



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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## Lessons by Sharon Kaplan Roszia

In October of 1990, I was sitting at a dining room table in a suburb of Sydney, Australia reviewing some lecture notes for a presentation I was to give that evening. Sitting on the floor near me, reviewing her schoolwork, was a ten year-old Korean-born adopted child. I became aware that Jin Hee was watching me intently. Since her parents were my hosts, we had spent several days together, but this was our first time alone. When Jin Hee spoke, she asked me to tell her everything I knew about adoption. That conversation began a three-year dialogue that continues through the mail to this day. This past spring, Jin Hee and her parents returned to Korea and visited her Korean foster parents. Jin Hee told me her life was now like a circle; she has hold of her present and past. She doesn't know the lessons that her parents had to embrace in order to do that for her. Jin Hee reminds me what a responsibility adoption "experts" carry to be honest and available over the long run as children work on and through their adoption conundrums.

The year Saigon fell, I met Yim, approximately eight years old. I had the privilege to be her family's social worker for approximately one year. A variety of circumstances caused Yim to disappear from our lives until recently. Yim's life was not easy before she left Vietnam and it continues to be a struggle into young adulthood. Adoption did not treat her kindly. Her inner strength, good genes, perseverance and sense of humor carried her through college, into a career, and through a reunion with her former family in Los Angeles. She has subsequently found two sisters separated from her after leaving Saigon. Yim is now married and has claimed us all as "family." From Yim, I learn about strength of character and the blessings of hope. She also teaches how we can fashion kinship systems in new and creative ways.

Aaron was 14 when we met. He had been raised for all those years by a single Black foster parent in a poor neighborhood of a Texas city, then adopted by a Caucasian, Jewish professional family. Aaron taught me about making gigantic shifts in one's life and how important the "little things" can be that make people feel welcome and cared about. He taught me about the power of metaphor in conversation. Aaron brought me two of my dearest friends.

My career in adoption started in 1963. I've been witness to the power of genetics when I see people whose adoptions I'd overseen brought in reunion with their birth families. The impact of societal beliefs and values and its effects on institutions, particularly adoptions, never ceases to amaze me. I've come from a time when birth fathers were rarely discussed; special needs adoptions hardly existed; "out of wedlock" pregnancies were considered a result of deep-seated emotional problems and it

was believed that therefore babies and mothers would be better off apart; and everything was closed, closeted and secretive. My whole career has been about reassembling those torn-apart pieces and people by partnering with Deborah Silverstein in *The Seven Core Issues of Adoption*; Mary Jo Rillera in *Cooperative Adoption*; and Lois Melina in *The Open Adoption Experience*.

I've watched families love children who differ from them in race, religion, and temperament. One Jewish friend adopted two Korean children ages 7 and 9 who were Buddhist, and the family members began to call themselves Buddha Jews. All around me have been people practicing and teaching unconditional love with children who have been deeply hurt by adults in the past and who act out their rage against the new family. At home, I learned from my children, who have had difficult beginnings, about my capacity for patience, loving, humor, acceptance of difference and the constant flame of hope for these children, now young adults who still struggle in the world. I've come to often thank friends who stuck with us through hard years when my children stole from them when we visited. I reflect on the shocked looks of teachers who expected parents of color to show up at parent-teacher conferences and still bristle at the audacity of teachers who expected six months is long enough for us to "fix" children who had lived elsewhere for years! I'm grateful to therapists who understood the issues and didn't blame and I'm working to educate therapists who still don't understand what adoption is all about.

I've learned most life lessons in connection to my career in adoptions. Adoption lecturing has provided opportunities for extensive travel. In Australia, I've chased a mother kangaroo so I could snap a picture of her and her joey peeking out of her pocket. The largest man I've ever met, a Maori in New Zealand, gave me a ride when I was lost in a village on the North Island. I've been awed at the beauty of Vancouver. I've stayed up all night in a cabin with no locks in the woods in a camp in Oklahoma after hearing a series of ghost stories around the campfire. And I nearly died from food poisoning in Louisiana. I've been welcomed to and spoken in more churches in the United States than I can count and sat at Sabbath dinner with Holocaust survivors in Australia. Laughter - the belly laugh of the Australians; the polite laugh of the New Englanders; the warm smiles of the Southerners - has been a constant companion. I feel like I have friends and family in every state. What a blessing! Who could ask for more out of one's work? We are truly a world of caring people.

Sharon Kaplan Roszia is the author of *The Open Adoption Experience* and *Cooperative Adoption*. She is the founder and former director of *Parenting Resources* and the current director of *Kinship Alliance*.