

The Lifelong Journey of the Adoptee

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Keynote presentation for Pact Camp

Although I've done a number of presentations over the past several years, I do not consider myself a "speaker." I am at heart a writer and a good listener. That is why, as I have been working on this morning's presentation over the past few months, I have stressed over how to create a great, dynamic talk. When Beth and I brainstormed for ideas, we both agreed on a presentation about the lifelong journey of an adoptee. So I went about busily putting together a talk based on Erik Erikson's model of psychosocial development, with David Brodzinsky's additional developmental tasks for adoptees added on top, and a little brain neurobiology sprinkled throughout. But as today grew near, I realized that my presentation that I'd put together just didn't feel right. I tried to fix it several times, and then realized why it wasn't working.

I am not a psychologist or a child development expert. In fact, tomorrow you'll get to hear from a true child development expert. I'm also not an expert on brain neurobiology. But I have 42 years experience as a Korean adoptee and I've written a lot about my experiences and thoughts about being a Korean adoptee, and I've listened a lot to other adopted individuals. So today, I am going to talk about the lifelong journey of an adoptee by sharing *my* thoughts and experiences, and those of other adoptees I've been privileged to know and hear from.

Some of what I'll share with you reflects my experiences as a transracially adopted person, and some will reflect more general adoption themes. While my experience is unique, what I've discovered as I meet more adoptees and adoptive parents is that despite the diversity of experiences and families, there are also a lot of common themes. What I want to highlight today is a normalization of these feelings, thoughts and behaviors of adoptees throughout the life span.

I'll be throwing in a little of the other stuff I mentioned about development too, but mostly just to provide a framework and context for the some of what I'm going to share about the adoptee experience. I am, after all, an expert in my own life.

There are four main messages I want to leave you with today and I will go more in depth for each one. These messages are:

- 1) You can't erase our past - including the hurt and loss we have experienced**
- 2) The majority of your relationship with your adopted child will be as adults.** As I see it, as a parent, your job for the first decade of your child's life is to keep them safe. Your job for the second decade of their life is to help them learn how to keep themselves safe. And from that point on - the remaining 40 or 50 years - your job is to be present and to have a mutually healthy, supportive, reciprocal relationship. You may think that this last part is a given, but what I've learned over the years is that it's not. Because for many adoptees, it's a deliberate choice whether or not they are going to stay engaged with their adoptive parents. And some make the choice to walk away.
- 3) An adoptee's real identity work begins later than what the "experts" say**
- 4) The impact of adoption lasts a lifetime** - and for generations to come

Let's begin with 1) You can't erase the past.

All the adoptive parents in this room received the child they adopted under different circumstances. But one thing is the same. Each child that comes to be adopted had to have experienced the disruption and loss of their biological family in some way. In order for one family to be formed there has to be another family that experienced a dissolution. In addition to that first initial loss, for many adoptees there are added layers of loss. According to Erikson, a baby's psychosocial development task is centered around figuring out if s/he can trust the world to meet his or her needs. The baby learns he can trust the world if he is fed when he is

hungry, changed when his diaper is dirty, kept safe from harm and comforted and loved. Some of us have lived in multiple homes or with multiple caregivers – foster care, orphanages, with family members or friends – each placement or move is a loss, as is the experience of getting close to a caretaker at an orphanage only to have them transfer or quit. Some adoptees are adopted into their “forever homes” only to have the adoptive parent or parents change their minds. Some are abused or neglected in their biological home or in one of their placements before they come into your home. Those of us adopted transracially or internationally lose our country of birth, our language, a community of people who look like us, social customs, faith communities, food, holidays and more.

Our past also includes our pre-natal experiences. Although it’s not typically included in discussions of child development, when we think about the adopted person’s development we have to look impact of prenatal experiences on the adoptee, which could include maternal stress, poor nutrition, genetic heritable influences, environmental or substance toxins such as drugs or alcohol or living in an area exposed to environmental toxins, poverty, lack of prenatal care, and violence in the home. Impacts of pre-natal experiences may show up as low birth weight, pre-term delivery, immature development or developmental or intellectual delays or disabilities.

