



ADOPTEEES ASK ...

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Adoptees Ask...is a place for adoptees to ask the kinds of questions they may find difficult to ask, that may not be politically correct, or that no one seems to want to hear. “Why was I “given away?”” “Who are my “real” parents?” “How come I feel like I never belong anywhere?” And perhaps most importantly, “What can I do to heal?” The answers provided here will come foremost from my work as a psychotherapist with over twenty years’ experience counseling adult adoptees. I’ll also be drawing upon my personal experiences as an adoptee and an advocate for the rights of adoptees as I respond to your questions. My goal is to provide an open, honest environment where “Adoptees Ask” their most important questions and deepen their understanding of their unique, personal experience of being adopted. You can submit your confidential, anonymous questions by emailing them to me at: Karen@karencaffrey.com.

January 2016 – To Be “PC” Or Not To Be “PC”? (Or Perchance To Be Compassionate...)

One of the first thoughts that came to me when starting this column was how we can learn to talk with each other about being adopted without causing offense. Surprised? Perhaps not, if you hang around online adoption forums and have witnessed the intensity of hurt and anger that can be sparked by the words people choose to express their experiences. But how do we speak our truth without being overly cramped by the pressure to be “politically correct”? My hope with this initial post is to provide us all with a little inoculation of compassion as we commence talking about our experiences of being adopted.

In the past century society crafted a narrative for adoptees based on secrecy and pretense. Despite the sometimes benevolent intentions behind this narrative, the effect has been to impose a silencing, shaming and acceptable “story” upon our true stories and experiences. We have been told who are “real” parents are, what questions we may ask of them or society (and perhaps more importantly, what questions we may not ask) and what we can and cannot believe about ourselves, our origins and our lives.

The purpose of language is to communicate. But communication can take many forms. It can be compassionate and heartfelt. Logical and straightforward. Persuasive. It can also be manipulative, critical, shaming or bullying.

As society has begun an historic shift out of secrecy into a more reality-based understanding of adoption, we have an opportunity to explore our own, unique adoption experiences and to find our own voices. However, as any butterfly will tell you, the process of emerging from the dark can be uncomfortable and painful. And it might make us a bit cranky, especially after years of being squashed into a form that doesn’t work for us.

I am starting this column with a call to all of us to respect each other's individual emerging butterfly forms. We are all learning to describe the experience of being adopted to ourselves and to each other. Let's try to have compassion. Let's try to not assume that all adoption experiences are the same, that words which fit your adoption experience necessarily fit others, and that there is room for us to make mistakes.

But let's also be courageous and take the chance of talking frankly with each other. Let's try to speak our truth and not worry so much about whether our words are politically correct, but more about whether they express our heartfelt truth. And let's grant others the same grace.

February 8, 2016 – Adoptees And The Debt That Can Never (And Should Never) Be Paid

Question: What are the signs of, and how can I heal from, being raised like a purchase/charitable contribution? What are some psychological and emotional signs of adoptees who were raised feeling indebted to their adopted parents?

Answer: Your question goes to the heart of what it means to be loved as a unique and valuable human being. We all deeply wish to receive (and give) this kind of love. Yet it is the human condition that we both love, and fail to love, each other.

Charity in its purest sense is a beautiful form of love. We see the hungry child or the victims of a tragedy and rush to help them.

But sometimes charity becomes confused with a sense of obligation or a reaction to inadequate sense of self. I am "doing the right thing" by helping you. I'm giving to you to avoid feeling bad inside me. And since I feel obligated to help you, I believe you are obligated to me. You owe me your loyalty, your gratitude, your tangible help, etc. This isn't love but a (one-sided) trade.

It is a misfortune to be raised by people who are deeply wounded in this way. It is a particular misfortune for adoptees. Many adoptees are already grappling with feeling like they were an object transferred from one set of parents to another. Adoptive parents who believe that their child owes them for their "charity" of adopting will place another layer of pain upon the child's sense of worth as a valued human being, rather than a de-valued commodity.

A sign that you carry this wound is the sense that you must "pay back" others for their friendship and caring, and you feel bad if you don't. You give too many or too expensive gifts. You're always available even when you don't feel like it. You don't truly believe other people's expressions of love, because you can ever give enough to be worthy.

There are many healing steps to take to move from an "obligation" sense of self and relationship to a "love-worthy human" sense. Here are two:

Find a picture of your youngest (infant/child) self. Place it where you will see it every day for a month. Ask yourself, "Is this infant worthy of love? Could she/he possibly owe anyone a debt?" Cultivate compassion for this little one. Remember, she/he is you. When you notice yourself trying to "pay back" someone for their caring, try to stop yourself. How would it feel to NOT "pay back"? (Yikes!) Can you stop yourself once? For a week? Longer? "Paying back" can be a way to avoid the wound that needs your attention. Let it gently bubble up and then attend to yourself with love, positive affirmations and caring. "I am worthy of love even if I don't pay back." "I am loveable just as I am." Breathe. Hug yourself. Breathe some more....

February 15, 2016 – What You Don't Know CAN Hurt You...

Although this column generally follows a reader Question and Answer format, today I am posting a question of my own from my movie review of *Father Unknown* by filmmaker David Quint. It is a compelling story about searching for lost family, intergenerational trauma and healing.

Question: So why, more than half a century later, is David Quint urging, orchestrating and ultimately filming his father's journey back to his country of origin to search for his father?

Answer: I have just emerged from a gripping journey into the world of the Quint family, a deeply courageous trek undertaken by filmmaker David Quint and his father Urban into the shadows of Urban's origins in <http://www.fatherunknown.com/>. I feel privileged to have witnessed a transformation from denial, distance and emptiness to awareness, connection and reality. The arc of their story follows an arc similar to the process of psychotherapy or other personally transformative process.

