



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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How Adoption Has Shaped My Life

By Joyce Maguire Pavao

A young teenage girl kept a huge secret. She never told her boyfriend. She never told her best friend. She never told her mother. She was pregnant. The day of the birth, she had "cramps" and her six-year-old sister was sent to get help because they thought she had appendicitis. I am the appendix. I am the secret.

Her mother, ill-prepared with only a few hours' notice, was just not willing to be involved with this ("this" being me).

Secrecy was first, but love was there. The teenager, who had grown to love her secret, had fantasies of keeping the child and was devastated when her mother would not help. She had to continue to live in secrecy after her baby was gone because no one could know.

There was a couple who had been married for several years and were quite happy. The husband was a young, up-and-coming businessman who was doing very well. They had a beautiful home on an exquisite property. They had summers by the shore. They had friends and family. After the pain of infertility, they had adopted one child who was now six and they wanted another child. They adopted the teenager's baby.

In those days it was all "secret." They were told very little about the teenager and she was told close to nothing about them. The baby got a whole new name. The smells, the sounds around her changed. She was adaptive and she grew. She was loved and cared for. There was no lack of material things. There was appreciation of her and love for her but somehow there was no acknowledgment of who she was. Who was she?

The baby-turned-child was curious. Her red hair was blamed for her feistiness and temper and her irrepressible curiosity. She asked constant questions about everything but especially about herself. Who was she? Her parents read to her, answering her questions...

except those about herself and except those about adoption. When those questions were asked, her mother, in particular, would get a sad and distant look and would change the subject. That was the worst thing you could do to the red-haired girl who appreciated honesty and directness and who hated secrets. If people didn't answer, was it a secret? She was, of course, told that she was adopted. But you really can't just tell a child anything, especially something important and complicated, just once.

A mean child in the neighborhood taunted the red-haired girl as she roller-skated one day. "Ha, ha, you're adopted, you have red hair and you don't look like anyone in your family.... Ha, ha." The red-haired girl went crying home to her mom and told her what the girl had said. Her mother said, "Red hair is a recessive gene; tell Carol to drop dead." That helped, to go out and with hands on hips tell Carol off, armed with good vocabulary like "recessive." Carol backed off but the red-haired girl was well aware that her mother had not addressed the issue of adoption. She knew she was adopted but it must be a very bad thing, because no one would talk about it except to tease her.

Throughout her childhood, neighbors and relatives made comments about adoption and there was no one who taught the red-haired girl how to respond. The tradition her birth mother had started, of keeping things inside and dealing with them alone, was being recreated by her adoptive parents as well. They were keeping the secret of infertility and thereby could not talk about adoption very easily, if at all.

The red-haired girl turned into a teenager. Adolescence is very hard for everyone but it is extremely hard for adopted people. The red-haired girl was very smart and very social in high school. She wanted to be included, so she hung out with the wrong crowd and missed curfews. It was safer to keep her place with her teenage friends and to come in late and be punished by her

parents (who loved her but seemed unreasonable) than to be punished by her friends and excluded.

The baby, the red-haired child is, of course, me. Adoption has shaped my life from the moment that my birth grandmother entered the hospital and recovered from the shock that her daughter had concealed a pregnancy and had given birth.

Adoption has shaped my life through the losses experienced by my birth mother by my adoptive parents. It shaped my life as I tried, all alone, to figure it out. No one would talk. No one would explain. My questions were unanswered. My adolescence was so difficult - wanting to please my parents but having to please myself...needing to know myself. Eventually, I went back to school and wended my way into psychology and family therapy.

One of the things that was most healing and helped me to center was my search for my birth mother. Her life had continued to be shaped by secrecy as well. She eventually married and had six boys and a girl. We had a good relationship but due to her shame and need for continued secrecy, it was constrained. She was, however, greatly relieved to know that I was all right and we had a very intense interaction every time we met or talked.

My mothers died six weeks apart. They both died of secrecy. One could no longer talk, silenced by her disease. One could no longer think or remember. My mothers are together now. There is no divided loyalty. I love and cherish what each set of parents gave to me and especially what each of my mothers endured and imparted. I regret that they were not allowed to be whole and I celebrate that I am whole. I refuse to have secrets and I work to change a system that perpetuates them.

My bias shows. I am most committed to the best interest of that baby and child. As a family-systems thinker, I cannot forget the importance of understanding all of the parents, birth and adoptive, and their needs and concerns as well, since they so forcefully affect on the life of the adopted child. My whole life has truly been shaped by adoption. I have found the way to integrate my personal, professional, and political beliefs in a way that makes me feel that I am in a reciprocal situation of giving and getting back.

When adoption is done ethically, when it is the right thing for all of the parents, birth and adoptive, when the extended families have been educated and worked with and when the community is well-prepared, then we all know that we have expanded our lives, expanded our families and expanded our hearts. We have taken one more step toward acknowledging that we are all family.

This, however, rings false when any of the parties involved is not being honest, when any of the parties is not being listened to and educated. When adoptions are done, the adults involved must, every so often, put their own egos aside and look closely to see what is best for that baby or that child. Sometimes they must stretch to do things that aren't easy. We must learn to be open, communicative, and to work at all times toward adding on and including, rather than cutting off and excluding. You can shape a life by diminishing it or you can shape a life by expanding it. I choose expansiveness. I choose health and openness.

Adoption has shaped my life quite beautifully and has given me the opportunity to help educate and work with others to shape theirs.

Joyce Maguire Pavao, Ed.D., LCSW, LMFT, is founder and director of both the Adoption Resource Center (ARC) and Pre-Post Adoption Counseling (PACT) in MA.