Beginning at birth, our brains begin to form implicit memory – which continues throughout our whole lifespan. If you’ve ever experienced a sense of having an emotional reaction to something for a reason you can’t explain, it’s likely your brain is recalling an implicit memory. Our brains also generalize repeated experiences and store them as mental models. When our brains recognizes something that seems familiar – and recalls a mental model – we behave, feel or think based on our mental model of a situation, even if the context is somewhat different. As Dan Siegel and Mary Hartzell write in *Parenting from the Inside Out*, emotions, behaviors, body sensations and perceptual interpretations based on our mental models formed throughout our lives influence our present behaviors and perceptions. And, we don’t even know that this is happening. Because they are formed without our consciousness, mental models are very hard to change.

Adoptive parents don't want their children to suffer and may think that if they can just work to help us forget about our past then we'll be better adjusted. But this approach can backfire. First, if the adoptee expresses grief over his or her losses, or if we behave based on mental models of our past histories of abuse, loss, abandonment, neglect, or prenatal experiences then adoptive parents can feel like they were bad parents or unsuccessful, that it was their fault. Or, they may project this "failure to resolve the past" on the adoptee who is unable to "get over it."

In his book, *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self*, David Brodzinsky writes that in an attempt to minimize adoption as a loss, people often compare adoption to divorce and death, two other ways in which children lose parents. But because in adoption a child *gains* a parent or parents, instead of an acknowledgement of loss, an adoption is celebrated as a time of joy. People have a tendency to tell adopted children that they were lucky, something they would never say to a child who loses a parent to divorce or death.

Adoptees grieve in waves over time. As we talk further today, I'll highlight times where adoptees might have more difficulty. Our past is part of who we are, and cannot be erased. I think the most successful adult adoptees are those who can recognize their losses but not be defined by them. I have met many adult adoptees who looked "adjusted" but were actually in crisis below the surface, often because somewhere along the line they had internalized the belief that they couldn't be both grieving and grateful.

I'm not where I am today *in spite of* the losses I've experienced, but *because of* them. I've had the support of a lot of people helping me learn that I can take what I've experienced and pass that knowledge on. Deborah Jiang Stein, a transracial adoptee who was born and spent the first year of her life in prison with her birth mother who was incarcerated, and I had an interesting conversation on facebook last year. Deborah wrote on her Facebook wall, "A diagnosis is not a destiny. Or does it have to be? Once called "at-risk & special needs" and more, I can testify that one can out-do and out-live a diagnosis. At least to live a productive, happy, and fulfilling life. But how often do people live up to the expectations of a diagnosis, just because that's expected?"

My response was this: "I think it's easier for some to live a self-fulfilling prophecy than to spend our lives convincing both ourselves and others that we are more than the sum of our childhood losses."

I may have gained many things by being adopted to the U.S., but I've also experienced many losses. And while I believe I am much more than the sum of my childhood losses, there are still days – not often but sometimes - when sadness bubbles up and overwhelms me. Because *it's hard*. For many of us adoptees, it would be easier to just shove all those feelings of loss and grief way down deep, compartmentalize them, and throw away the key. For others, it is easier to stay overwhelmed with grief. I totally understand why many adoptees don't make it. As difficult as it may be to believe, every time I hear about an adoptee who has taken their own life, I get it. I've had to work hard to convince myself that I am more than the sum of my childhood losses - and having to constantly prove that to greater society as well takes a heavy toll.

I'm fortunate that I have a good relationship with my adoptive parents. However, having a "good" (however one defines that) adoptive home did **not** erase the losses I've experienced. There is nothing that my American, middle-class upbringing could have done to erase the loss of my Korean family and culture and language. I am frustrated with the prevailing assumption that as long as the adoptive parents are "good" ones, the adoptee won't ever feel loss and grief. I'm not convinced by the notion that a "well-adjusted adoptee" is one who never questions adoption loss, who never feels sadness or grief, or who never goes through an identity crisis over who s/he is and where s/he belongs. It angers me that we are constantly told that we should "get over it."

I recently I heard one adoption "expert" (not an adoptee, of course) state that despite the losses involved in adoption, as an institutional child welfare practice, "adoption is still the best intervention we have for children who are parentless." As an "intervention" adoption gave me a home and a family but it did not "cure" what caused me to be in need of a home and a family. Adoption is not a cure, it's a treatment, that - if the adoptee is fortunate and if it's done well - potentially helps makes the sorrows more manageable. Adoptive parents can't erase the initial loss

that is core to adoption, nor can they prevent that loss from impacting the adoptee. Especially since many of the most challenging times for adoptees occur after they leave the safety net of the parents and are out on their own. Which leads me to my second message.

2). The majority of your lifelong relationship with your child will be as adults.