When is it ok to keep a secret? When are we obligated to tell? One factor in making this distinction is our perception of whether we are harming ourselves or another by keeping the secret. Of course it is human nature that our judgment is most likely to be skewed in answering these questions when we are ourselves afraid of being harmed.

I very roughly divide people into two camps: the "let sleeping dogs lie" folks and the "truth will set you free" folks. Generally, people gravitate towards one or the other camp depending on whether their life experiences have taught them that secrets are helpful or harmful. If you believe secrets have protected you, you will tend toward the "let sleeping dogs lie" camp. If secrets have hurt you, you'll be wearing a "truth will set you free" T-shirt.

Many years ago some people (most importantly, Urban Quint's mother) believed that the identity of Urban's father was a "let sleeping dogs lie" secret she wanted to keep from him. (The film reveals enough information that we can imagine the shame and social judgment that motivated her decision.) So why, more than half a century later, is David Quint urging, orchestrating and ultimately filming his father's journey back to his country of origin to search for his father?

Because when you hide something as essential to a person's humanity as the identity of their father, it shapes not only that person but that person's children. (And perhaps their children's children, though we will need to wait until the youngest Quints are old enough to become filmmakers themselves to know for sure.) The silences, the lack of intimacy, the lessons learned about what is it NOT OKAY to discuss and share within the family erects barriers that do not crumble despite the passage of decades.

To read the rest of this review, <http://www.karencaffrey.com/2016/02/what-you-dont-know-can-hurt-you-the-beautiful-truth-in-father-unknown-by-filmmaker-david-quint/>

February 22, 2016 – Not A Chip Off the Old Block

Question: "My question relates to people [who know my adoptive mother] who are meeting me for the first time and who say the following....

"Oh, you must be the daughter! Don't you look alike!?"

I know I don't carry a sign saying "beware – sensitive adoptee – approach with caution" so I know it's merely a throwaway comment on first introduction in their part, but I do

not look like my mother and I actually don't want to look like her. I prefer it that way. I find myself getting increasingly angry and my response is normally sarcastic and creates an awkward atmosphere. "Well I shouldn't ... I'm adopted!!" Then I hate myself for being so obtuse. Surely that's not normal?

Answer: In our society it's considered normal to comment upon physical or character similarities between family members. It's code for "You belong in this tribe."

Yet as adoptees we live with an essential, genetic truth of not belonging in our families. I am NOT saying adoptees are, by definition, less loved. I'm speaking to the simple fact that if we happen to look like any of our adoptive family members it is just that: a "happening." Not a biological reality. In this way, we NEVER belong.

So someone who comments on our similarity to an adoptive relative is unknowingly drawing (unwanted, unwelcome) attention to how we are NOT connected, rather than to how we are. OUCH. The problem is what to do when this happens.

My take on this is that how we respond to these comments is a personal decision that every adoptee has the right to make for themselves. And we may make different choices depending on the external circumstances as well as our energy level on a particular day. (It can take energy to respond with the truth and possibly getting into an adoption related discussion, for example, while you are in the check-out line at the grocery store.)

Your anger and sarcasm may also be a sign of unhealed pain in your relationship with your mother, but I would encourage you not to take on the burden that it is all about you. It's ok to be angry, and it's ok to not want to look like your adoptive mother. That would be true even if she was your biological mother. You certainly don't have to wear a veneer of unreality to make anyone else happy.

I know some adoptees who can acknowledge the implicit compliment by saying "Thank-you, other people have noticed that, too. But as it happens I'm adopted so our similarities are just by chance." To get to this place and really mean it, one would need to feel deeply accepting of oneself. A personal goal, for sure, but not a cudgel to use against yourself in the meantime. Instead, perhaps bring some gentle awareness to the pain that these comments are touching. It is this pain that needs your attention for you to feel peaceful.

March 1, 2016 – Because You're Worth It

Question: How do I overcome or combat the feelings of being abandoned and rejected? I mean, I WAS WORTH IT. When I am feeling vulnerable in relationships I get triggered even though I know this is not what is currently happening.

Answer: Congratulations on knowing that when you get triggered that it is not currently happening! This means you have developed enough "observing ego" to not get fully pulled into the swirling current of old traumatic thoughts/feelings/body memories, but can keep part of yourself in the present.

You need your present, adult self to do the work of helping your traumatized self. I strongly recommend mindfulness meditation to cultivate the observing self. It can literally affect the structure of the brain to help you become more emotionally and mentally regulated. I recommend Sharon Salzberg's Real Happiness as a good guide for those getting started.

Anchored by your observing ego, what should you do next?

First, say "(An) old feeling of rejection and abandonment has just been triggered in me" either in the privacy of your mind, out loud to yourself, or (if you're with someone who is

sympathetic and aware) to another person. Naming the experience immediately starts to create emotional space from it, and invites in more of your observing self. Then SLOW DOWN. Your system needs time and gentle attention to down-regulate the physiological distress that is happening. Heart racing? Sweaty palms? The edge of tears? The urge to lash out? A great deal of what we mean by being “triggered” is that our bodies are responding “as if” the dangerous event is happening in the present, even when our minds know it is in the past. What do you know already about soothing your physiology? Start doing it. physiology? I highly recommend everyone familiarize themselves with diaphragmatic breathing, and practice it daily. (Then when you need to use it, it will be easier. It’s like making sure there are fresh batteries in the flashlight so we’re not fumbling around in the dark for batteries when the lights go out.) Basic, simple grounding techniques are very helpful. Pay attention to your SENSES. Notice the sensation of the comfortable cushions under your sit bones, the pressure of the soles of your feet on the floor, the velvety slide of the afghan on your skin. Look around you and name six colors, five shapes and four objects. These basic sensory exercises orient your nervous system to the present, which is where you are safe. And yes, you ARE safe in the present (we’re assuming you’ve been triggered and haven’t actually been rejected). How do you know? The traumatized self feels physically overwhelmed. She may even feel she is going to die. Present day adult selves feel like they have the capacity to handle things, even when things are difficult. Work with your senses and over time your emotions will join your mind in the awareness that YOU ARE WORTH IT. (Love, that is. J)

March 7, 2016 – Why Doesn’t She Love Me?

