

Thoughts of an Adoptee By-the-Sea

Dr. Joyce Maguire Pavao

As I sat at my computer, glancing now and then out of the window to look at the dunes, the sea grass, and the amazing colors of the sky in Truro on Cape Cod, I was interrupted by my phone. I was in the midst of writing Chapter Nine of a book about the construction of complex families, especially by adoption, but also by foster care, kinship, donor reproductive technology, and guardianship. I picked up the phone and it was someone asking me to write an article about how adopted people feel--an article that would go deeper into the core issues that affect the lives of adopted people. I carefully answered her questions as an adopted person, and a professional, and then I sat down and wrote:

How can I ever finish a book when sharks are constantly being found on my beach attacking vacationers, and when phone calls and assignments keep getting in the way!

Maybe I will just ramble on about the idiosyncratic aspects of being adopted. I am addressing this to adoption professionals,-lawyers, judges and all of those who make decisions about the infant or child without hearing how that child may feel now and, more importantly, later. The families (by birth and adoption) often know this, but it is important that everyone understands what adoption holds in store.

...I remember sitting with four of my best friends, who are all adopted. This was about twenty years ago, and we had the funniest hoot of a time just laughing and making fun of ourselves, and our adoptee neuroses.

I will share a bit about what we talked about. But don't YOU dare repeat any of this or take it on as if you know what we mean. This is how we are allowed to joke about ourselves, but if you do it you're being 'birth-ist'. (I know for a fact that when one of our adoptive parent/therapists run a group for adoptive parents and one of our birth mother/therapists runs a group for birth mothers, they have the very same kind of ways of making fun of certain aspects of their lives). This self-reflection and 'making fun of oneself' is

important in terms of being self aware.

It is quite true, we adopted ones were taken, and moved, and transplanted, and given new names and new identities as if we were in the FBI witness protection program!

Hence, we do have some trauma related to this early (or not so early in the case of older child adoptions) event. Nancy Verrier would call this the Primal Wound (sounds rather Catholic, like 'stigmata', and really rather depressing, doesn't it? Nancy is not an adopted person, after all.)

Of course, we do have some trauma associated with our first loss, and with any other additional moves and losses. Wouldn't you? But the thing that comes along with the loss part is our adaptive qualities.

We're adopted and we're adaptive!

We can get along anywhere as a result of this transplanting and replanting. Place us in a room with high society and royalty — we're fine. Our birth parents may have been kings and queens, after all. We're actors and actresses trying on many roles because we could be anyone, couldn't we? And we often don't even know who we are under the disguise. We could have been an entirely different person with an entirely different name and life! We started out as one person and then turned into another. Ta Daaa!! So we could be anyone.

We instantly know how to act and how to get along just fine, thank you.

Place us in a room with junkies and low-life thieves and we'll be hangin' out and talkin' trash with them in no time. Our birth parents could have been just like this! Place us in good schools and we'll either do just fine (aimin' to please), or we'll be so busy trying to get the social thing down (we have to be accepted, after all) that we'll miss our assignments and do rather poorly academically. But we'll be working on something. We just adapt and adapt and adapt.

You all ('you' being society, the adoption system, and sometimes parents and professionals) made us think that our birth parents were poor and unable to parent, and so we gravitate toward a lower socio-economic group of friends at certain periods, or we work with this population in order to give something back to 'our people'. We take what you say very seriously.

You don't even realize what you're telling us some of the time. If we're relating to what we think is our 'background' and you put it down in any way, it only adds to our losses in terms of our loss of self esteem. So, please, love and respect our culture, love our race, love our religion and love our ethnicity of root family, as well as that which we gain from our family by adoption.

The core issues:

Intimacy? It takes knowing who you are to know who you can be with another. So, we either get all dependent and mushy and enmeshed and then feel rejected, or we stay in our marginal stance. After all we are marginal people. We fit in two families (or more) while, at the same time, we fit in neither of these families completely. We are excellent bystanders, as we can see from any angle. (We make great therapists! We make great detectives! We make great friends and family members--although we can be hard to live with as we sort out our divided loyalty and loss issues.) We are eternally loyal, like a beagle.