In the past three years, over twenty of my friends have had their first children. I've been empathizing with late nights, potty training issues, sleeping and eating and the lack of couple time and the general overall exhaustion my friends have been experiencing as new parents. Meanwhile, my partner and I have teenagers – a 13-year old son and a daughter who will graduate from high school next year. While my friends are immersed in the daily ins and outs of parenting babies and toddlers – thinking those days will last forever – my partner and I are facing a different reality and a different style of parenting all together. We look at parenting in a much different way – we look at parenting teenagers as learning how to have authentic, long-term relationships with our children as adults.

If you think about it, the majority of our knowledge and information about parenting is how to do the early stuff – the early child development stuff like I mentioned – getting the child to sleep through the night, eating well, keeping them safe. That's the focus of the majority of the parenting books out there. There is a resurgence of advice for when our children become teenagers – I've read those too – *Reviving Ophelia* and books about how to talk to your kids about sex, etc. But have any of you seen a book about how to be a parent to an adult? How do we continue to have good relationships with our kids once they are no longer kids? They're only ours for the first 18-20 years give or take (or for many of us who adopted, even less) – but we hopefully have another 40-50 years of relationship time with our adult children.

It's the same when thinking about parenting adopted children. The majority of the books out there on parenting adopted children are about children and teens – under 18 years old. I think this is something that most adoptive parents haven't

thought about – the relationship they'll have with their adopted children after those children are adults.

Adulthood is when many adoptees start thinking about a birth family search. Or if they have contact with their birth families, adult adoptees need to begin negotiating on their own how much time to spend with the biological family and the adoptive family. They may decide to live in their countries or communities of birth. All these things can freak out adoptive parents, and adult adoptees can smell this fear. As a result, adult adoptees often keep their adoption-related activities from their adoptive parents. It's very common for adoptees to worry about split loyalties regarding birth family relationships or searches.

This can be tough on the adoptee's relationship with the adoptive parent or parents. The adoptee may replicate parent/child attachment and abandonment issues with their adoptive parents. Many of my adult adoptee peers have tenuous or strained relationships with their adoptive families. I've known many adult adoptees that severed contact with their adoptive parents during this phase of life. It's pretty common in young adulthood to exert independence. Having a relationship with an adoptive parent at this stage of life is more a choice – and some adoptees may choose to distance themselves.

Other adoptees may become clingy and overly dependent and have a hard time separating from their parents and family, even to go to college, begin a career or settle into a relationship or begin a family. The transition into adulthood is one that might be more difficult for an adoptee, and adoptive parents might not realize that tensions around moving out of the home, starting a job or career or difficulties in intimate relationships may be adoption related.

Adoptive parents often have complicated relationships with adult adoptees. Particularly with those of us who are a little more "outspoken." As a blogger, this is something that I and some my adoptee blogger peers often discussed with each other – why was there such animosity towards us when we wrote about our thoughts and experiences (especially as a transracial adoptee) and a tendency for adoptive parents, some who were younger than us chronologically, to dismiss our reflections as adolescent angst? I think it's because adoptive parents have been so

caught up in the daily work of parenting *children* that they can't always see their child as an adult adoptee, with their own thoughts and opinions about adoption.

We parent our children with our values and beliefs and hope they take those on as their own when they become adults. We see our children as extensions of us. Adoptive parents tend to think that if they can do the "right" things that they'll prevent their adopted child from going through any difficult times or becoming "an angry adoptee."

I understand why adoptive parents feel raw reading or hearing adult adoptees being critical. A criticism of adoption seems like a criticism of the adoptive parent and their family. So it's fairly common for adoptive parents to dichotomize adoptees into "well-adjusted adoptees" (which means they don't even think about their biological parents and think adoption is the best thing ever and have no desire to search or think about adoption identity) and "angry adoptees" who get pathologized as being dysfunctional, mentally ill, or that they must have had terrible adoptive parents who were abusive. This isn't the case at all. Some of the "angriest" adoptees have the most supportive, amazing adoptive parents. And many of the adoptees from the most dysfunctional and abusive adoptive homes go to great lengths to defend adoption. People are often surprised that I have a good relationship with my adoptive family – they assume from reading my blog that we must be estranged. Do we agree on everything adoption-related? Of course not. We have definitely had our challenges.

