



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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“Don’t You Dare Repeat Any of This”

Thoughts of Adoption

By An Adoptee-By-The-Sea

by Joyce Maguire Pavao

As I sat at my computer, writing Chapter 9 of my book, glancing now and then out of the window to look at the dunes, the sea grass and the amazing colors of the sky on Cape Cod, the phone rang and it was Roxy, asking me to write an article for the next Pact Press which is to be written by adoptees only and which would be going deeper into the core issues that affect our lives as adopted people. She invited me to write, and said that she thought maybe something about intimacy or anger or deep losses.

I remember sitting with four of my best friends, who are all adoptees. We had the funniest hoot of a time just laughing and making fun of ourselves and our adopteehood. I will share a little bit about what we talked about. But don't YOU dare repeat any of this or take it on as if you know what is what... this is how we are allowed to joke about ourselves, but if you do it you're being "birth-ist." {I know for a fact that when one of our adoptive parent therapists runs a group for adoptive parents and one of our birth parent therapists runs a group for birth parents, they have the same kind of ways of making fun of certain aspects of their lives. It's quite true; we adoptees were taken, and moved, and transplanted, and given new names and new identities as if we were in the FBI witness protection program! Hence, we do have some trauma related to this early (or not so early, in the case of older child adoptions) event. Nancy Verrier would call this the Primal Wound (sounds rather Catholic like "stigmata," and really rather depressing, doesn't it?).}

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

We're adopted and we're adaptive. We can get along anywhere as a result of this transplanting and replanting. Place us in a room with high society, with royalty—we're fine. We're actors and actresses trying on many roles because we could be anyone, couldn't we? We could have been a person with an entirely different name and life. We started out one way and turned into this. So we could be anyone! We instantly know how to act and get along just fine, thank you.

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

You all ("you" being society, the adoption system, and sometimes, parents and professionals) made us think that our birth parents were poor and unable to parent, and so we gravitate toward a lower socioeconomic group of friends at certain periods or we work with this population in order to give something back. We take what you say very seriously. You don't even realize what you're telling us some of the time. If we're relating to what we think is our "background" and you put it down in any way, it only adds to our loss of self-esteem. So please love and respect our culture, love our race, love our religion and love our ethnicity of root family as well as that which we gain from our family by adoption.

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

Attachment? We are uprooted. We attach really well over and over and over but the roots are delicate after they've been torn and the tenacity wears down. We will reattach well only once, if the people we're placed with are also good at attaching (it takes two to tango). But don't move us too often, or we'll have no ability to stick to it. Then we'll become better at moving from place to place, because that is what you will have taught us. And it is you that teach us all of this by taking us away and then placing us, and then taking us away and then placing us.

(It's not our shortcoming, but yours.) We attach on the surface very quickly. It's part of how we adapt. We can't even walk into a hotel room for an overnight stay without rearranging the furniture and making the place comfortable so that we can settle. We need to bring along some transitional objects if we can as well.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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