



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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## The Primal Wound?

by Randolph W. Severson

I don't support the theory of the primal wound developed by Nancy Verrier and clearly and comprehensively articulated in her new book of the same name.

I regard the theory as (1) psychologically naive, (2) historically unversed, (3) sexist, and (4) operationally destructive. Let me explain.

### (1) Psychologically Naive

The theory is psychologically naive because Ms. Verrier does not appear to be aware of the fact that her idea draws its self evident nature by expressing an archetypal image. She is in the grip of the Mother Child archetype, the Pieta, the Madonna with the babe suckling at her breast. By archetypal, I mean that it is a universal recurring image, occurring cross culturally, with great emotional appeal. Whenever it is evoked persuasively and with some relevance to any specific phenomena, it will seem overwhelmingly true. Not only will it seem true, it will seem to explain everything.

Sexuality, power and religion are also archetypal ideas. It is possible to develop an entire theory around them which will seem to explain everything, that is, when one experiences reality through this archetype.

Adoption itself is an archetypal idea. When one is in the grip of the notion adoption too will seem to be ever present, the "explanation" of everything. Every popular song, for example, will seem to be about adoption, or, at least, "could be." Most popular lyrics are about love and loss which makes them applicable, though usually distantly, to adoption, but while in the grip of the archetype one will feel "certain" that the singer or writer is a closet birth parent or adopted person.

That a theory is archetypal in nature in no way discredits it. The task is to consciously integrate it so that we remain sensitive to other ideas, other images, other values which may have an equal relevance to the experience we are imagining and investigating.

Identification with an archetype produces inflation, a torrent and tumult of powerful feelings that carry one away. Identification with an archetype causes one not so much to lose one's wits as to lose one's wit. A sense of humor, a perspective that both delights in and anticipates the unexpected, typically indicates a flexible well integrated point of view.

Another consequence of identification is the splitting off of negative affects and emotions, so that one particular image becomes the very definition of a reality. Reality is always ambiguous and usually ambivalent. In the case of the parent child, mother child relationship, to ignore its' darker, less ideal aspects condemns every mother to instant self alienation the first time she feels anything but perfect love for her child coupled with the desire to mirror and hold.

### (2) Historically Unversed

The primal wound theory is historically unformed at least about the historical genesis and context of John Bowlby's work, which is its conceptual precursor, on attachment, bonding and loss.

The source of most bonding and attachment theory is twentieth-century post-war London. In his classic book, *Dubious Maternal Affection*, J.H. van den Berg, the eminent Dutch psychologist, thoroughly critiqued the research on which Bowlby's theories are based. Even if we accept the idea of scientific research as somehow decisive in the world of the human spirit and soul, bonding and attachment are based on poor science.

Following the end of World War II, hundreds of thousands of British and American soldiers returned home to find a heavily industrialized society whose need for them was limited because in place of all the men who had gone marching off to war, women had moved into the work force in large numbers. In order to find employment for all these returning veterans, it was necessary that women vacate the work force, returning both the employment opportunities and, perhaps, more

significantly, the power to men. What better way to psychologically coerce women into “staying home” than to make them feel guilty about “abandoning” their children.

Research and theory always occur within a specific socioeconomic economic political context whose influence, although subtle, is unavoidable.

In this context it might also be relevant to note that the logic of Ms. Verrier’s theory inescapably condemns birth parents. If the worst thing that can happen to a person in his or her life is to be placed for adoption, and if this decision is made by a man and woman who regardless of societal pressure and oppression, could have done otherwise, then every birth parent who placed a child is personally responsible for this terrible trauma, although society is also culpable. To load birth parents with this kind of guilt is absurd; it is also ironic for an adoptive mother to be making this kind of charge under the guise of defending adopted people and birth parents. What it amounts to is an adoptive mother saying to her adopted child, “Isn’t it terrible what your birth mother did to you?” This is nothing more than a sophisticated version of “Gee, how could anyone give away a child that beautiful?”

### **(3) Sexist**

Verrier’s theory is sexist. To the point of absurdity, it underestimates the paternal role in child rearing. Her theory is consistent with ideologies (and they enjoy a long history) which, in their view, transformed pregnancy and birth into a female monopoly. The father tends to be presented as being peripheral.

When men are portrayed as economic providers, operating mainly outside the home to sustain the family unit and mothers are presented as the providers of emotional support within the home, it is inevitable (if unjust) that the mothers are most likely to be implicated when the children develop problems.

To minimize the paternal attachment is a limitation upon the freedom and power of women. One could even say that it represents an attack on women.

