

Kathy, my dear, dear friend, and Godmother to my daughter, Saraswati, asked me to write about my experience with HOPE. It was hard to decide where to start and what to include. I have had such an intimate relationship with HOPE in my life. I have chosen to write about the most significant event of my life, the adoption of my daughter and my fulfillment of my dream of becoming a mother.

After discovering that I had uterine cancer during a standard fertility test, I had to have a hysterectomy. Miraculously, the name of my surgical oncologist was Olive – the name we had chosen for our first daughter almost 10 years earlier. When we heard her name, we knew that everything would work out. But it was obvious that the only way we were going to start a family now was through adoption.

Brian and I went to an adoption fair at the Children’s Museum in Indianapolis. We felt strongly about adopting domestically because of the number of children in the US who need families. We chose a local agency who also housed women, mostly young girls, who were pregnant and alone, and gave them a place to live and skills to take care of their child. They also gave them counseling and information about adoption, making sure they understood all of their options.

So, the waiting began. We put a profile together with photos of us and our family and told our story of what we could offer a child. Birthmothers reviewed all of the profiles of perspective adoptive couples and got to choose which family would get her child. We waited for two long years, rarely getting a phone call or support from our adoption counselor.

One day, at work, I had a conversation with a friend that changed my life. Bob had known me for only a little over a year, and he asked me what I was waiting for. He said that this waiting around wasn’t like me at all. And he was right. His words struck a chord with me and I went home to Brian and I said, “Bob asked what we’re doing waiting around, and I don’t have an answer to that. So we’re not going to do it anymore.”

I started calling agencies and asking questions. It was about on my third call that I spoke to the Adoption Support Center in Broadripple. Immediately I knew that this was

the place. The two ladies that I spoke to were warm and answered all of my questions with enthusiasm and HOPE. Ah, there was hope!

I went to the next information seminar they held, even though Brian couldn't get off work to do it. Through a structured decision-making process that they developed, I was able to discern what my adoption priorities were and then match them to the programs that they offered. I felt comfortable that Brian and I wanted the same things, and so I completed the questionnaire and waited to talk to one of ASC's counselors. When it was my turn, I was a bit shocked to see that international adoption seemed to be the best fit, and, even more distressing, the countries whose programs fit the best were ----- gulp --- half-way around the world. Did I mention that I don't like to fly?

Well, I felt truly driven by God to be there, and so I checked my fear at the door and proceeded. Brian and I talked about it and thought about it and prayed about it and talked some more. And we came to the conclusion that the Nepal program was the best fit for us. It was relatively quick --- 3-6 months for a child younger than 12 months, only one trip, and we could request a boy or a girl. It was right. So we jumped in. We filled out the paperwork with the agency, requesting a baby girl, under the age of 12 months. And then I started our dossier.

Oh, I was organized. I was determined to have the best darn dossier they had ever seen. It reminded me of completing a book report in 5th grade --- I was going to do everything to get that "A"! There were papers and copies and fingerprints and background checks and marriage licenses and birth certificates and letters from our family and friends as to why we would be good parents. My dear friend, Karen, drove with me to the town where Brian and I filed our marriage license to get a copy of it, and she took a photo of me outside with it in my hand for our scrapbook.

And, during that time, there was heartache. Someone we thought was a friend refused to write a letter for us, giving us no reason for his refusal. And we had someone who is a very good friend write a letter that, instead of pointing out our qualities to be solid, supportive parents, pointed out my health issues. We made the choice to eliminate that letter from the submission and it hurt. Someone who we thought wanted us to be parents

seemed to be standing in our way. Thankfully, Brian's boss wrote a beautiful letter for us, completing our dossier.

We submitted our dossier in November of 2003. Soon we found out that the Maoists in Nepal were causing the Nepal government distress, and new adoption cases were in danger of being turned away. Our adoption counselor suggested all the waiting families make two trips – the first to get the process started so we would be certain to get our case considered. Christmas came, and I hung a little stocking with “Baby” on it over the fireplace with mine and Brian's. I started filling the closet in the baby's room with little peach and pink dresses and outfits. I'd stop at every clearance rack of baby clothes in any store I was in. It helped me visualize my sweet baby girl.