Question: “Why doesn’t she love me? What did I do?”

Answer: I received this question as part of a rather detailed email from an adoptee who has years of experience in reunion and adoption reform. I was expecting an intellectual question, as this person has done much reading and thoughtful contemplation about adoptee issues. Instead, out pops a question that resonates to the core of my adoptee heart and, I suspect, the core of any adoptee’s heart who dares to go deep enough to touch it. “Why doesn’t she (my birth mother) love me?”

My own heart rang in an echo of pain as my eyes traveled across the words. And I wanted to weep, for all of us.

The email continued, “I don’t think I need an answer to that question. I really need to just move on, and feel stuck ... I just want whatever stupid hold she has on me (or that I’ve put on myself) gone.”

How do you move on when you know **why** she doesn’t love you (or at least why she behaves in a very unloving way towards you) but it doesn’t change your need to be loved? When you know it is her own damaged psyche which keeps her from loving you? Why isn’t the awareness that the problem lies within her enough to set you free?

I offer two answers. The first is poetic and genetic.

First, because it is very, very, very hard to fully detach from the being within whose body you dwelled for the first nine months of your life. The being whose blood was (literally) your blood; whose heart beat steadily above you while you grew inside her womb; whose voice sent vibrations through your bones as each marrow cell was formed. The being you

are designed by millions of years of evolution to cling to because your very life depended on it.

It is no small thing, no small thing at all, to emotionally, psychologically and spiritually detach from the woman whose body was your gateway into this world.

The second answer is psychological. I offer this excerpt from a related, personal experience:

More than twenty years ago I was chatting with one of my birth sisters about how I struggle to explain to people why my birth parents, who were married at the time, gave me away. My sister quipped, "Just tell them you were bad!" and howled in laughter. In that instant I felt myself split in two. One part of me howled right along with her. It was so obviously ridiculous that anyone would believe an infant was bad. Another part contracted in pain as if a thousand knives were stabbing my heart. The younger, vulnerable part of me believed it was true: they gave me away because I was bad. What do we do when a younger part of us is stuck in an old place? This kind of stuck cannot be defeated, avoided or intellectualized away. More here - http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/06/magazine/should-a-sibling-be-told-shes-adopted.html?_r=2

March 14, 2016 – How could my family have kept the fact that I am adopted from me? How can I ever trust them, or myself, again?

NOTE: Today's question is a hypothetical question posed by me in response to "The Ethicist" column in the New York Times on March 2, 2016. In that column a woman who was the biological child of her parents asked whether she should tell her sister, who was adopted, the truth about her being adopted. Her parents had exacted a promise from her as a child to not tell the adopted sister the truth. The parents said they would eventually tell her sister she was adopted, but they never did. The biological sibling kept the secret even when her adopted sister asked questions about, for example, her physical differences from other family members. The adopted sister is now an adult and has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. The Ethicist (Kwame Anthony Appiah) opined, "Your sister really is entitled to know this basic fact about her life and they aren't entitled to command your silence indefinitely (though you should tell them if you're breaking it)." Here is a link to the full column – http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/06/magazine/should-a-sibling-be-told-shes-adopted.html?_r=0

Question: How could my family have kept the fact that I am adopted from me? How can I ever trust them, or myself, again?

I recently learned that I am adopted after accidentally overhearing a conversation between my aunt and uncle. I wondered many times over the years if this was true. My older sister and I are very close, yet every time I have asked her about it she made a joke or changed the subject.

I am devastated that my parents and my sister have lied to me about this my whole life. I keep wondering who else knew but didn't tell me. Surely my grandparents, aunts and uncles, and maybe my cousins, knew? Did the neighbors know? My minister? I am starting to feel paranoid wondering who else knew and never told me.

I have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and the doctors asked me to provide my medical history. I realize now that all the medical history I have given my doctors is

wrong. Also, I don't have any idea what my true biological medical history is. I'm afraid this may affect my treatment.

I am angry, hurt and confused. And I feel deeply betrayed. I've struggled for years with self-doubt and have a hard time trusting myself.

Answer: I am deeply sorry to hear how your family so grievously betrayed your trust. Every human being has an absolute right to know the truth about themselves, particularly in regard to something as deeply personal and important as one's biological origins.

You have unfortunately joined a club of people referred to in the adoption reform world as "LDAs" or "Late Discovery Adoptees." These are people who were adopted into their families at a young enough age that the truth about their adoption could be hidden from them by their parents and others. Continue reading at

<http://www.karencaffrey.com/2016/03/part-ii-how-could-they-have-lied-to-me-for-so-long-about-being-adopted/>

March 21, 2016 – “Who Am I?” Movie Review of Kung Fu Panda 3: A Modern Narrative of the Adoptee’s Journey (With A Few Old Myths Still Hanging On)

Part I

A much more realistic and grounded answer to this question is being viewed by young adoptees and their parents in the movie theaters today in Kung Fu Panda 3. Although we are not fully there yet, we are seeing the end of the pretend “as if” family and “denial of reality” myths in adoption, and the development of a new, more reality-based cultural narrative.

I recently watched Kung Fu Panda 3 through the eyes of my adoptee, psychotherapist, and adoptee rights advocate selves. The movie is a coming of age tale combined with the particular issues of self-discovery experienced by adoptees. Yes, Po Panda, otherwise known as Kung Fu Panda, is an adoptee (as anyone who has seen the first two installments knows).

This movie is a bell weather of the massive changes in our societal adoption narrative over the past few decades. This movie would not have been made during my childhood in the '60s and '70s. Or if it had been, it would have been so rife with the myth, misinformation and stigma that surrounded adoption in those days it would have been more harmful than good for adoptees and their families.