### **(4) Operationally Destructive**

Operationally, the whole idea of the primal wound is disastrous. Once an adoption has occurred, what good is served by insisting that adopted people are at a higher risk for anything as a result of separation from the mother? As van den Berg writes in *Dubious Maternal Affection*, “We should realize...that there is nothing irrevocable in the relation between past and present. A child may become neurotic. He may just as well grow up perfectly normal. He may even become normal in the process of growing up. Many children with an unfavorable prognosis become normal and productive people without any help at all.”

From this critique, it does not follow that I in any way minimize the loss that every birth parents and adopted person experiences when a child is separated through adoption. The loss is real and of great import. It does have lifelong consequences. But to say that adoption is a lifelong process does not equate with the idea that the separation of mother and child as a results of an adoption is a trauma causing a lifelong primal wound, in terms of which almost every behavior and idea of the adopted person can be explained. Further, I do not deny that separation of a mother and father from the child through adoption might sometimes, depending on a complex of other factors, result in something like a primal wound. But, If I understand her rightly, Ms. Verrier claims to be offering a theory about the experience of adoption rather than a rhetorical explanation for how separation of mother and child sometimes affects the individuals whom she has counseled in therapy. Instead of offering insights, she is proposing an ideology.

After an adoptive placement occurs, it does very limited good to insist too broadly on the adoption experience as generative of a primal wound. On the part of adopted people and birth parents, it all too often fosters victim status and self-pity, while encouraging adoptive parents to be so sensitive to their children’s primal wounds that they become quasi-therapists who are always trying to understand their children’s internal motivation rather than responding to their children with love, firmness, resolve, and human sympathy. Too much psychologizing about the burden and wounds of adoption alienates those who have suffered genuine pain and losses from own psychological resources and spiritual strengths. Too much pathologizing of adoption forgets that every burden can also be a blessing. In other words, one never gets over the losses of adoption but one can in a certain sense get beyond them to a place of forgiveness, understanding, acceptance, hope and even the righteous indignation that fuels effective action rather than self-destructive rage, guilt and ceaseless self-recriminations. To keep both burden and blessing together requires hard-headed realism, philosophical conviction and imaginative scope. To separate them adds to the internal blights that we know as depression and denial.

Given the political and media setbacks occasioned by the Deboer case, adoption reform advocates need to rethink the agenda. The primal wound theory is clearly unsatisfactory.

To succeed with reform, we need to emphasize two fundamental ideas. One, that every child is better off being raised by their natal parents who have been genuinely supported in their exploration and exhaustion of all other alternatives. And, two, all people who walk the face of the earth possess the inalienable right to know their history and to meet the man and woman from whom they drew life and breath. These are principles upon which adoption reform can build a

human, successful, inclusive political and philosophical agenda. In order to assent to these truths, one needs only common sense, unclouded by self-interest. Because these faculties characterize nearly everyone, adoption reform can be successful, but not if it appears to be identified with what most people perceive to be anti-adoption ideology. What adoption reform does not need is a new ideology so sensitive to one element of the adoption experience that it becomes insensitive to all the others. To reduce any human experience to a single explanation inevitably falsifies and thus dehumanizes that experience.

*Randolph Severson is a psychologist in private practice in Dallas, Texas and is the author of many books, including Adoption Philosophy and Experience, Dear Birthfather and Adoption Charms and Rituals for Healing.*

## **Letter to the editor**

*Dear Pact:*

*While I agree with Randolph Severson's article in your last issue, I feel that he missed the most obvious flaw in Nancy Verrier's (and others') theses. It reminds me of the logic mistakes we laughed at in high school: All children love chocolate; I love chocolate; therefore, I am a child.*

*I was raised in a family that would appear to be the archetypal nuclear family. There were four children, my mother was at home, we suffered no losses or upheavals in our idyllic suburban lives. Despite all that, I have never felt close to my mother (whom I resemble strongly), and I have always felt that I was never understood by my parents or siblings and that I really didn't "belong" in the family. Unfortunately, I can't blame any of these things on adoption, and therefore must just chalk them up to the human condition, my own personal DNA, or perhaps the fact that we all suffer from a primal wound.*

*I'm sure that many adopted children struggle with their identities, and I hope that I will be able to help my adopted son to understand his life story and to feel positive about himself. I hope I will be able to listen to his feelings and tell him about his birth family without interference from my own emotions.*

*However, I also hope that I won't blame all his problems and all our problems on the fact that he's adopted. As we go through our inevitable mother/son battles and his predictably stormy adolescence, I hope I will respond as his mother, not as the one who created his problems by taking him into my home.*

*Sincerely, Janice Wood*