It wasn't until legally changing my name that I fully understood that my parents' resistance to my incorporation of a Korean American identity came from a place of fear of losing our relationship. They personalized every attempt I made to "reclaim" my identity as reaction against them. They had set up a dichotomy – either/or – with Korea on one end and them (a mental model of American) on the other end. In this model every step towards Korea meant moving away from them. Only once they understood I was not trying to become more "Korean" in order to leave our relationship they could let go of their fear and become more supportive of my Korean identity. Although I've never been estranged from my family, there have

been times when our relationship has been superficial. Those were the times when my adoptive parents would not walk with me in my journey.

This is a perfect example of how adoption is a life-long issue. I was 36 when I changed my name - an adult, with a partner and two kids. I was hardly a petulant child doing something oppositional in order to hurt my parents. And my parents were in their 60s. If my sister had changed her middle and last names, they would never have felt it was an act of anger towards them. They probably would have questioned her decision, and felt she was making a mistake. But they would not have personalized it. Race and nationality and adoption and adoptive parent fear of rejection got tangled up in my adoption journey. Perhaps residual fear on behalf of some adoptive parents make them more clingy and resistant to their adopted child's normal process of independence. Adoptive parents can strengthen their relationship with their adult adoptee children if they don't personalize their child's steps towards finding out "who they are." They need to remember that this search for identity is a normal part of human development.

3) An adoptee's real identity work begins later than what the "experts" say

Erikson's task for young adults is to develop the capacity for intimacy. This can be a challenge for young adult adoptees. Young adults are developmentally individuating again, re-defining themselves politically, spiritually, and socially from their parents. For adoptees, this might mean if their adoptive parents heavily emphasized adoption that they might not want to identify as adopted and may quit any adoptee groups in which they used to participate. Or it could mean that if the adoptive parents never talked about adoption that the adult adoptee might immerse themselves in adoptee social groups.

Identity work is often considered the developmental task of teenagers and young adults, and for adoptees this happens somewhat, but I've found that many adoptees really don't begin to delve into their adoptee identity until later. For transracial adoptees, racial identity often becomes more of an issue than adoption identity because of the visual differences. When the adoptee is outside the protective and familiar family and community sphere, they can immerse themselves

into communities without disclosing they are adopted. I've found that this time period is when identity work gets intense, particularly for transracial adoptees. When I went into college, I had to explain to people why I had an Anglicized name because there were a large number of international students from Asia at my college and my classmates and teachers had a hard time understanding why I did not have an accent or was not an international student. I never had to answer this question when I lived in my home community because everyone knew I was adopted. It was a period of intense evaluation of what being an adoptee meant, in a way I never had to think about when I lived at home with my family.

In 2009, the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute published a report based on a survey of adult adoptees titled, *Beyond Culture Camp*. Responses from the Korean adoptees surveyed found “most Korean adoptees grew up in communities that were less than 10 percent Asian, but almost half (47%) indicated there are larger numbers of Asians in their current communities. This shift also was reflected in the fact that 67 percent of the Koreans described the extent of diversity in their childhood communities as “not at all” to “not very much,” whereas many (42%) indicated there is “very much” diversity in their communities as adults (p.25).”

I grew up in a suburb of Minneapolis where there was, to my knowledge, only one Korean American family in my school district and a very small handful of African American families. Although we lived 20 miles from the city, my daily interactions with anyone other than White Americans was non-existent. This changed when I became an adult. I found myself a job where the majority of the employees were immigrants and I attended a very diverse university. And, since the day I moved out of my parent's home, I have only lived in the city and in neighborhoods that are racially, ethnically and socioeconomically diverse. As a person of color, this is where I feel comfortable. My parents, on the other hand, don't like where I choose to raise my family. To them you live in my neighborhood because you don't have a choice, and as soon as you can you “move up.” For my partner and myself, living in our neighborhood was our first choice.

Sometimes adoptee identity doesn't hit until the adoptee reaches their 30s or 40s. This could be because the adoptee has reached a point in life where they have

the “space” to begin to explore what being adopted means to them. I am a perfect example of this phenomenon. Growing up, I only had one transracially adopted friend, whom I only saw at church camp, until the summer after fourth grade. But like many childhood friendships, we lost touch. One day, when I was 30 years old, I happened across a copy of Korean Quarterly and the page I happened to open featured the story of a Korean adoptee and her family. There was something familiar about this woman - her name, the references to her father, and the coincidence that her daughter had my name (which is not very common). There was an e-mail at the bottom of the article and I wrote to this woman, hoping it was my friend from so long ago. It was. Less than two weeks later, we were sitting in the middle of a coffee shop catching up on our lives. It was the beginning of my journey to discover who I am as a Korean American adoptee. A year later we would travel to Korea together, for the first time since we were delivered to our adoptive parents in Minnesota.

