were in agreement about the best way to help Beth with all that a reunion could mean. I asked the social worker if Jennifer had read the letters I had sent through the years as a chronology of Beth's growing up. She did get the first three and then had stopped. It became too painful. I understood that now. I asked the social worker to send her the rest before we talked, to give her some history and context. She did. And Jennifer sent Beth and me the

most beautiful affirming letter. She expressed her gratitude for the chance to read the letters and “watch Beth grow up through the window they provided.” She expressed her joy at the chance to meet Beth and to meet me and Don.

Wow. I found myself praying for this dear woman who had given Beth the gift of life and was now giving us the gift of meeting this deep and important need in our child. Jennifer and I talked and she was tentative and appreciative. We scheduled a time for Beth to call her. We thanked each other. I felt I had found a friend and sister. Jennifer asked me if I were ok with this. I told her that anything that helps Beth be whole is more than ok; it is wonderful. My tears were tears of joy that God could provide for all of us the healing that this reunion would mean. I remembered a time years ago when Beth asked me if it would be ok someday if she met her birthmother and wanted to have Christmas with her. I told her then that there would be many times in the future when she would not be able to be with everyone who loves her on Christmas day. She might spend Christmas with her birth mother. She would sometimes spend Christmas with her husband’s family. She might spend Christmas at home with her husband and children or have to work and not be home at all. In every circumstance, we would love each other and celebrate Christmas when we could. Christmas is not a day. It is a celebration of love when we get together. Remembering that conversation was a reminder that this reunion would change things in many ways, but not in any way that would diminish us or her.

I talked with Beth. She called Jennifer. She came out of her room after that conversation glowing. We became Facebook friends with Jennifer. We exchanged cards and letters by snail mail and email. We began to plan our meeting. I want Beth to tell you that story. But I will tell you this. Nothing has been as sweet in my life as seeing my child

fall into the arms of her birth mother and hug and love her and be loved by her, more whole than ever. I will ever be grateful to our loving God who does all things well; to Jennifer who gave us this gift and is now our dear friend; to Alan Keith-Lucas who taught me what was possible....and was right.

Beth's Story

This is the part where I tell “my story.” Before I was born, I was loved unconditionally. I’ve always known that. My birthmother, a nineteen-year-old young woman named Jennifer, decided early on that she couldn’t raise me in the way that I needed to be raised. She had a young daughter already and was trying to work her way through school. She received letters from several potential adoptive families, and eventually chose the Harrises. I was born late in June of 1992 in Corpus Christi, Texas. I was placed in a foster home with the Mickleys the next day, where I would stay for the first seven weeks of my life. My adoptive parents and their five-year-old son Daniel came to visit me once at the Mickleys’ home, and Daniel knew even before my parents did that he was going to be my big brother.

One of Dr. Keith Lucas’s principles is to never rule out the child’s biological family. I don’t remember not knowing that I was adopted. It’s always been a part of me, and I always felt kind of special because of it. But I also always felt like some part of me that I couldn’t explain was missing, somehow. I could never quite put my finger on what it actually was, but I could always sense its absence. I remember when I was about seven years old I went up to my mom in tears and told her how much I missed my birthmother. To this day, I am unable to express through words how you can miss someone whom you’ve never really met, but you can. The grief is there, and I felt it all through my childhood and adolescence. Starting when I was about fifteen or so, when I began the

ongoing process of figuring out who I am and who I am called to be, I felt so stuck. I thought I couldn't really know myself without knowing my roots. I didn't believe I could know where I was going if I didn't know where I came from. Through high school, though, I eventually became pretty grounded in myself – my faith, my beliefs, etc. – with the help of my parents and friends.

A big principle of Dr. Keith-Lucas is that if a child does not find something to love and appreciate in their birth parent, they will not be able to find something to love and appreciate in themselves. This is one that really resonated with me. My mom always spoke of Jennifer very positively – how much she loved me, how her decision was made out of love for me. My mom expressed her grief that I couldn't grow up with Jennifer, but her joy that I got to grow up with herself, which were things I always felt but never really wanted to say out loud. I think it was because I viewed my roots and my past in such a positive light that I never understood how people could think of adoption as “throwing a child away” or any of the other negative connotations associated with being adopted. I was so proud of not only my parents for so lovingly accepting Jennifer as a part of my life, but also of Jennifer for loving me enough to give me a chance a better life than she could provide at that time. I was proud to be an adopted child. I've always considered myself lucky, that I have so much love in my life. Another of Keith's principles is that personal relationships matter. So every year on my birthday my mom would write an update letter to Jennifer, and some years I enclosed my own letter. I never really knew if they would be read, but just knowing they were sent was enough to feel a stronger connection with Jennifer each year.

