

SIMON, from page 1

child.

J.Z.: Because she could be in danger because of her condition?

S.S.: It certainly would be a risk to her security. It's a crime. I cannot imagine what a young woman goes through to essentially have to conceal a pregnancy for five months or more and conceal a birth and travel to someplace where she isn't known and leave her child in a conspicuous spot where she will be found. I can't imagine the torture that is, and I think torture is exactly the word.

J.Z.: Does adoption get a fair shake in the U.S. when we consider the role parenting plays in our values and culture?

S.S.: Well, I am reluctant to say its gets an unfair shake, but my wife and I know our reflex was not to consider adoption and to go through the fertility route, and I do think that is demonstrably the reaction of a lot of people, and I hope that in the least bit my book can open the door to adoption in perhaps a way they didn't think about before.

It's been very gratifying. After speaking, I've had couples come up and tell me they decided that evening to adopt.

J.Z.: Having adopted two Chinese girls and having experienced the public reaction to creating a mixed-race family, not all of it positive, what do you think we have to learn about race in the United States?

S.S.: Firstly, I think our daughters are growing up in a significantly better society on this issue than what I grew up in. Which is not to say that all bigotry has been abolished, but diversity of America is no longer just in the big cities, it is all over. I dare say it's in Portland, which is a medium-sized city. Goodness gracious, the governors of two former states of the Confederate union are of Indian extraction.

Just where our little girls go to school, almost every family that we personally know is mixed in one way or another. Not necessarily along sharp racial lines, but certainly in religion. It seems to me almost every family has some relationship that falls outside of the harsh distinctions we used to observe.

Certainly the family in the White House — that's an interracial family. Barack Obama was born into an interracial family. So are the McCains, for that matter (who adopted a daughter from Bangladesh).

One thing you learn when you adopt a child of a different ethnicity; weeks go by and we don't think about race. They're tired. They're hungry. They're thirsty. They're cranky. They're laughing. You see all of that stuff day in and day out a lot more personally and strongly than their ethnicity.

It renews my convictions in that I've covered a lot of wars around the world in which ethnic dissent is an aggravation to the conflagration. That's the way small minds keep score.

I have not heard from many Aryan supremacists or white bigots. I have heard from a few people who consider it cultural imperialism. Firstly, I would be very surprised if they've ever adopted more than a hamster in their life. And from their e-mails, they don't sound like parents to me.

I think they are seeing only our daughters' ethnicity — and they're real people.

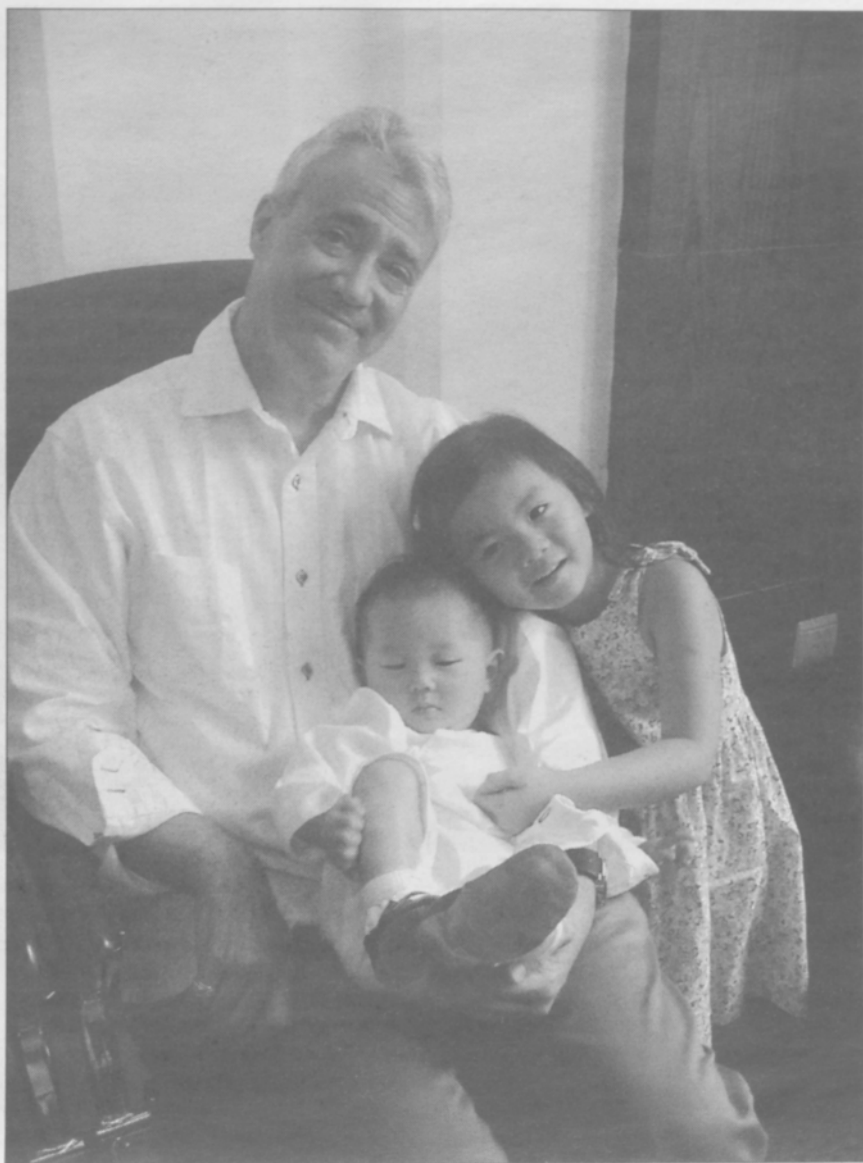


PHOTO COURTESY OF SCOTT SIMON
Scott Simon and daughters Lina, on his lap, and Elise, soon after Lina's adoption.