On January 21, 2004, I received a call from our adoption counselor, Don, while I was on my way home from work --- there was a little girl available for adoption! I called Brian right away, and when he got home we called Don and he emailed her photo. She was born on January 10 and the orphanage director had named her Sona. She was a tiny brown bundle with dark hair. We would name her Olive.

We fell in love with her right away and told Don “yes!”, and began calling our family and friends! The internet was hot from her photo being emailed to everyone! We were going to be parents. Wow. Us. Finally. It was really happening!!

We knew we had to wait for certain steps to be completed in Nepal before we could make our first trip, like having Sona's photo in the newspaper so that any relatives could come forward to claim her. That lasted two weeks. And there were other details that had to be completed before we could travel. The Maoists were busy causing bombings outside Kathmandu and the government responded by shutting down all of their offices several times. This resulted in our paperwork, as well as four other families' in the Indianapolis area, to sit on a desk somewhere in Kathmandu.

We, the waiting families, were all meeting each other through a chat room Don had set up, exchanging photos and sharing every detail we knew. When one family traveled, we all sent gifts with them to our children, and the traveling family took photos of our

children and sent them back to us. My angel of HOPE was named Peggy. She and her husband were adopting a little girl from the same orphanage and were ahead of us in the process. We lived only 10 minutes away from each other and had bonded and were supporting each other through this journey. At the end of March, they were notified that they could travel to Nepal and meet their daughter and start the adoption process. And Peggy promised to kiss and hold Olive for us, and to take videos of her. Little did we know what a blessing that trip and video turned out to be.

The last day that Peggy and her husband were there, I received a call at work from the adoption agency. It wasn't Don, it was his wife, who managed the agency. She asked if I had someone who could be there with me. She asked if I could sit down. I, of course, knew it was serious, and I called our office administrator, Bev, and asked her to come in my office. When she did, I sat down and said that I was ready. And Jeannine told me that Olive had died. They didn't know why. She had stopped breathing and couldn't get her to the hospital in time to save her. They were considering it SIDS.

I fell completely apart. The bottom fell out of my world. I had never known this feeling. I had already lost both my Mom and my Dad. But this was the death of HOPE. It happened so quickly. My whole identity, my whole reason was gone. I wasn't sure who I was any more if I wasn't a woman waiting to adopt her child. And I needed to get to Brian. Bev drove me across the street to Brian's work. I had called his boss and told her and she had him waiting in an office so I could tell him. He was in shock. I just cried. He collected his things and took me back to my office to get my things. And by then Kathy was there, another Earth Angel. We had really just started our friendship, but that day it ignited full force. Kathy became my one friend who I could share everything with without putting a filter on it. She was fully there for me, and her support and her words of HOPE during this time and the next 9 months were critical to my every day functioning. I had never allowed myself to lean on a friend so heavily, and I knew that it was the right and good thing to do, and that God had put here in my life.

As it turned out, HOPE wasn't dead at all. HOPE was dealt a crushing blow, but wasn't dead by any means. Brian and I spent the next few days grieving and talking, and we decided that our situation had not changed, in that we knew that God wanted us to be

parents. Why this had happened may never be revealed to us, but we needed to move on and seek out our daughter.

When we called Don, he thought it was too early for us to move into another adoption. We reassured him, and so he moved quickly. And on May 1, 2004, we got the most wonderful news. There was a baby girl. She could be ours. He was sending a photo.

When we saw Saraswati's eyes, we were done in. This was our child. This was our daughter. There was no mistaking her. Dark chocolate skin, almost black hair and eyes. And she was a very small baby. Amazingly, she was in the video that Peggy made on their first trip to Nepal. In the video, Peggy asked about the tiny baby girl, and the orphanage director said that she was strong and healthy, just small. And Saraswati was in the newspaper the same day that Olive was, being "advertised" for any relative to come forward to claim her. Saraswati was born on January 11, they estimated. She had been found by a policeman, as many babies are, and was brought to the orphanage for care.

The telephone lines were lit up. We anticipated concerns from our family and friends, and we understood. But we KNEW this was our daughter. And HOPE was alive!

