

Completely



FINDING his own way and own interests in life is 7-year-old Miles Monroe.

His

by Michael Monroe

I can vividly remember the moment that I saw my oldest son for the first time. I'm not talking about the day I first laid eyes on him when he was only 18 days old, or the next day when we brought him home, changing our lives forever. I'm talking instead about that cool November afternoon, nearly two years from the day we first met, when I began to look beyond all of my assumptions and even hopes and dreams concerning my son, and caught my first glimpse of the "real" him. That was the first time I believe I truly met my son, as I started to let go of who I thought he was and would become and began to fully embrace the adventure of discovering who God had uniquely made him to be.

Not Made in My Image

No two adoption journeys are exactly the same, but many adoptive fathers encounter similar questions and challenges as we grow into our role. So much of an adoptive parent's experience is identical to that of any other parent. And yet, adoption offers a few "extras" that come with parenting a child who claims so much of us but does not share our genetic fingerprint.

For some adoptive parents, maybe especially adoptive dads, one such "extra" is the temptation to assume or even secretly desire that our children — especially sons — will grow to resemble and reflect us in many different ways. We dream that they will share our same likes and dislikes, our same habits and traits, even our same quirks and mannerisms. In some ways we dream that our kids will be a "mini-me" of sorts — a scaled down version of ourselves.

Certainly there is nothing unnatural in wanting to share our experiences, interests and passions with our kids, nor is it the least bit wrong to hope our children will take the best



ENJOYING some father-son time is Michael Monroe with his son, Miles.

personal traits we have to offer. But I have come to realize that in some ways I secretly hoped my son would become a complete "mini" version of me. I wonder if I am alone. I wonder too if this is somehow more of a temptation for adoptive dads, if only because we know so well that our children were at one time strangers to us in every sense of the word. Perhaps it is subconscious and subtle, as if somehow a deep longing for a visible and tangible connection to a child who holds an indescribable claim on us. Maybe this was simply my way of laying claim to him as to reassure myself, if not also to convince others, that while he is not "of me" he is certainly all "mine."

So there I was on that cool November afternoon in the front yard with my son, then just 2 years old, eager to engage him in a right of passage for all fathers and sons — a game of catch. I had long dreamed of passing on to him my lifelong love of football and I had recently purchased a junior sized football emblazoned with the University of Alabama logo. I was convinced it would appeal to both of us — me being a lifelong Alabama football fan and my son being an animal lover and thus naturally attracted to the team mascot, Big Al the elephant. It was yet another subtle sign that he and I were clearly meant to be. Despite the fact that he was adopted, he was after all "my" son and I had no doubt he would develop many, if not most, of the same likes and loves as me. In

my mind the formula was simple: I would show him the world as I saw it and as I experienced it, and he would come to see it and experience it in much the same way.

So I stood five yards away from him and raised the football and called out to him "Here, catch." But instead of raising his hands ready to catch the ball, he held out one hand signaling for me to stop and replied, "Wait Daddy, I need to go get my Santa bag." With that he disappeared inside the house only to return seconds later with a decorative Santa Claus door hanger draped over his shoulder and a huge smile on his face. He then put out the other hand as if to indicate "Now I'm ready." I was stunned — and so too were the football gods.

I now realize that I had secretly hoped that this inaugural game of catch would serve as a meaningful bonding experience for both of us and, as a bonus, might be the first step toward eventual gridiron fame and immortality. Instead my son introduced me to an aspect of football fashion I had never imagined — and provided me with my first eye-opening glimpse into how he is wired, what he likes and how he and I might best be able to connect.

Who is this kid?

Never one to give up easily, I went ahead and tossed him the football. It hit him in the chest and fell to the ground . . . and that was it. Game

over. He was immediately off to other things such as looking for bugs and playing in the leaves. It was clear that football did not interest him, and in that moment I distinctly remember thinking to myself “who is this kid?”