As it is, a great deal of the story busts the unreality surrounding the adoption experience and provides an updated, real, compassionate narrative for everyone involved.

(Unfortunately there is at least one noteworthy exception.)

The story line in the three movies is that there are various forces of darkness afoot and a “Dragon Warrior” must be found who will vanquish them. (In Chinese Martial Arts, a Dragon Warrior is considered a master of all things and the apex of true wisdom.) In the first movie, through a series of comic circumstances, Master Oogway identifies the affable, uncoordinated Po Panda as the next Dragon Warrior in the making. Po has been raised by his adoptive father Mr. Ping who found him in a box of radishes by the side of the road. The third movie begins with the dark Master Kai, who was banished to the spirit realm by Master Oogway 500 years ago, stealing chi from all the other masters so he can reincarnate and take over the world.

Po is meanwhile at home in his village and dojo, feeling uncertain about himself and asking, “Who am I?” Master Shifu counsels him about what a difficult question that is. “Master Oogway sat alone in a cave for thirty years asking only (that question!)” He tells Po, “You don’t even know who you are.”

At the same time, Po birth father’s Li Shan (Li) suddenly appears on the scene. He has been searching for Po because he received a “message from the universe.” First, let’s notice that a birth parent (a birth father!) searching for his lost son is relatively rare even in current times. Continue reading at <http://www.karencaffrey.com/2016/03/kung-fu-adoptee-panda-3-movie-review/>

March 28, 2016 – “You All Look Just Like Me!” Movie Review of Kung Fu Panda 3: A Modern Narrative of the Adoptee’s Journey (With A Few Old Myths Still Hanging On) – Part II

When we left Po Panda last week he was preparing to return to the secret panda village “to learn who I really am” in order to master chi and become a true Dragon Warrior. Po experiences incredible, innocent reunion joy when he arrives at the village and sees other pandas for the first time. As the other pandas crowd excitedly around him, he is entranced by his physical similarity to them.

“You look just like me but a baby! You look just like me but you’re old! You look just like me but you’re fat! You all look just like me!”

This deeply human urge to experience physical evidence of your connection to another human drives many adoptees. “If I could just see a picture....” is something I’ve heard countless times.

Almost forty years ago in the first phone call I had with my birth mother, she blurted out “Do you have a big space between your front teeth?” (I did.) It is a defining trait of my biological relatives. Her question put words to a deep inner longing: to see someone whose face looks like the one in the mirror. It is something the non-adopted may barely note. But not adoptees. Not Po.

There is also a dark side of reunion for Po. Po was deprived of the experience of naturally becoming a panda. He doesn’t know how to roll (a favored method of panda locomotion.) He startles the pandas with his ignorance of his birthright of eating several dumplings at a time (versus only one). (“I knew I wasn’t eating up to my potential!”) Having missed a lifetime of living with his tribe, he doesn’t fully fit in. He has missed a lot, and his sense of difference may well be permanent.

Happy reunion stories are portrayed in the media and there are many which truly are happy. But for at least some adoptees even a successful reunion brings into sharp relief what they lost by being separated from their birth families. This loss cannot be “fairy tale-d” away. As with any loss, the loss itself and the feelings it engenders (sadness, anger) must be acknowledged and experienced to move beyond it. I’m glad the movie showed both Po’s joy and his losses, without glossing over it.

However, I had more difficulty with their handling of another critical element of the adoptee’s experience.

After teaching Po how to do a deep, relaxing panda sigh, Li pulls Po into his home, saying “I want to show you something.” There, on a candlelit altar, is a picture of a momma panda holding a baby. Po finally asks the question that every adoptee is asking, and yet until now no one has seen fit to mention.

“Is that my mom?”

Next week: Kung Fund Panda 3 slips into adoption myth...

April 4, 2016 – “Is that my mom?” Kung Fu Panda 3 Movie Review – Part III

We left off last week with Po’s birth father Li pulling Po into his home, saying “I want to show you something.” Inside is a candlelit altar with a picture of a momma panda holding her baby. Po finally asks the question on every adoptee’s mind.

“Is that my mom?”

Yes.

Li tells Po his mother (whose name we’re never told) was fleeing the evil Lord Shen and his wolves when she hid baby Po in a box of radishes along the roadside. We see her distract the wolves by running in the opposite direction, after which she is presumably killed. (We previously learned that Po’s adoptive father Mr. Ping found Po in a box of radishes.)

This is the part of the movie I liked the least. It perpetuates adoption myths that are incredibly harmful to birth mothers and adoptees (and the adoptive parents who raise them.)

There is an egregious myth that women who relinquish their children are self-sacrificing heroines who are “saving their children’s lives” by giving them away to better, more suitable parents. In fact, many pregnant women have been brain-washed by society, adoption agencies and their families to believe they were shameful, inadequate and immoral women who were incapable of mothering. They were told it was selfish of them to keep their own children. This myth denies the reality of the history of massive forced relinquishments in our society, which many believe are continuing in more subtle, yet powerful ways in the for-profit adoption industry.

Adoptees were often told lies like “your parents died in a car accident.” This tactic is designed to silence the adoptee’s natural questions about their own identity, or desire to know the woman (or tribe) from whom they were birthed. The self-sacrificing, dead birth mother is a front for these kinds of dishonest abusive practices.

This myth also pressures adoptees to ignore and silence their emotions such as anger, grief or distress at being given away. After all, what kind of adoptee questions the decision of a mother who sacrificed her life to save him? (A bad one...)

It’s interesting that Po’s mother isn’t even given a name. It’s easy to ignore a nameless person. Names make people real.

Lastly, it bothers me that the scene focuses solely on Li’s grief. Li says of Po’s mother, “She was the total package. Smart, beautiful, the love of my life. I really had it all until the one moment when I lost everything.” Po comforts Li by placing a paw on his shoulder saying, “You don’t ever have to worry about losing me again.” Really? Why is the child comforting the parent? (A suspicious psychological dynamic in general.) Why isn’t Li comforting for Po for losing not only his parents but his entire community and culture? Another miss regarding the adoptee’s experience.