We got a phone call just 2 weeks later telling us we could travel for the first time! We had never traveled outside the US, so we were literally flying on a wing and a prayer! But we were protected and powerful. Brian and I were solid partners, fortifying each other for the trip of our lifetime. We were gutsy. And we were in love with our daughter!

We only stayed 3 ½ days, but we got to keep Saraswati in the hotel with us 3 afternoons. The first day I immediately stripped her down to check out all of her parts. Brian sat on the couch just about as far away from us as he could, drinking in everything that had happened. I had brought scads of clothes for her and dressed her up and cuddled her. My dear friend, Bob, had told me to "coo" at her. At that age, he said, she should "coo" back to me. She did! She looked at me with those big dark eyes and cooed! I tried to absorb every second of being with her, to engrave it in my memory so I could describe it when we got home, so I could cherish it while we would have to be separated from her.

Saraswati held on tight as we made our way back and forth from the orphanage in the little car along the bumpy roads. Her little head moved from side to side, looking at everything. She had on a little striped knit hat I had brought for her. I held her so close over the bumps that she left an imprint of perspiration on my sweater. We got some very strange looks – two large white Americans with a very small, dark, Nepali child.

When it was time to go, I kissed Sara, I hugged her, and I promised her that we would be back soon. I held Brian's hand tight and said, "Let's get on that plane and get home so this clock can start ticking. I can't wait to get back to my baby." Sapna, the orphanage director assured us we would be back by July. It didn't turn out that way.

Conversations with my friends, my family, other waiting families --- books, music, everything was based on HOPE. We waited for 8 months through the Maoists terrorizing Nepal and delaying all of our children's trips home. Brian was quiet. I cried a lot. I prayed a lot. I plastered photos of Sara up in my office and in our home. I continued buying clothes and bedding and outfitting her bedroom. Friends at work in New York gave us a shower. I watched the internet for any news on the political situation in Nepal. Don was good about checking in with us. And he took my tearful requests for more photos very well. In December I organized a coat and blanket drive for the orphanage, getting a Fed Ex representative to get the boxes to Nepal for free, God bless him. We sent a little maroon velvet outfit for Sara with a small snowman on the front. Soon, a photo of her with that outfit on came to us via email. Everything had gotten there safely!

Again, it was Christmas. I hung the "Baby" stocking up over the fireplace, between mine and Brian's. And this year it was filled with HOPE that soon a wonderful thing was about to happen. We didn't know when. I had even talked about going over and staying with Sara in the hotel like another mother was doing. But it didn't seem right without Brian. And we couldn't afford to go there indefinitely. By then I vacillated between hopefulness and despair, and I was feeling a lot of physical, emotional and mental stress.

Meanwhile, we had decided that we didn't want to make the second trip alone. We wanted to share this with someone else. We didn't think Brian's parents would travel that far. We had many friends who would have gladly made the trip. But there was one person who was the perfect person to go with us. Aunt Connie. Brian mentioned her first. She had been on the top of my list. And when we asked her, she was surprised. She asked us if we were sure. We were. Absolutely. And without knowing it, we had made a decision that would prove to serve us better than we could have imagined!

We heard from Don early in January that we would be able to travel at the end of January! Here we go! It was really happening! No one had to make a suggestion to me --- I was miles ahead of everyone, almost completely packed, checking off each item on our list. Those weeks went by quickly, and soon it was a Saturday morning in January 2005 and we were going to the airport with Brian's Mom and Dad, Aunt Connie and our friends Ruth and Karen. I had no concerns about the flights --- I knew who was waiting at the other end and that was all I needed.

We flew from Indianapolis to Detroit, Detroit to Tokyo (13 hours!), Tokyo to Bangkok (6 hours), and stayed in a transit room in the Bangkok airport. The next morning we got on the last leg of the flight to Kathmandu, just 3 hours away.

We landed in Kathmandu and the significance of the moment overwhelmed me. I turned to Aunt Connie with tears in my eyes and choked out, "This is it. It's really going to happen. I'm really going to become a Mom." She put her arm around me with a smile. I knew Aunt Connie was glad she came to share this with us.