It was patently obvious to me and to everyone else that he and I did not share the same DNA. So why was it that I assumed he would like football simply because I did? For that matter, why would I assume anything at all about him? As I began to confront these questions I realized that I needed to stop assuming and begin actively discovering who this little boy, who I now called my son, was.

I recognize now how ridiculous this probably sounds, but I also suspect that I am not completely alone. Maybe it's not football, maybe it's music or movies, books or school, trains or cars or building things or maybe it's types of foods that you consider fun. Regardless, I suspect that many dads can relate to making assumptions and having dreams about how their kids will turn out, only to be surprised, bewildered and, at times, somewhat disappointed.

Adoption has a way of making you think about and question things that many people take for granted. I suppose this is because in adoption there are few “givens.” In talking with guys who are considering adoption it seems that many of them have concerns about what it will be like to parent a child who comes into their life in this way. Specifically, they wonder whether they will feel truly connected to their child and whether that connection will look and feel “normal.” Many of us have come to realize that once the “givens” are removed, difficult questions often take their place — sometimes accompanied by doubts and even fears.

To be honest, I am not really sure what “normal” is any more. I do know, however, what it means to be blessed by the miracle of adoption. Even as my original dreams for my son were fading and my initial assumptions about him were proven wrong, a new and more beautiful reality was coming to life. Embracing him for who he is has been far more rewarding and fulfilling than I ever could have imagined — and I'll take this over “normal” any day. Throughout the years I have slowly come to

realize that my son was not made in my image. He is not my “mini-me.” Instead, as his dad I have been given the privilege to help him discover who he is and all that he can become. In the beginning I was worried about whether I would feel like he was “mine.” Little did I know that by embracing this adventure of discovering who he is I would become completely his.

As for the football — it is no more. It spent a good many lonely years at the bottom of the outdoor toy box, only to fall victim to last year's spring cleaning. Even so, I still try to watch a quarter or two of a game here and there, and, out of habit, sometimes I will ask my son if he wants to watch with me. He's always quick to remind me “no Daddy, you know I don't like football.” Truthfully, I don't really like it that much either now . . . not compared to all that I have come to know and love because of him.

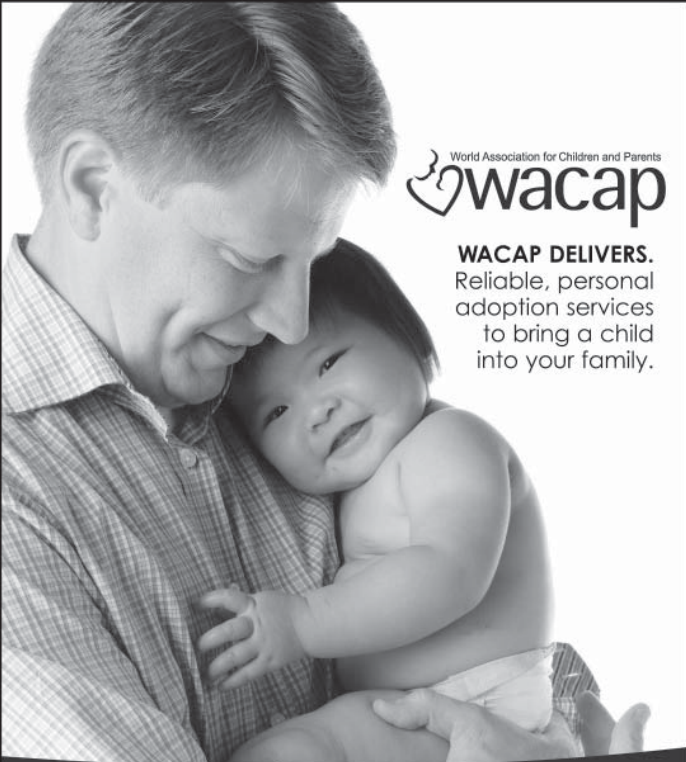
Michael Monroe and his wife Amy have four wonderful kids. He and several other dads regularly share their thoughts and insights on adoption, foster care and fatherhood at www.adoptivedads.org.



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