Next Week: The movie ends with a more progressive understanding of adoptee loyalty binds and identity...

April 11, 2016 – “Thanks, Dads!” Kung Fu Panda Movie Review – Part IV Conclusion

Finally, we arrive at the two most adoptee-positive, myth-busting aspects of Kung Fu Panda 3. The first is the resolution of the relationship between Po’s fathers. The second is the conclusion of Po’s journey of self-discovery.

The dominant cultural narrative about adoption has been that the adoptee can have only one set of “real” parents. The historical roots of this are based in now discredited genetic and psychological beliefs. Yet any healthy narrative for adoptees must incorporate the reality that they have two equally valuable set of parents. Devaluing any one of the adoptee’s parents devalues a part of the adoptee.

Would you ever ask a child of divorce, “Is your mother or your father your real parent?” Of course not! Parenting experts specifically caution divorced parents not to degrade the other parent to the child. This places the child in a harmful loyalty bind and risks the child concluding, by inference, there is something wrong with them, too.

So why would anyone ever deem any one of an adoptee’s four parents less valuable than the others? The fact that the four parents play a different role (or no apparent role at all) does not diminish their place in the adoptee’s history.

There is an incredibly touching conversation between Po’s birth father Li and his adoptive father Mr. Ping where they each come to understand their importance to Po. It is Mr. Ping who reaches out to Li after Po storms off, angry at Li for lying to him about not possessing the secret of Chi. Mr. Ping says to Li, “Look, he’s hurt, he’s confused and he still thinks he needs to save the world. He needs both his dads.” The two fathers unite in helping Po fight the evil forces.

Bravo! Po needs both his dads. Of course he does! Not for only one dad to be “real.” Not for one dad to be second best or erased. He needs his dad who has raised him and fed him dumplings. He needs his dad who has shown him how to be a panda, his birthright. Po needs both dads because he needs ALL of himself.

And here the movie shines. Discovering his panda birth-self is not the end of Po’s journey of self-discovery. Since the pandas don’t know the secret of chi, Po has to take a next step to figure it out on his own.

When Po confronts (and defeats) the evil warrior Kai in the spirit realm, Kai demands of him “Who are you?” Po responds, “I’ve been asking myself the same question. Am I the son of a panda? The son of a goose? A student? A teacher? It turns out I’m all of them! I am the Dragon Warrior.” By claiming ALL parts of himself, Po discovers the powerful secret of chi and becomes his complete, integrated self. Which is what all of us, adopted and non-adopted alike, must seek and become.

Go, Po!

April 18, 2016 – When Your Therapist Doesn’t Get Being Adopted

Question: Why does my therapist tell me being adopted doesn’t have anything to do with my problems?

Answer: The red flag here is that your problems do have something to do with being adopted and this is being ignored or denied. I’d like to say this could never happen. Unfortunately, this is not my experience.

This is from a chapter I wrote in the anthology *Adoption Therapy: Perspectives from Clients and Clinicians on Processing and Healing Post-Adoption Issues*:

“For many years the dominant cultural narrative in America has actively denied the distinctiveness of being adopted. My sad experience in speaking with adoptees who have come to me after receiving counseling from other therapists is that far too often, these counselors (who may be excellently qualified in other respects) lack the education, training, and basic knowledge about the experience of being adopted to adequately help their adoptee clients. Worse, I’ve seen some adoptees whose therapists actively dismissed or denied the impact of being adopted on their client’s lives and concerns. This is as damaging to an adoptee as it would be to tell a person of color that race is not a factor in her life, or in how she experiences herself as being subject to discrimination. In my opinion, counseling adoptees requires a specific competency about the experience of being adopted, both intra-psychically and within our culture.” (Find this book on Amazon - <https://www.amazon.com/Adoption-Therapy-Perspectives-Clinicians-Post-Adoption-ebook/dp/B00N2A6HJI>)

Not knowing your specific problems I can’t say for sure that being adopted is connected to them. And it is true that the simple fact of being adopted does not mean that every adoptee needs therapy, any more than it means every member of any other minority group needs therapy. However, our job as therapists is to hold the client’s history (and particularly their trauma history) in our awareness as a possible factor in any problem they are experiencing. I certainly want to encourage you to have an in-depth discussion with your therapist about why he/she is ruling out this aspect of your personal history as being related to whatever issues you are dealing with.

Adoptees, in general, benefit by working therapists who have a multi-cultural competency in the experience of being adopted. You have a right to ask your therapist or your potential therapist questions about their experience and training. A good therapist will be very willing to answer these questions. After all, we want to help the people we can help and refer those we can’t help to others who can.

Some therapists are already adoptee competent. Some are willing to learn. I’ve heard of wonderful healing relationships that have developed between adoptees and therapists who learned with them. An excellent website for both you and your therapist to find adoptee authored and recommended resources is Adoptee Reading Resources at <http://adopteereading.com/>. I strongly suggest working with a therapist who has a somatic-based orientation, an understanding of trauma and pre- and peri-natal development, and who can work in resonance with deep emotion and presence.

April 25, 2016 – Is This Bond with My Birth Sister Normal?

Question: I found my biological family including a sister with whom I have become very close. We text, talk on the phone and see each other in person whenever we can. I find myself thinking about her all the time. I never had siblings, nor anyone in my life that I could keep having that, “Yeah, me too!” feeling with. Is this normal? Will it end?

Answer: Human beings have many kinds of “merging” and “being at one with” relationships. Mother/infant, best friends, “falling in love,” sexual experiences, soldiers at arms, “bromances”; the list is endless. They can be deeply powerful, intense and very meaningful.

Such bonds can and do form between adoptees and their found birth family members: parent/child, siblings, half-siblings, cousins, etc. Merging can be particularly likely when sharing a genetic connection like you do with your sister. Similarities such as shared

physical characteristics, emotional tendencies, scent, facial expressions and tone of voice can contribute to the “we are one” sense.