We all deboarded the plane. We knew what Manoj, the attorney, looked like and we were excited to see him again. He was like an old friend now. Brian and I looked at each other with excitement and disbelief. Our smiles covered the width of our faces.

We made the decision to go to the orphanage right after dropping our things off at the hotel. Manoj wondered if we wanted to clean up a bit, and with almost a unison response, we said, "No!" We jumped into two cars after studying what the safest, least uncomfortable combination of people would be in each vehicle. I felt protective of Aunt

Con, but I didn't need to be. She had traveled internationally and was very savvy about people and politics. And she wouldn't be shy about expressing whether something didn't seem quite right. Again, she was the right person to have on this adventure!

The orphanage stood three stories high, white with blue trim. Laundry was hanging on lines on the roof, as it was on other rooftops around. The cement yard in front of the building was small, and surrounded by a high stone wall that was topped with sharp objects, like nails and cut glass, to make intruders think twice about coming over the wall. As we entered the courtyard, I faced the building and knew exactly what room Sara was in. I had asked so many questions of Don and had visualized this moment hundreds of times. Sapna, the director, led us into the building and I was entirely in disbelief that this was happening. I kept turning and looking at Brian, making eye contact and speaking in our silent language that we had developed over 15 years.

The group of us rounded the corner and entered a small room with a cement floor and cement walls. There was a nanny there, dressed in a sari, watching over the group of babies who were Sara's playmates. Even though it was January, it was warm --- maybe 65 or 70 degrees – but all of the children were bundled up so that you could only see their little faces. And so my eyes searched for her eyes. And there she was, sitting in the front corner of a playpen with 4 other children. Sara's skin was very dark because of the practice of covering the babies in mustard seed oil and letting them "bake" on the rooftops in order to get vitamin D. Sapna reached in and picked Sara up, and I moved toward her slowly. She watched me without a sign of recognition or interest on her little face. Sapna nodded at me, and I reached for her and had her little body in my arms. Right away Saraswati was crying – hard. Who was this white-skinned person holding me? I don't know her! Where is Sapna?

I didn't want Sara to be so upset. I had a good idea that this would happen and I wasn't upset by it, other than seeing her so distraught. This was a very good sign. This meant that Saraswati had been able to bond with her nannies and with Sapna. So she would be able to bond with us. I quickly handed her back to Sapna and continued talking to her softly. She watched every move I made. And for that entire time, I don't remember

anyone else being in the room with us. Not even Brian or Aunt Connie. I just remember focusing on Sara's eyes.

I thought that maybe if Sara saw us with a friend of hers, she would see that we weren't too scary. I picked up Chhaya, whose mother, Peg, I had emailed several times. Chhaya had been in many photos with Sara and so I recognized her right away. She was happy and smiling as I picked her up. But I could see on Sara's face it was having no affect.

After a few more attempts, Sapna suggested that perhaps we give Sara a bottle. She put Sara in my arms, screaming, gave Brian a bottle, and ushered us into an empty room with two cots. I sat down with Sara and Aunt Con sat on the bunk across from us. Brian stood next to me, bending down and trying to calm Sara down by saying very sweet things to her. Once the bottle was in Sara's mouth she started to calm down. Her little body relaxed. It was probably about 5 minutes later when Sara looked up at me and put both of her hands on my face. She focused her big dark eyes on my eyes, and everything changed from that point. Aunt Connie said it was incredible to see. It was as if she was saying, "Oh, there you are! I've been waiting for you to come back and get me, Mom." And that moment was HOPE fulfilled.

I could go on about the rest of our adventures in Nepal over that two weeks, with the Prime Minister closing the country and all communications being shut down the second day we were in the country, or about being told by the Embassy to stay at the hotel until they said it was safe, and then Sara having a 104 degree temperature and us having to find the shop keeper in the gift shop at the hotel to translate to a taxi driver where the clinic was so we could get help for Sara. There were so many things that happened during those 2 weeks that weren't what was expected. It was all an adventure that in normal circumstances would have been more incredible than any other thing I had ever experienced. But it was all overshadowed by my baby girl, Saraswati Marlene Wood, the fulfillment of HOPE, and the new journey we had started together.

--- Linda Marlene Wood, April 15, 2007