As amazing as it is to meet other adoptees that have shared similar experiences, if an adoptee is in an intimate relationship this adoption exploration can be a point of contention. I wrote a blog post called, “Being Married to Harlow’s Monkey” in which I shared some of my (and other adoptees I know) struggles with intimate relationships. To date it is the blog post I’ve received the most feedback on from other adoptees.

In the blog post, first I wrote about the impact that attachment and loss can have on an adoptee in terms of their intimate relationships. Adoptees may rush or settle into marriages or relationships that aren’t right for them because they would rather be with anyone than alone. Some adoptees on the other hand may always have “one foot out the door.” I’ve heard many adoptees express they can never feel like they can just settle in to a relationship - the issues with attachment may be expressed as excessive clinginess or again, as a need for total independence. In many ways adult adoptees are replaying their abandonment and attachment issues but this time with significant intimate partner relationships instead of parents. Difficulty with trust and abandonment is the single most shared commonality I’ve found among domestic same-race adoptees, foster-adoptees and transracial and international adoptees. For some adopted persons, that can translate as being stand-

offish, cold and commitment-phobic, with a tendency to leave people before they leave us. For others, this might translate into clinginess, jealousy and neediness with a tendency towards suffocating the very people we love the most. This is what's referred to as insecure attachment.

But one of the biggest areas of conflict or tension I've witnessed is the conflict that results when adult adoptees that have previously not really thought about adoption begins to explore. There is a tendency for the adoptee to become immersed – some might say obsessive – about adoption. The internet has helped feed this with all the blogs and discussion forums. One of the Facebook groups I belong to is for alumni of the White Lily Orphanage in Daegu, South Korea. Currently there are 80+ members, and I'm always struck by how feverish "newbie" adoptees are. There tends to be a pattern where the adoptee discovers other adoptees that have a connection with them in some way. They want to get to know as many other adoptees as they can. They share the most personal, intimate things about their lives with people they barely know just because they have the adoption connection. It's very common for adoptees who meet each other to share their adoption story the first time they meet. Soon there are meet-ups and mini-gatherings and special discussion forums. Recent topics on the White Lily forum include: who has been to Korea, who has considered changing their names and why, who has trouble with dating/relationships, who has been abused in their adoptive homes, and what people thought about the recent legislation passed in Korea, including the right for adoptees to obtain dual citizenship and the new one that just passed a couple weeks ago that would restrict adoptions from Korea.

The impetus to immerse oneself in adoption reflection might be triggered by having a child or meeting another adoptee. If the adult adoptee is partnered and begins to really become "obsessed" about adoption, the partner may wonder "why now?" and become resentful. I've seen a lot of relationships break up because of this. I found this article by the Benevolent Society in Australia best addresses the fears and questions the non-adopted partner might have about their loved one immersing themselves in adoption-related identity work. Some of the words of wisdom in this

article (and I've found many are helpful for adoptive parents to know as well) include:

- You have probably grown up with your biological family. This is a very different experience from being part of an adoptive family. Adoptees are cut off from things that non-adopted people take for granted – birth parents, the extended family, genetic inheritance and sometimes ethnic or racial origins. Adoptees often search in order to re-connect with the past and contrary to many people's beliefs, those who search are not necessarily unhappy with their life.
- Adoptees who have had a happy adoption can also experience feelings of emptiness, of yearning and of something missing in their lives.
- The grief associated with this sense of loss can sometimes surface at the time of specific events, such as the death of an adoptive parent, the illness of a loved one, or on 'happy' occasions such as birthdays, anniversaries or the birth of a child. These situations can all be reminders of the lost birth family
- You may be tempted to undertake the search on your partner's behalf, wishing to protect him/her from possible hurt. However...the search can be part of the healing process for an adoptee. Ask yourself whether you are taking control of the situation rather than protecting your partner.
- You might...feel resentment when [your partner] become obsessed by the search and all their energy is focused on it. You may begin to worry that the search seems to be taking over not only your partner's life but yours
- If there are existing problems in a marriage or relationship, the stress caused by reunion [or identity work] can serve as a catalyst by highlighting these, and sometimes breakdown can result.