We'd always talked about a possible meeting with Jennifer, and in February of this year my social worker, Diane Gryseels, found Jennifer on Facebook, of all places. We made initial contact, which led to a phone call, which led to a reunion over Labor Day weekend. Friday morning my parents picked me up at my dorm and we went to Jennifer and Chet's hotel. I was scared, excited, super nervous, a myriad of emotions. But I walked into that hotel lobby and it was like all of the past years of feeling my whole life like something was missing was gone. It just stopped. It was like slow motion when Jennifer and I both started sobbing uncontrollably and walked into each other's arms...holding each other for the first time since the day I was born. It was so surreal, and wonderful, and special, and...unreal. It's difficult to put into words.

We went to Cafe Cappuccino in downtown Waco and I had breakfast with my two sets of parents. Then I went to class, my dad went back to school, Chet went back to the hotel, and my two moms walked around campus getting to know each other. The whole day I marveled, and still do, at how much they are alike in personality, temperament, stubbornness, and their unconditional, unlimited love. Friday night we went to the Crawford-McGregor football game — the biggest rivalry around. And we won. And it was awesome. But, as in so many other small towns, as soon as people started to figure out who Jennifer is we were instantly the talk of the night.

Saturday I picked Jen up at the hotel and we went to IHop, my favorite! She brought pictures of her family, even some pictures of the two of us together, when she was pregnant with me. I cried. She cried. ...Actually, I don't think either one of us stopped crying the whole weekend. We left IHop and went to Kinko's to make copies of scrapbooks that my mom had made over the years. Then we went to the Dr. Pepper museum, and then we met

my parents at Ninfa's for lunch. We went back to the hotel with my mom and looked at pictures and scrapbooks. Everyone cried some more. Then we went to the Baylor football game, Jen's first college football game ever.

Sunday I met Jen and Chet for breakfast at the hotel. We hung out talking for a long time, and eventually my mom met us and brought my baby book with her. After everyone crying over that, we went to lunch at Olive Garden with my parents, my dad's mom, and Diane, the social worker who placed me, without whom none of this would have been possible. After Olive Garden we went to Barnes and Noble and took a whole bunch of pictures. After coffee and multiple tearful goodbyes, Jen and Chet were on their way back to Georgia, and my mom and I were on our way back to Baylor.

The whole weekend was absolutely perfect. It was everything everyone hoped it would be, and more. All weekend Jen and my mom and I were constantly surprised at everything we had in common. On my bedroom wall, there is a poem that ends with the words, "Heredity or environment — which are you the product of? Neither, my darling, neither. Just two different kinds of love."

Keith's Principles: Essays From More than Fifty Years in Social Work

- Never rule out a child's biological family no matter how inadequate they seem to be.
 - Offer to provide support if that would make the difference
- Man (sic) has neither the right nor the ability to judge his fellows in terms of what they deserve;
 - This was never about who was good or bad; worthy or unworthy
- Helping people find their own way is better than controlling them, however subtly;
 - Children's Home gave options of family aid and option of families

- Feelings, and personal relationships, matter;
 - Yearly letters
- People should be treated as “subjects” and not as “objects.”
 - “I miss my birthmother.”
- We help, not because it always or even usually ‘works,’ but because it is the right and loving thing to do.
 - Adoption is not about my needs.
- Human beings are fallible, but at the same time sometimes capable of transcending themselves and showing great courage or unselfishness.
 - The decision to complete the pregnancy.
- The difference between “good” and “bad” people is insignificant compared with the standard demanded by their maker, and consequently people have no right to judge each other.
 - There is inadequacy, grief and loss on all sides of the adoption equation.
- It is always dangerous business to tie a label onto any of God’s children.
 - Unwed, unwanted, unable.....or self sacrificing, loving, providing
- Protecting clients from consequences is not helping.
- Helping, from Keith’s point of view, is not for the faint of heart or head.
- Reality: “This is it.”
- Empathy: “I know that it must hurt.”
- Support: “I am here to help you if you want me and can use me,” or “You don’t have to face this alone.”
- In adoption

- Acknowledge the realities
 - Empathize with the loss and pain
 - Support where the child is in the process
- People need to know that they are accepted and that the helping person will not give up on them. The helper will still care.
 - The right to self determination means the right to choose differently than I would choose and still be loved by me.
- Christians understand the finite nature and fallible (sinful) behavior of persons, but they see persons in terms of their destiny and their nature as made in the image of God.
 - We are all sinners saved by grace.
- “The wisdom of the world has always stated, ‘Behave and you will be loved,’ but Jesus, when He died for our sins, said, in effect, ‘You are loved; therefore behave’(AKL, 1985).
 - Discipline is not about punishment. It is about love.
- If a child does not find something to love and appreciate in their birth parent, they will not be able to find something to love and appreciate in themselves.

Conclusion

This is not a fairy tale. It is not just a good story. It is, in fact, a true story of the application of theory to practice. It is an example of a man who gave his life to Christ and gave his wisdom and work to the benefit of others. It is the story of a social worker who benefitted both personally and professionally from the wisdom and teaching of a great man whose wisdom began in Christ. It is the story of a baby who became a woman loved by two mothers, finally whole in the arms of both. Thank you, Keith.

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