pact's point of view
The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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The Name Game

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Part 1

In Hayao Miyazaki's movie, Spirited Away, ten-year old Chihiro finds herself trapped in a spirit world. In order to rescue her parents and return to the human world, Chihiro must work at a bathhouse run by a witch named Yu-Baaba. One of the ways Yu-Baaba enslaves Chihiro is by taking away her name; hence she is re-named "Sen" and one of her challenges is to remember her original name. If she forgets that she is "Chihiro," she will lose her chance forever to return to the human world.

Anthroponomastics, from the Greek anthropos "man" and onuma "name" is the study of human names. Naming is an intentional practice of claiming. Humans name things that have emotional importance in their lives; it is a way to inform others that there is a historical or significant relationship between the person and the named object. For example, we name our domesticated pets, but farmers do not name the animals they intend to slaughter for meat; musicians name their guitars, men often name their cars and it is a common literary device to portray unsympathetic characters as either nameless individuals or through nicknames or euphemisms.

Names give people an identity; names are an expression of cultural identity deeply imbedded in sociocultural contexts.

Some cultures do not pre-determine names for infant children; instead, they are named at ceremonies, at which time either the parent or community elder names the child. Naming ceremonies are extremely important to these cultures because the belief is that a person cannot exist without a name.

As Miyazaki explained the significance of Yu-baaba's practice of re-naming her prisoners, "the act of depriving (a person) of one's name is not just changing how one (person) calls the other," he said, "it is a way to rule the other (person) completely."

Of course, this makes me think of the practice we have in adoption of re-naming children. Just like Chihiro, I had a name that I forgot and for the thirty years I lived as an outsider. Only when I remembered and reclaimed my name was I able to stand proudly and through my name, have I reconciled my place in the world.

In my 37 years on this earth, I have had four names; four times I've been claimed by someone, four identities. These identities are spread over two countries, two nationalities, three families and have assigned me the multiple roles of daughter, sister, wife and mother.

My first name was most likely given to me by my birth family. When I was found at the age of 14 months old, in a box on the steps of Daegu City Hall on a cold, February evening, inside my quilted jacket was a note with no explanation. The note did, however, include my name and birth date. For almost three years, I was a daughter of South Korea.

Then, in late July of 1971, I arrived in Minnesota by an enormous, metal stork and re-born as the child of D.B. and K.B. At three years old, I was claimed as a B. and who I was, the child before, was summarily erased with the swipe of "Wite-Out" on my new "birth certificate." My new name signified that I was now claimed as part of the B. family. Because my adoptive parents did not keep my any part of Korean name, we all forgot who I once was. Like Chihiro, I had embodied "Sen" for so long, I'd begun to forget who I was. For seventeen years, I was my adoptive parents daughter.

When I was twenty, I got married. I had toyed around with many different ideas for my married name. As a feminist, I decided not take my husband's surname. We discussed all the possibilities - I could keep my maiden name, I could hyphenate, we both could hyphenate. Never once did it even occur to me to incorporate my Korean name. In the end, I decided to tack on John's surname with a hyphen. I was hyphenated for almost fifteen years.

In 2004, I went to South Korea for the second time since my adoption. I was 34 years old and had been thinking about changing my name back to the one on that little note pinned to the inside of my jacket. My friends, who traveled with me, decided to call me by my Korean name. After almost three weeks of hearing it everyday, it became part of me, integrated.

Returning home, I felt very confused as my Korean friends continued to call me Jae Ran and everyone else called me by my American name. John thought taking back my Korean name was a positive thing and when I returned to school a few weeks later, I informed all my classmates and professors that I had changed my name.

Two weeks before my 35th birthday, I walked out of the Hennepin County courthouse as Jae Ran Kim. I had come full circle. In a way, I was going back to the beginning.

Only this time, I was claiming myself.

Part 2

An in-process adoptive parent posed a question to me:

"We would like to keep our child's Korean name . . . but if it happens to be a name that really makes them stand out and makes them more of a target for teasing/harassment - is it worth it? Is it better to have it as their middle name and let me choose when they are old enough? Also if the Korean name is given by someone other than the birth family (e.g. agency, foster parents) does it have as much resonance?