[http://www.bensoc.org.au/uploads/documents/IS19_Partners_of_Adoptees_2010_06052.pdf]

With transracial adoptees, another area of conflict for couples in which one or more member is adopted occurs when an adoptee meets others from their racial and ethnic group for the first time and begins to realize they might have missed out on dating opportunities. Some Korean adoptees I know felt pangs of regret that they married white spouses either because of lack of diversity where they lived or because of their inner negative feelings about Asians. Imagine being that person when your partner suddenly regrets being partnered to you because you're not the same race. Many adopted Koreans get divorced or separated after they begin to address their adoptions.

Even though I've semi-retired from my blog, I still get emails from adult adoptees. What adult adoptees who email me write is so similar it is almost a script. Statements like, *I never really thought about my adoption/racial identity until . . . college/marriage/having children. And, I've always felt so isolated.* Most of these adoptees have good relationships with their adoptive parents. Most of them love them to death and don't "regret" their adoptions. But all have in common a feeling of "where do I fit in" and a sense of ambiguous loss. Many have written things like, "my world is turning upside down."

They write to me because for the first time, someone has put into words what they have felt but did not have the language for; or just that perhaps their experiences resonated with what I wrote. These adoptees are only a small fraction of those out there, but knowing they've found something relatable has reinforced my belief that my voice, as critical as it can be at times, is the reason I continue to speak out.

Up until I was 29 years old, I was that "happy, adjusted adoptee." There were some things about my adoption experience that were negative, and many that were positive. I just never told anyone about the negative. I did the adoptee version of the hustle and jive for other folks. You know, telling them what they wanted to hear while inside, I was cringing at my own words. You know what changed? I met other Korean adoptees. Know what they said? They'd had the same experiences I had growing up; the same thoughts, the same feeling of walking in two worlds and fitting in with neither, the same racial incidents at school, church and homes. They were

also trying to find the balance between their adoptive parents and their own personal journey, and between protecting their parents' feelings, or being true to their own.

4) The impact of adoption lasts a lifetime – and for generations to come

Humans are obsessed with their personal histories. We take great pride in tracing our forefathers to the Mayflower or a past president or a king or queen. Witness the naming of sons after fathers (my husband is the third generation John in his family). Family names are important – I named our son after my maternal grandparents, descendent of Oliver Wolcott, who penned his signature on the Declaration of Independence. There is a whole industry surrounding genealogy; web sites to search, books on compiling the data, magazines for the home anthropologist on the most beautiful and elegant method of presentation. More than mere surnames or the family schnoz, we desire to pass on to the next generation family culture, mythology, implied inherited virtues, and a historical context in which to frame the family's journey. I remember being pretty sad thinking about how I had no ability to pass on my cultural heritage to my children. When my daughter was about 4 ½ she asked why I didn't look like my parents and siblings. I explained to her that I was adopted. For a while, my daughter's reaction was to ask where her "Korean grandparents" were. It was difficult to be reminded that I couldn't provide that for her.

When I was pregnant with my daughter at my first prenatal check I had to fill out a standard medical history chart. Until my pregnancy I'd never had a reason to have regular medical care. Was there heart disease or breast cancer or diabetes in my family? Had I had chicken pox or German measles? I knew nothing of my personal medical history from birth to 3 years. As my baby grew inside me so did the frequency of family history issues. At my baby shower I received a baby book and on the second page, there it was – two solid pages of family history waiting for my pen to fill in the blanks. I filled in John's side of the family and my adoptive parents side. But what is missing says more to me than anything else – somewhere

out there is the rest of my history, the family who will never have their names documented in my genealogy because I will never know them.

My daughter was born in the image of her dad. From the beginning, I was fascinated with who she looked like. Did she have my eyes? She had my nose. Her face shape and hair color were definitely not like mine. She had her dad's skin color, eyebrows and curly hair. I assumed she would have the shock of thick, coarse inky black hair typical of Asians, not the fine, curly light brown hair from her paternal side of the family. All my friends and family members said it too; she looks just like her daddy. This upset me. I'd spent my whole life standing out, the only dark head in family photographs. I wanted my children to at least resemble me.

Another transracial adoptee friend of mine told me that recently she was looking at some photos of her two young sons with her adoptive parents and it struck her that it just "looked wrong" to see her two Korean kids sitting on the laps of her White, Scandinavian American parents. Some adoptees become so accustomed to seeing themselves in family photographs being "the odd one" that it doesn't register. But for some reason, seeing her Asian boys with their white grandparents triggered her own sense of racial isolation and feelings like she didn't "fit in" with her family. Another adoptee I know shared that she felt her white adoptive mother "fetishized" her baby, reenacting the orientalized childhood she experienced. She worried that if her child was out with his grandmother that strangers would think he was adopted, and she found herself shocked to feel that way.