Attachment? We were uprooted. We attach really well over and over and over, but the roots are delicate after they've been torn

and the tenacity wears down. We will
I reattach well only once, if the people we're placed with are also good at attaching (it takes to tango and to attach). But don't move us too often, or we'll have no ability to stick to it. Then we'll be better at moving from place to place to place, because that is what YOU will have taught us. We'll have a hard time with jobs and with career and with relationships. We learn very well and very early you know. It is YOU that teach us all of this by taking us away and then placing us, and then taking us away and then placing us. It's your shortcoming, not ours that leads to attachment problems. We attach on the surface very quickly. It's part of how we adapt. We can't even walk into a hotel room for an overnight stay without rearranging some furniture and making the place comfortable so that we can settle. We need to bring along some transitional object-- familiar objects-- when we are in strange places. Our first familiar object (birth mother) disappeared!

Loss? We can't find a thing! Loss is an issue that pervades. We deal with it in many different ways. We are pack rats and some of us keep everything - every shred of everything. We collect old things, "useless" things, because this is what society has often thought of us. We have to have one of every color of our favorite sweater...what if we lose one? People misdiagnose some of us as having ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) but really, we all have this problem with distraction because it feels like...something is missing. Our rooms are cluttered and piled high with things that we can't lose, because we're trying to calm our feelings about the people that we've lost.

We misplace keys and things and joke about loss being a huge issue for us, because we are adoptees. Some of us go the other way and KEEP nothing. We give things away. We'd rather be in control and we'd rather know where things are, even if there with someone else. We live sparsely and can't bear to have anything that may end up being lost. It is the same issue, the manifestation is just different for some of us than others.

Anger? I guess SO! How would you feel if people did things to you when you were asleep and unconscious and when you were an infant or small child? People destabilized your whole world and then, ta dah! you were a different person. It's okay. We can deal, but you bet there's going to be some anger. And not at the people (definitely our parents, birth and adoptive -- they had their own problems and losses to contend with--we all did) but at the situation. We older adoptees, from the very closed era, can't stand secrecy and get very angry if people are clandestine or passive aggressive.

Just TELL us! Be frank! Tell us anything. Tell us the truth. The truth may hurt, but being kept from it is even more devastating. The truth is what we've always wanted. Openness and sincerity. Is it so hard? Our anger is dynamic. It moves us to get involved politically. To want to change the world because our world was changed so dramatically. This can be a good thing and often is! We can focus our anger and use it to challenge what is wrong and we can be agents of change, as we were infants and children of change. Change is our legacy and our strength as well as our downfall. We are changelings.

Humor? Humor is the highest defense mechanism. We were quick and early to learn whatever we needed in order to survive. We are survivors. We learned it from our birth parents and we learned it from our adoptive parents. We can laugh at ourselves (but don't YOU laugh at us, or label us, or diagnose us, when YOU are the culprit that made us who we are). We can laugh at the world around us and we can play. We have the gift of play and fantasy because we have lived in a world of fantasy and not-knowing for oh, so long.

Spirit? We have an innate sense of spirit and spirituality. It doesn't matter what religion our birth parents had, or what religion our adoptive parents had. It is not about organized religion or disorganized religion. It is about something much deeper and more personal. It is about the archetypal themes in our lives by adoption.

It is about who we are, and where we come from, and where we are going. It is about why we are here, and what we will leave behind in the name of our fathers and in the name of our mothers. Amen.

written by Dr. Joyce Maguire Pavao

...with the help of the dunes, and the seagrass, and the ocean that surrounds her in Truro, on Cape Cod where she has spent many of her summers, some with her adoptive family, many with her family of choice, many with her child and extended family and many with her birth family. To adoptees, family is huge, and extends to the ends of the earth and if we adoptees are held properly as children, we hold many as adults. Take care of the little adoptees of the world - they are magical.

Dr. Pavao is the founder and director of the Center For Family Connections with offices in Cambridge and New York; she is also founder of the 23-year-old Adoption Resource Center and the 20-year-old PACT (pre/post adoption consulting team) Team; her doctorate and one masters are from Harvard University and another masters is from Antioch. She teaches and trains professionals and parents nationally and internationally and has taught at Harvard, Antioch, UCLA, UC Santa Cruz, Cal State Monterey among others. She has trained probate and family court judges, attorneys, psychiatrists, midwives, social workers, marriage and family therapists, clergy and educators. She is

constantly in pursuit of the best interest of the child and her models for working both clinically and educationally with this population of complex families in adoption, foster care, kinship, guardianship and other families of a complex nature have been replicated by many professionals and agencies that she has trained. Dr. Pavao says that her greatest credential is her life as an adopted person and her love for both her adoptive and birth families.

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Joyce Maguire Pavao
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