The short and unsatisfactory answer to this is, It Depends.

When I arrived in the US, I was almost 3 years old and presumably, I'd been called Jae Ran in Korea for that long (if my birth name truly was Jae Ran, as everyone I've talked to in Korea has indicated). My adoptive parents changed my name to an American one, yet it was an unusual name all the same. Although it's fairly common now to hear "Kendra" as a first name, back in 1971 in a white, middle class suburb in Minnesota, it was unheard of. So even though I wasn't "Jae Ran" at school, I was still teased about my name. In fact, I hated it.

Having an unusual name stood out for me because it was just another reminder that I was, as my daughter would say, the statistical outlier in my community.

In thinking about it, however, I do not blame my "name" for this problem.

The name issue is essentially a microcosm of the entire act of adopting a child from another culture and ethnicity. As an adoptive parent, if you are adopting a child from Korea (or any other country) you are already committed to bringing a child of color into your home and community. Keeping the name is admitting (as in, not trying to cover up) the fact that your child is, yes folks (drum roll please), an Asian child.

If you believe that keeping an ethnic name will target the child for teasing and harassment, I would wonder what kind of community this child will be coming into; and what would prevent those kids from teasing and harassing the child because of his/her ethnicity anyway. You will not, I repeat, not be able to prevent kids at school from teasing and harassing your child because of their transracial and international adoptive status; nor will you be able to prevent others in the community from saying or thinking racist thoughts. Nor will you be able to prevent that future date rejecting them because their parents don't want them dating a person of color or on the flip side, be able to prevent creepy Asian fetishists from exoticizing your teen/young adult.

As I was thinking about naming, the memory of what it feels like to have people constantly question me over my name re-emerged. I have a Korean face. I had an Anglo name. So it was a constant irritant in my life to talk to people over the phone with my "American name" and then to meet them in person have them do a double take once they put my face and name together. This happened every time I met a new person. The more obnoxious people would laugh at me, or outright question it (as if I was lying); most people just looked surprised and/or would be taken aback and try to look like they weren't surprised. Often, people would come out and tell me, "I wasn't expecting you" because they were looking for a white person.

That is what I mean by how deeply our names are part of a socio-cultural context.

Since I've legally changed my name, I find that I get a lot of questions over how to pronounce my name, but no one is ever surprised that a Korean person is walking into their meeting or appointment.

It makes me think of all the second generation immigrants whose parents gave them "American" (but really, just Anglo) first names, thinking that it will help them assimilate. Then again, they have their ethnic last names to help avoid the confusion.

For some reason, our society tries awfully hard to "normalize" the concept of adoption. That is why "we" work to legislate it - saying who can parent and who can't, those age, weight and sexual orientation requirements some countries impose - those are all just a part of trying to "normalize" adoption. Why are we trying so hard to pretend it's the same thing as a heterosexual, two-parents, biological nuclear family? Folks, it's not the same, let's stop pretending it is. The only way to "normalize" transracial adoption is to stop pretending it's the same as a biological family, and force society to accept our family structures as they are.

In summary, I think it is a personal choice adoptive parents will have to be comfortable with; ever since having children, I've made it a point to live in diverse areas and send my kids to diverse schools. It is no strange thing for them to have kids in their classrooms named Ngyuen, Pa, Xiong, Khalid, Mariyama, Juan, Xochil, Circe or LaShondra (all real classmates of my children).

Adoptive parents must be advocates for their children (actually, shouldn't all parents?) to help them navigate through the tough times they may have at school and out in the communities.

Keeping your child's Korean (or Colombian, Chinese, Ethiopian) name is:

1) honoring the culture they were born into that is a part of their history,
2) helping them identify as a Korean- (or Columbian-, Chinese-, or Ethiopian-) American, which is how society will define them,
3) helping them (and yourselves as parents) see themselves as part of a diverse world that includes all kinds of family types, and
4) teaching the entire family advocacy skills.

And don't forget, that every child is going to be different and there is no right answer to this dilemma. However, just remember that if you give your child an "Anglo" first name, it will not erase the fact that s/he is not an "Anglo" child.