I've had adoptee friends share that they're worried about how to be a good parent. Many of my adoptee friends are very anxious parents and are afraid that something will happen that will cause them to "abandon" their child. Pregnancy and childbirth can be very triggering for adoptees. Regular developmental milestones can be triggering as well. One friend who has an almost-3 year old and is expecting another baby later this summer asked me if it was "normal" to bawl the day she realized her daughter was the age she was when she was placed for adoption. This is pretty common, actually – I remember myself the day that I realized my daughter was 14 months old – the day I was found at the city hall in Daegu. MY 14-month old

was saying “mama” and “dada,” she recognized us, she was starting to feed herself and she was walking. When I thought about my daughter being left at City Hall, it was unfathomable. I was triggered again when I realized that at almost three years old, she was the age I was when I was sent on a plane from Korea and flown 15 hours to a strange family in Minnesota. I could not imagine my child having to go through that.

Other things that can trigger an adoptee parent – children’s movies and books, since so many of them feature orphans or children that are abandoned or abused (like so many of the Disney movies. My daughter’s personal favorites were *Annie* and *The Land Before Time* about an orphaned dinosaur). School assignments such as the Family Tree don’t go away when you’re an adult if you have a child and they have to do the assignment. Once again, the adoptee has to decide if they’re going to squeeze in a third branch if there’s no information. And, once again, if your child is multiracial you may have to deal with the question at school of “Is that your mom?” or people thinking that you’re the nanny instead of the parent.

Another way that adoption impacts the adoptee throughout their lives and for generations to come is dealing with an absence of medical history. Since 2004 the Surgeon General’s office has promoted Family Medical Health Day for Thanksgiving – where it is hoped that families share family medical history because it is considered the single most important medical prevention that a person can have. Facing unknown genetic history for myself and my children is an issue I’ve experienced a lot in the past five years. Some developmental and neurobiological disabilities have strong genetic components. My son has Asperger’s Syndrome, which often has a genetic component and my daughter has ADHD which has also been found to run in families. Over the past few years the medical needs of my kids have meant that I’ve been filling out countless medical histories for my kids’ doctors and *Every Single Time* I have to explain to the physician why I don’t have any medical history information for my kids for my side of the family. Not only is this a constant reminder for me that I lack that information for myself, it also stresses me out that I can’t pass on that important medical information for my children.

I used to work at an organization called Minnesota Adoption Resource Network. One of my responsibilities was to answer the information line and I was surprised by the number of phone calls and emails I received that were not from adoptive parents but from adult adoptees or from birth families seeking advice and information about re-connecting with each other. Adoptees in their 50s and older had waited until their adoptive parents passed before they felt they could begin a search and now they feared it was too late. One of the most memorable calls I received was from a woman in her 60s who discovered after her mother passed away that her mother had placed a baby for adoption. This woman wanted to know if it was possible to find her sister. I also received phone calls from children of adoptees who wanted to find their birth grandparents, even though their parent (the adoptee) did not necessarily share that desire. Adoption agencies in Korea are now seeing children of Korean adoptees, searching for information.

For many years my mom has been working on a family genealogy. This past Christmas, my mom shared with me that she had learned her great-granny had been adopted, likely from an orphan train. If you're not familiar with the orphan train movement, let me give you a brief history. From 1854 to 1929, an estimated 200,000 mostly orphaned, abandoned, or homeless immigrant children from New York and other urban cities in the East were placed on trains that traveled to towns in the Midwest, where farm families and townspeople would choose them for fostering or indentured work. The term "put up for adoption" originates with the orphan trains, because the children would be put up on the train platform for the prospective family to view. For my mom, having a question mark in her own family tree actually helped her understand a little better why I felt the need to search for my own roots. I'm an advisory board member for an organization called Adoptees Have Answers in Minnesota and last year we put on an event honoring Orphan Train alumni. As you can imagine there are very few left. I met one man whose grandmother had been adopted from an orphan train. He was so curious about his grandmother's origins that he began a ten-year search to find out where she came from and how she ended up on the orphan train and in the end was successfully able to find her birth family's information. I've also met First Nations people who have

shared their stories about the devastation the Native American Boarding Schools had on their families for multiple generations. And if you ever get the chance to see the film *The Triumverate* by Jean Strauss, you learn that not only was Jean adopted, both her birth mother was also an adoptee, and her birth grand mother had been raised in an orphanage.