Often what is happening in these relationships is that our earliest attachment templates have been activated. We are biologically programmed as a matter of survival to attach to our caretaker. Attachment needs tend to get activated in subsequent close relationships. But we are not literally “one” with another but are two separate selves. We mature by separating from the mother/attachment figure. Ideally the mother handles it in an age appropriate fashion so that the child feels comfortable being both “at one” (you and me) and separate (me).

As with most things in life this ideal hits bumps in the road. Many people struggle to keep a clear sense of themselves both as individuals and as connected to another. This is most difficult when the “we are one” stage naturally starts to pass.

How does this look? Someone starts to separate. Perhaps they feel “full.” (Their need to contact has been met). Or busy. Or invaded. The other person may be okay with this and return to their own separate sense of self. Or the separation may energize their attachment wounds. They feel rejected. Or panicked. Or confused. Or, or, or...

Conscious awareness, communication and knowledge of one’s personal issues becomes critical. We can and must learn to both be close to and separate from others. And we really want to know that we can tell the difference between our old attachment wounds getting energized and what is happening in the present.

This can be particularly challenging for adoptees because we were prematurely separated from our biological mothers, which frequently created attachment wounds. Many of us experienced subsequent attachment breaks through foster care. If these wounds get touched in our present day relationships, we may be overwhelmed by our feelings. It is wonderful that you feel such a close connection with your sister. Enjoy it, stay conscious, and be mindful that if one of you needs some space it might mean nothing more than you are two separate people.

May 2, 2016 – Should I Even Exist?

Question: “How does one get past the fact that they weren’t supposed to be born to begin with, when that is coupled with the knowledge that their adoptive parents didn’t want them either? I was never supposed to exist and no one was happy about my entering the world. The only possible way I know to get past this is to pretend that I just landed on earth one day, not born to anyone, and that I am a different human-like species than everyone around me.”

Answer: For reasons I can only guess at as a mere human myself, you have been born into a life which has issued a stark invitation to transcend the powerful human tendency to see ourselves as others see us.

It is a basic tenet of psychology that self-image develops through a process of mirroring between an infant/child and their caretaker(s). Through millions of verbal and nonverbal interactions in our early years we absorb lessons about how to feel about ourselves. Since we are raised by humans no one develops perfect self-love, but usually we develop enough to at least get by.

But what if we get the message we aren’t even supposed to BE. How do we bootstrap ourselves out of this fundamental failure on the part of our parents to create a place of welcome?

Let me ask you a question. Do you believe your four parents are uniquely qualified to evaluate the worth of another human being? Are they endowed with special perception, omniscience, love and wisdom?

I didn't think so.

So how do you heal the massive wound created by the imperfect people who created and parented you, who are themselves particularly damaged around the right to exist and be loved?

You may (gently) need to stop trying to "get past it." The most successful healing I have witnessed around these wounds involves a deep "getting into" the reality of the somatic and spiritual pain involved (which often transect.) The point is not to re-traumatize but to build internal resources of love, groundedness and spirit with loving, skilled helpers. You must become your own bodhisattva.

This is paraphrased from my chapter in *The Adoptee Survival Guide*:

"I am fairly certain that the point of existence is love. Somewhere, somehow, a person must grasp this essential truth in order to heal. It can be like pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. Believe me I understand how difficult this is when the demons in your head are screaming that you are a worm, that your own mother gave you away, that no one has loved you and no one ever will. I really, really understand.

I also really, really understand that these voices are completely mistaken. And I can say that even though we've never met and I know nothing about you. How do I know? See above, "I am fairly certain..." See more about the Adoptee Survival at

Guide <https://www.amazon.com/The-Adoptee-Survival-Guide-Adoptees-ebook/dp/B00U7PTACM>

This task is difficult, but not impossible. Not impossible at all.

Namaste. (My spirit honors yours.)

May 10, 2016 – Am I An Adoptee If My Mother Took Me Back?

Question: My mother placed me and my younger sibling in the care of others when we were infants. When I was several years old she reclaimed us. I have no early memories of her and never felt bonded to her. I am for all intents and purposes very much like an adoptee. Am I an adoptee if my mother took me back?

Answer: Your question brings to light the incredible variety of situations experienced in adoptive, foster and kinship care. At a bare minimum, an "adoptee" is a person who was transferred from a biological mother to an adoptive family with no intermediary. More frequently there was at least one interim step of foster care placement for days, weeks or months. Some experienced multiple placements, often due to abuse or neglect.

Placements were with strangers or within extended family networks. Occasionally a child ends up back where they started, with their original biological mother.

I see many adoptees in my psychotherapy practice. But sometimes I find myself sitting across from a new client who has not identified as an adoptee but who "feels" like one. I find myself wondering if they were adopted and it was hidden from them. Or perhaps they will eventually reveal they are adopted. Yet as their story unfolds it becomes apparent they were not, in fact, adopted.

So what do they "feel" like? They feel unmoored. Untethered. Unbonded. Lost. There is a sense that not only are they "unmothered," but as if they don't have a mother (although they literally do.)

Your question caused me to revisit the amazing classic *Women Who Run with The Wolves*, by Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Ph.D. I highly recommend it, particularly the chapter on “Finding One’s Pack: Belonging As Blessing” where Estes examines the tale of The Ugly Duckling and the quest for our wild woman nature. She talks about the “exile of the unmatched child,” and the ambivalent, collapsed and unmothered mothers. But she also tells us of the strong mother:

“Even if you had the most wonderful mother in the world, you may eventually have more than one. As I have often told my own daughters, “You are born to one mother, but if you are lucky, you will have more than one. And among them all of you will find most of what you need...Relationships between women, whether the women share the same bloodlines or are psychic soulmates, whether the relationship is between analyst and analysand, between teacher and apprentice, or between kindred spirits, are kinship relationships of the most important kind.”

