



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

*First published in Pact's Point of View © 1995
Do not reprint without permission.*

The Lifelong Impact of Adoption

by Marlou Russell

There are new basic tenets in adoption. One is that adoption is a second choice for all the triad members. For example, people don't usually imagine that they will grow up, get married, and adopt children. People expect that they will grow up, get married and have children of their own. People also don't expect to get pregnant and give their child to strangers to raise.

A second basic tenet of adoption is that it involves loss for all involved. A birth parent loses a child. The adopted person loses biological connections. And the adoptive parents lose the hope for biological children. Those indirectly involved in adoption also experience loss. The birth parents' parents lose a grandchild while the siblings of the birth parent lose a niece or nephew.

Since loss is such a major part of adoption, grieving is a necessary and important process. The five stages of normal grief and mourning as set out by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross are 1) denial — feeling shocked, numbed and detached; 2) anger — feeling that the situation is unfair; 3) bargaining — wanting to make a deal or a trade-off; 4) depression — feeling helpless and hopeless; and 5) acceptance — integrating and resolving the loss to enable the return to function. For triad members, grief holds a special significance. They may not even be aware that they are grieving or mourning their loss. Adoption can create a situation in which grieving is delayed or denied. Because adoption has been seen as such a positive solution, it may be difficult for a triad member to feel that it is OK to grieve when everything is "working out for the best." There are no real rituals or ceremonies for the losses of adoption. In the case of death, society provides the rituals of funerals and the gathering of people to support the person who is mourning. If the adoption process is secret, as was the case in many adoptions of past, there is even less opportunity for mourning. In addition, with adoption, much attention is given to the next step to raising the child or getting on with one's life.

Some triad members resolve their grief issues by trying to find the person they are grieving for. Search and reunion offers triad members the opportunity to address the basic natural curiosity that all people have in their inheritance and roots. The missing pieces can be placed into the puzzle; lifelong questions can be answered. In addition, there is an empowering aspect to search and reunion and an internal sense of timing that brings with it a feeling of being in control and trusting one's own judgment. For most people who search, knowing— even if they find discomfiting information — is better than not knowing.

Whether someone actively searches or not, there is usually some part of the person that is internally searching. A common experience among adopted people and birth parents is to search in crowds looking for someone who could be their parent or their child. Even triad members who say they aren't interested in searching will express curiosity and react to the idea of search and reunion. What holds many triad members back from searching or admitting they are searching is the fear of hurting one of the other triad members. Adopted people worry about hurting their adoptive parents' feelings and appearing ungrateful, while birth parents may worry that their child wasn't told of the adoption or that their child will reject them.

Reunion between triad members is the beginning of a previous relationship. It is where fantasy meets reality. Reunion relationships affect all triad members and those close to them. As with all relationships, these relationships need nurturing, attention, and a respect for people's boundaries. Reunion relationships and the interactions within them show us that adoption is not just a simple solution but indeed a process with lifelong impact.

Marlou Russell, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Santa Monica, California where she specializes in adoption. She is an adopted person who has been reunited with her birth father and brother.