I'd like to end today by sharing a poem by Khalil Gibran that serves as my own parenting mantra.

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you.
You may give them your love but not your thoughts.
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.
You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.
The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and He bends you with His might that His arrows may go swift and far.
Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;
For even as he loves the arrow that flies, so He loves also the bow that is stable.

I think this is a beautiful meditation on how to be an engaged parent. I love the idea that as a parent, I am the bow that sets the course for my children to fly off and discover the world. This means that I must be strong yet flexible so that when I launch them, they're able to go to their full distance. And this is what I would like to encourage you to be: strong yet flexible. It takes a lot of strength to be an adoptive parent. Adoptive parents have extra challenges in parenting than those parenting

biological children. And in a lovely way, this poem is a model for adoptive families and addresses the four messages I had for you today.

First of all, as Gilbran wrote, children are not objects to be owned – they are “sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself. They come through you but not from you.” While adopted children literally do not come *from* their adoptive parents in the biological sense, what I love about this line is that all children are seen as part of a larger, extended family and community. As parents it is a gift to have the opportunity to shepherd children to adulthood.

Gilbran writes, “You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you. For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.” Parents can’t erase their child’s past, including the hurts and losses. But they can support their children through their grieving – however that looks – and by using all available resources that are necessary. Unrealistic expectations are often placed on adoptive parents to be the therapist and the parent both. You don’t have to be your child’s therapist and sometimes the best way to help your child if they are struggling with adoption-related issues is to find the appropriate resources for them.

The majority of your relationship with your adopted child will be as adults. Gilbran writes, “You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth. The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and He bends you with His might that His arrows may go swift and far.” Sending them off is tough to think about. I know this first hand. My daughter is so eager to be on her own and experience life as an adult. Of course, I’m much more fearful because I know how hard the world can be. But I see my job as preparing my kids to be competent in being independent as well as valuing relationships and interconnectedness, both with me and with those they choose to build families with in the future. I’ve often told adoptive parents that their real marker of “success” is not whether their child grows up to be an “angry” adoptee or not, but whether they still want to have a relationship with you, and know you’ll be there to support them in their adoption journey.

An adoptee’s real identity work begins later than what the “experts” say. Gilbran wrote, “You may give them your love but not your thoughts. For they have

their own thoughts...their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.” Identity work for adoptees is more complex than for non-adopted persons. Adoptive parents need to acknowledge this and remember that there are no timeline expectations that an adoptee will “resolve” issues around identity. In fact, as with living with loss, an adoptee may be working on identity for their whole lifetime.

And finally, we need to remember that the impact of adoption lasts a lifetime. I’ve figured a lot out over the past four decades as an adoptee, but I know there is so much more I still have to discover. Betty Jean Lifton, an author who is considered one of the founders of the adult adoptee movement in the U.S. passed away last year. Even in her 90s, she was writing and advocating on behalf of adult adoptees.

Being adopted is like reading a book with the first few chapters ripped out. It takes a while to figure out the story when you are missing the introduction or first few chapters. My friend, Laotian adoptee and poet Bryan Thao Worra, described being adopted as “a life written in pencil” because of the constant erasing and re-writing when new information about him and his biological family is discovered. Adoptees are not the only ones with lives written in pencil, however; adoptive parents are also doing a lot of erasing and re-writing.

Some of what I’ve said today may have been difficult to hear. And as this week continues, some of what you’ll hear from other adult adoptees may be difficult too – or even scary. But I hope that rather than being frightened, this week serves as a catalyst instead, motivating you to consider what might be ahead for your adopted child throughout your lives together as a family, so you can begin to reflect on how you might address some of these issues if they come up. I also hope I’ve helped to normalize some of the common areas in which adult adoptees struggle so that you know that these are normal for an adoptee.

I’m here today, at Pact camp, for the same reason I wrote my blog. Since that day in 1999 when I saw myself reflected in another person who had shared so many experiences as me, I knew I was not alone. I write and speak so other adoptees can know *they* are not alone. One of the biggest tragedies I think many of us adoptees experience is isolation. That is why Pact camp is such an important resource and

why I am thrilled to see all of you here. But Pact Camp is just the beginning. Your kids are strong and capable and survivors. My hope for each and every one of you is that this week you'll begin, or continue to build, both the strength and the flexibility you'll need to send your child "swift and far."