

Coming Full-Circle Becoming a Parent

by Hollee McGinnis (also known as Lee Hwa Yeong)

My father, seeking to underscore the significance of a situation, has always been prone to pronouncements. When I told him that my husband and I were expecting our first child, he smiled, put his arm around my shoulder, and said, "Well, you are coming full-circle."

Although I thought I understood what he was trying to get at—that as an adopted person having the opportunity to give birth to a child who would be genetically connected to me would be coming full-circle—it was far from how I felt. There were many ways that I struggled to relate to the small being growing in my belly, but most of all it was difficult for me to imagine a relationship to someone by blood.

To me, coming full-circle—in the sense of coming back to what is familiar and known—would have been having a child through adoption. Since my personal experience and professional work has focused on adoption, I felt far more prepared to raise an adopted child than a biological child. I

have no recollection of any relationships with people genetically related to me, so being pregnant was a completely foreign experience.

There weren't very many people I could speak to about my feelings, since the vast majority only know family by blood connections. If I asked anyone, "How do you raise a biological child?" I feared I would be met with quizzical, "are you coo-coo" looks. It was difficult for me to even articulate my feelings about carrying a child who would be intimately linked to me in a way that I was not linked to anyone else in my own family.

Being pregnant and preparing to raise a biological child also underscored my own adoption losses—losses that are further complicated by the fact that my husband is also transracially adopted from South Korea. It began in the doctor's office when we both had to write "unknown" in response to a battery of questions relating to our family medical history: a lack

of knowledge that would be our child's legacy as well. And I realized we would have to explain our adoption to our child. We would have to explain why Mommy and Daddy did not look like Grandma and Grandpa (on either side!).

But certainly, as all humans do, I came into this world with genetic linkages. In that sense, being pregnant brought me full-circle to questions and realizations about my own birth.

As I carried our child for those nine months, I was struck with the amount of history that was being created, a part of my own past of which I knew nothing. As I jotted notes to my unborn child and worried about all the practical aspects of caring for another life, I could hardly imagine what my own birth mother experienced, lacking the support and resources I had.

After I gave birth to our son, "birth mother" took on a whole new level of depth and meaning. The label had always felt so sterile to me, evoking little of the relationship and feelings that exist between mother and child; a relationship that may be even intensified by relinquishment, feelings that for too long we have been afraid to acknowledge in the world of adoption. For a time my son and I were one body, an intimacy shared with no other in the world. How must it have felt for my birth mother to experience and then lose that most-intense connection?

As I gazed at our son I marveled at his tiny nose and rosebud lips. But the first time someone said, "Oh, he has your eyes," I cringed. I never liked my eyes. I had always thought they were too small and was hoping my son's eyes would look like his father's. Perhaps it is common for biological parents to hope their children will inherit only the good parts of themselves, but I think part of my feelings stemmed from the fact I grew up with very few positive affirmations of my Asian looks. Now I have a son who is one hundred percent Korean, reflecting parts of me that in the past I would have preferred to deny.

Although my parents always tried to assure me that I was beautiful—my father would point out how the models in fashion magazines tried to make their eyes look almond-shaped like mine—there was no one close to me with features like mine with whom I could identify. As the days passed with my son and we drank in each other deeply, falling completely in love, I finally began to connect to that experience most others take for granted: knowing, and loving, someone who shares your blood. Now as I look at the delicate way our son's eyes slope into almond circles, I embrace those eyes that affirm my own, but also reflect the unique person he is and will become.

As my son has evolved over the first year of his life, discovering new things about himself and his world, so have I. But each time I see him reach a milestone, I am also left to wonder, "Did I do that?" I arrived from South Korea at the age of three; my husband was two. Our parents can only tell us what they know of us after those ages. I do not know when I cut my first tooth or what was my first favorite food; I do not know when I took my first step or spoke my first word. My son's first years are filling in the missing holes of our own early lives, giving me and my husband the chance to imagine our own unknown beginnings.

It is so tempting when you have a biological child to chalk everything up to genetics, but my husband and I are wary of taking too much credit. We know the power of nurture. If my son develops a love of music—something that my husband's family shares passionately—it may be biology, but most likely it will be a result of his environment. And it's clear to me that what I know about being a mother does not come from genetics, but from the love and nurturing my own mother (and father) modeled and gave me.

As a mother busy in the trenches of early parenthood, I now realize that bringing a child into your life—whether through birth or adoption—does bring you full-circle, providing you the chance to see your life refracted through the prism of your child. But becoming a parent is also about discovery. I feel I have come not so much full-circle as full-spiral. Like a single helix, I feel I have returned, but not to the exact same spot as where I started. Rather I feel stretched, able to look back at the distance I have traveled with a new sense of appreciation, and anticipation of the new discoveries I have yet to make.

Hollee McGinnis most recently worked as the Policy & Operations Director at the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. She is the founder of the adult inter-country adoptee organization, Also-Known-As, Inc., and is currently pursuing a PhD in Social Work at Washington University. She has launched a blog, Generations after Adoption (www.generationsafteradoption.com), where she reflects on her experience of being a parent and imagines the legacy of her own adoption.