Technically, an adoptee is someone who was legally made the child of a non-biological parent(s). But I think many people like you experience themselves as not part of the family that raised them. For those people as well as adoptees, the healing journey is about becoming who they truly are and finding the tribe to which they truly belong. Seek, and ye shall find.

May 16, 2016 – How Do You Feel About Your Name Having Been Changed When You Were Adopted? Part I

Note: I was personally asked an adoptee-related question that I decided to answer here because, remarkably, no one has ever asked me before. In the introduction to this column I share that I would be writing from several perspectives including my personal role as an adoptee, my professional role as a psychotherapist, and my adoptee rights advocacy role. I’m going to answer this question from all three perspectives.

Question: How do you feel about your name having been changed? I have always found it strange that adoptive parents change the name of a person...that baby already has a name.

Answer: Adoptee, author and adoption reform advocate Betty Jean Lifton, Ph.D. wrote about the “Ghost Kingdom.” The Ghost Kingdom is inhabited by all the “might have beens” created by adoption. For adoptees like myself born during the era of closed, secret adoptions, our birth identity was hidden from us. Typically, infants were whisked away to their adoptive families as quickly as possible. They simply didn’t know their birth families and, of course, never knew their birth name. Who we might have been, the parents we might have had, and the families we might have grown up in were “ghosts” to us.

I am one of the rare adoptees from that era who learned my birth name legally and at a fairly young age. I still remember the moment at age fourteen when I first saw the court order finalizing my adoption. I read a name I had never seen before. After questioning my mother a short time later, I realized the name was mine.

That name, that infant who I was before I became the “me” I know, lives in the ghost kingdom. I will never be her. She stopped existing when the judge signed my adoption decree in 1960. Despite thirty-seven years of reunion with my birth family she remains locked in stasis, unrealized.

How do I feel that I lost her name? (My name?) That I stopped being her? I feel strange. Sad. And still after all these years, I feel pain. She is the “me” I never became and never will become.

But in a strange way seeing her name, seeing MY name, also made her real. It was not possible to maintain any denial that my existence began with my adoption. There, in printed, gold-sealed state-court splendor was proof that I had been born someone else. That another “me” existed before “me.”

If you have been reading this column you know that one of my concerns for adoptees is that we are often pressured (explicitly or implicitly) to identify either our birth or adoptive parents “real.” This also means we have to disown that part of us that descended from the “non-real” parent(s). I refuse to choose. I refuse to diminish any part of myself or divorce myself from the “me” who was and could have been.

Next week: More answers...

May 23, 2016 – How Do You Feel About Your Name Having Been Changed When You Were Adopted? Part II

As to my adoptive parents changing my name, I can’t imagine it even occurred to them that I already had a name when they got me. The adoption world of that era considered infants to be “tabula rasa,” named and raised and parented “as if” the infant had no prior identity or existence. There was no malfeasance on their part in naming and claiming me as their own.

While this is my personal story and experience, as a psychotherapist I have found that adoptees have many different experiences around their birth name. Most haven’t thought about having had a birth name. They only come to an awareness of this if they are among the minority who have searched or have the right of access under a few state laws.

However, as laws are being modernized and adoptees increasingly obtain access to identifying information about themselves and their relatives, more and more are learning their birth names.

Some adoptees find out they weren’t fully named. Some were named “Baby Boy Smith” or “Baby Girl Jones.” Some have first, middle and last names. Whatever the name, it is uncommon for an adoptee to NOT have a reaction to hearing their birth name. It can be a very searing moment of reality. Often the emotions that arise are an encapsulation of previously denied or repressed emotions regarding their adoption. A few have no reaction at all, or at least no immediate reaction. I try to make room for each adoptee to have and explore this highly personal and private experience.

As an advocate, I find it to be a reprehensible abuse of power to withhold an adoptee’s birth name from them. It is the worst form of identity theft to deprive another human being of true and identifying information about their birth, when the only reason the theft can succeed is because it is perpetrated upon a helpless infant.

It is true that adults must sometimes act on behalf of children and make the best decisions they can in the best interests of the child. But we don’t have to steal a child’s identity from them as part of this exercise of our fiduciary duty of care. I would argue the opposite is true. Our duty of care to a vulnerable human being is to hold their assets (their birth name and identity) safely in trust until they are of an age where we can return them to their rightful owner.

There are more potentially complicated situations where children were adopted at older ages and have more awareness of their birth name. If a child is adopted from another culture their birth name may also connect them in other ways to their origins. I would love to invite other adoptees whose experiences regarding their birth names are different from mine to send me questions for future columns.

June 9, 2016 – Does My Birth Father Have the Right To Know My Birth Mother's Identity?

Question: I have found my birth father and confirmed our relationship by DNA testing. He welcomed me into his life although he never knew I existed. But he doesn't know who my birth mother is. He contacted the adoption agency to find out but they refused to disclose her name to him. The agency is claiming he was notified about me before his parental rights were terminated but they won't provide any proof. Is this right? Shouldn't he have been told about me? Shouldn't he be told who the mother of his child is?

Answer: It is only in recent years that the rights of men are being considered in adoption and usually only because of the risk of a "failed" adoption if their parental rights are not legally terminated. Past practices and laws frequently ignored the rights of the father. It was assumed he would be grateful for not being identified and faced with the burden of paternity. Even if the law required he be notified adoption agency practices were frequently loose in this regard.

At first I found myself wondering how a man could father a child and not know the identity of the mother. It is fairly common for a man to discover he fathered a child that the mother never told him about. Hiding a pregnancy is relatively easy. However, in my experience it is rare for that man to not know the identity of the woman who gave birth to his child. Men usually know who they have sex with even if they don't know the woman became pregnant.