J.Z.: You interviewed Thomas Lauderdale, a Portland legend and the ringleader of Pink Martini. Can you give readers a glimpse into his part in your book? What did you learn about adoption from him?

S.S.: I've earned so much from Thomas over the years. Thomas is a genius, and it is widely known that he's adopted. Kerby and Linda Thomas adopted four youngsters, each of them from a different ethnicity. Thomas is considered a great success. As Kerby notes, people were always coming up to Kerby and Linda, and saying, "And you took in this homeless kid of a different ethnicity...." Kerby and Linda have always said we just put Thomas on his feet and we followed him. Kerby doesn't like to take any credit for that success.

Thomas had a younger sister who had a different life. Thomas at least for the moment is not interested in meeting his birth parents. His younger sister was very interested, and she reconnected with her birth parents and left home. She got involved in drugs and wound up in a tailspin and died when she was age 24.

I don't like grading human lives, much less in adoption, as success or failures. That tragedy has occurred in the Kennedys as with many others. I don't like adoption being named as the culprit. I can't imagine the pain and tragedy of that loss. As Kerby said to me, "We don't deserve half the praise we receive for our son. And we probably don't deserve half the blame we've heaped on ourselves for our daughter." I think there are limiting factors that, for the moment, we can't fathom in any human

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relationship. And I would still tell you that their daughter had a better life for the time she had because Kerby and Linda adopted her.

Thomas is probably the most brilliant person I know. Thomas' identity is his music, his art, it's his genius. And if you're a healthy individual, it's not the most conspicuous human label. It's what we do with our lives. Again, I point to President Obama in his book, "Dreams of My Father." He went through a period where he was intensely interested in his origins. He absolutely became comfortable in his own skin, and he created a life, and that was what his identity is. If Thomas — five months or five years from now — decides he really wants to find his birth parents, that can happen. But what he says now, for the moment, is that he likes being this mystery agent.

J.Z.: I'm sure the experience has given you pause to reflect on the adoption policies in the United States, and the fact that so many children from day one, cycle through foster care and then cycle out without a home. What are your thoughts on that?

S.S.: It absolutely does pain me deeply. Because I think in many, many municipalities, adoptions can be difficult for a number of factors, some of which I absolutely respect. Putting a child into the arms of people who are not their parents should be taken with deliberation and seriousness. That said, the process can go on for years and years. I believe it's good when youngsters and parents of the same race get a certain preference. But I don't like the idea of children in the foster care system waiting around for years to have parents who happen to be of the same race. That's not seeing a person, that's seeing a statistic. I don't like that. I think there are many couples who back off from the prospect of domestic adoptions. I'm over 40 and that immediately puts me in the back of any domestic adoption.

J.Z.: What do you want people to take from the book?

S.S.: That what they read is a series of love stories, the way people find each other and make their way to each other. Adoption is virtually as old as childbirth, and I think we're wired to take care of the people who are in need in front of us, particularly babies. When Pharaoh's daughter reached down and pulled up Moses, he was wrapped in a Hebrew blanket. I think we're wired to take care of each other.

J.Z.: Pulling away a bit to look at media, do you think that when your daughters are your age they will be listening to NPR? What is the world of news and information that lies ahead for them — for all of us?

S.S.: I think there will be something like NPR. I think I can say it won't be radio in the way we understand it now, the big tower and all.

I do find it very important to assert in our time, much less 30 to 40 years for now, the importance of news, of honest reporting. So much of what we read and hear today is polemical. I don't like the idea that there's left-wing news and right-wing news. It seems to me an honest news organization, and I believe NPR is, has to have the nerve to challenge the audience, to sometimes bring them stories their marketing department tells them they may not want to hear, and challenge convictions. That to me is what a real news organization does. So much today is pandering to the audience. That does make me uncomfortable because down that road there's no room for growth and no room for surprise, which is why I got into journalism in the first place.

J.Z.: What will you do when the day comes, and your daughter, or both your daughters say, "Dad, I'm a Cardinals fan?"

S.S.: (Laughter) I really will examine what my life is all about if that happens. Our 7-year-old is a White Sox fan. And that's OK because the White Sox is actually a plausible team. They had a good year. And they're a good franchise. I think it's her way of both signaling to me that we're both Chicagoan, but also to step away. It's her independence. My wife, however, thinks to be a Cubs fan is to volunteer to have a psychological affliction.

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