However, upon reflection I can think of many circumstances where a man might not know the identity of a woman he impregnated. First, if the man and woman were anonymous to each other. (Think Erica Jong.) Or if the woman lied about her identity. Or if the man was under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Another possibility is if he had numerous sexual partners and the mother could be one of several or many women. And I'm sorry to say that rape is a possibility although it sounds unlikely in your situation. For purposes of answering your question I am going to assume no violence was involved. So we need to turn to what the law required. Since adoption laws vary from state to state it would depend on when and where the adoption took place. As mentioned above, even if the law required notice some agencies may have ignored the law. Or if your father could not be located some state laws provide that publishing a notice in a local newspaper constitutes "constructive" notice. To find out what the law was in the state where you were adopted you probably need to contact a lawyer. Regardless of the law what we know is that your father didn't know about you.

So what rights does your birth father have? (<http://www.karencaffrey.com/2016/06/more-on-a-birth-fathers-right-to-know/>)

June 29, 2016 – “The Call” And The Strange Covenant That Makes My Heart Ache – Part I

SPOILER ALERT: This personal review of Tanya Barfield’s play “The Call” at TheaterWorks in Hartford contains spoilers.

My reaction to “The Call” was primarily and deeply personal. Adoption, and one’s feelings about it, is a very, very personal thing. And since I am focusing on the personal I want to mention that the playbill describes Ms. Barfield as “an adoptive mother with an Ethiopian daughter.” A Google search also told me she was raised by her biological mother and a stepdad who was a father to her, and this caused some to consider her an adoptee. It is personal to her, too.

“The Call” is about becoming a parent by adoption in a world where there is still too much need for adoption to exist. It is about Annie and Peter, a white married couple who have been unable to conceive despite fertility treatments and thus are considering first, a domestic adoption, and then an international adoption from Africa. Their journey is shared with their African American friends who are also a lesbian couple, Drea and Rebecca.

I went alone and sat in the theatre looking at everyone’s faces. Who were the adoptive parents? Who were the birth mothers and fathers? How many other adoptees were there? I felt strangely anonymous and ghostlike. I couldn’t help experiencing myself as the child these people were thinking about whether to take, to parent. This child is me. I envisioned myself standing up and yelling at the crowd, “Isn’t anyone going to ask me what I want? Don’t I get to speak?”

Of course this is the adoptee’s essential dilemma. When we’re infants or young children we can’t speak for ourselves. So someone else attempts to divine our wishes and speak for us. At least that is how it is supposed to work. People are supposed to speak in our “best interests” (the usual legal standard in child welfare laws governing adoption).

Or perhaps they don’t attempt to divine our wishes, but merely to divine their own. I give Ms. Barfield great credit for showing the raw, real and sometimes purely selfish wishes going on inside of Annie and Peter. They want to be parents. There is no crime in this. And they want The Full Monty. Parents to a child they conceive, birth and raise to adulthood. Parents whose child has only one mother and one father. Are we to condemn them?

I won’t. But neither will I assume their desires are the same as the child’s.

When they are planning a domestic adoption from an expectant mother Annie wonders to Peter in half protest, “Do you think you can go to the maternity ward and take the baby from her arms!?” “She agreed to it!” he exclaims. Annie pauses and muses, “A strange covenant...”

A covenant to which I never agreed. And one that, over half a century later, still makes my heart ache.

A strange covenant, indeed.

July 11, 2016 – “The Call” Part II – Do Adoptees Need To Be Rescued?

SPOILER ALERT: This review of Tanya Barfield’s play “The Call” contains spoilers.

Last week I wrote about my visceral reaction as an adoptee to witnessing prospective adoptive parents discuss whether to adopt a child. I said, “Of course this is the adoptee’s essential dilemma. When we’re infants or young children we can’t speak for ourselves. So someone else attempts to divine our wishes and speak for us.”

I nonetheless found myself drawn steadily out of the adoptee position and into that of observer or arbiter. I am no longer a child and was never this prospective adoptee. I am an adult and informed by my particular adoption experience. I found myself drawn into the position of asking, “What is best for this child?”

Playwright Barfield introduces us to Alemu, an emigre from Africa. He wants Annie and Peter to take supplies to Africa should they decide to adopt this child. He tells them of the great suffering in Africa including disease and possible death.

His words pull on our heartstrings but also invoke the rescue fantasies (or realities?) of those who consider international adoption. *The Child Catchers: Rescue, Trafficking and The New Gospel of Adoption* (<https://www.amazon.com/Child-Catchers-Rescue-Trafficking-Adoption/dp/1586489429>) by Kathleen Joyce (who like playwright Barfield is an adoptive mother of an Ethiopian daughter) sheds light on the powerful religious and financial forces fueling these fantasies. “Overseas, conservative Christians preside over a spiraling boom-bust adoption market in countries where people are poor and regulations weak, and where hefty adoption fees provide lots of incentive to increase the ‘supply’ of adoptable children, recruiting ‘orphans’ from intact but vulnerable families.”

Annie herself wonders about her prospective daughter’s grandfather, who is still alive in Africa. I wonder what other relatives or friends are there.

But wouldn’t it be a good thing to bring a child to America where she would have all the security and advantages a wealthy family could provide? This belief has driven much domestic adoption as well, depicting adoptive parents as saviors of a child from poverty, bastardy and shame.

I find it is one of the most corrupting beliefs underlying adoption yet one I hear espoused even by some adoptees and birth parents. That the child’s life will be better because their adoptive parents are wealthier.

But do we really want to say that rich people’s children have “better” lives than poor people’s children? Do we, as a society, believe money is the highest value, higher than kith, kin and roots? And if we really believe that, why don’t we simply take children from poor people and give them to rich people? Perhaps poor people shouldn’t even be allowed to have children.

It’s a slippery slope, isn’t it?

Are there true orphans? Yes. True orphans need homes. And a child’s needs cannot always wait for economic justice or changed circumstances to arrive. But we should be extremely cautious about our motives and the true situation before we “catch” another person’s or community’s child.

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