



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

*First published in Pact's Point of View © 1994
Do not reprint without permission.*

The Tapestry of My Life

by Holly van Gulden

I think it would be easier to answer the question, "How has breathing affected your life?" than to comment on the impact of adoption. Four of my nine siblings and two of my three children joined our family through adoption. I have worked in the field of adoption for over 17 years. Since childhood, adoption has been a core thread in the tapestry of my life.

As a child, I experienced life as a member of an international, interracial family created through adoption. I learned, more clearly than most Caucasian youth, what prejudice and racism are. I was alternately proud of my parents for adopting and confused (and yes, embarrassed) by the whole thing. I loved my brothers. I was also confused, angry, ticked off and frustrated by them and many of their behaviors. I learned a great deal about diversity, bigotry, and racism through the prejudice they encountered and I knew early on of the many, many children in need of families. I watched my parents struggle, painfully at times, to try to understand and meet the needs of several of my siblings who brought into our functional family, our home, their baggage of pain, abandonments, moves, experiences of war and institutionalization, culture shock, and so on.

Throughout my college years I always planned on adopting children. I remember telling Tim, my children's father, on our fourth date, that I was going to have 12 children, some through adoption, some through birth!! As a parent, adoption has profoundly affected me, my sense of myself, my sense of family, of love. I have grown tremendously as a person because I was challenged to meet the unique needs of all three of my children. I have seen faced many facets of myself as I struggled to assist my children in dealing with their losses, their sense of belonging and their search for identity and individuation.

By working in counseling, learning from and teaching members of the adoption triad, I have been exposed to all kinds of people, all kinds of pain, all kinds of

love, commitment, caring and courage. Locally and throughout my travels I have been privileged to meet countless caring, loving and committed adoptive parents and prospective parents - birth parents, men and women who make the painful decision that they could not raise the children they conceived and birthed; adopted people, youth and adults, who have struggled to resolve their losses and move forward in life positively; and dedicated professionals working with these people. My life has been enriched by each and every one. In both my personal and professional lives, I have learned to value people for their unique individuality. I have been exposed to and learned to value people from most all walks of life, of diverse ethnic, racial, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, with diverse lifestyles.

I have found facets of my personality I love - an ability to love, embrace, and celebrate differences - and facets I hated - my angry responses to my oldest son's rage and rejection. I have learned in the very core of my being what unconditional love is - and I have learned what pain is. With all three of my children (not just the two who were, in fact, adopted), adoption has provided me numerous opportunities to grow as a person.

I have learned slowly, sometimes painfully, that I cannot do my children's emotional work for them. I can and do support them. I cannot heal them. As a parent and a professional working in adoption, I have learned to preach what I practice and practice what I preach. I discover in my personal life experiences which can aid families in addressing grief, attachment, and identity formation.

Modeling on my own parents' choices, I - we - adopted an older child, older than our first two by five and six years. He was eight when he joined our family. He will be 24 in May. Mostly, he is a confident, caring, loving, responsible young adult whom I love very much and of whom I am quite proud. The fifteen years during which

we have been mother and son have been an emotional roller coaster with, for a long time, more dips than peaks. Our son suffered severe and repeated physical, emotional and sexual abuse in the first six years of his life. He brought to our family an unbeatable, delightful sense of humor, a grin which endears all who share it, endless energy coupled with great physical strength and pain. Pain which was presented as rage, suspicion, distrust of all adults, anti-social and unacceptable behaviors and a neediness which cried out to be loved even while rejecting that love. The impact on each and every one of us was beyond comprehension.

Our functional family became dysfunctional as we struggled to contain his rage. I watched my two younger children grow to love their big brother...and to fear him. I've faced the reality that in bringing our eldest son into our family, we turned our lives upside down, inside out and every which way but healthy... at first. Gradually, we learned how to take care of our family, our normal healthy children and ourselves and how to respond to the intense needs of our eldest son. Maintaining normalcy in the midst of crisis and chaos taught us patience, courage and the real deep demands of unconditional love. During the journey back to family health, I forced myself to face and accept - not

act on but accept - facets of myself I wished I'd never known. During some of the times of deepest pain and hopelessness I accepted - but didn't act on - my wish for my son to be gone. I accepted that the earth mother who had planned to nurture and love twelve children was tempted to strike, wanted to strike a child who had already been brutally abused before.

I am a stronger person now, a better mother, a more loving person because I forced myself to acknowledge my own pain, my own ability to hate. I have accepted what I can and cannot do...my power and my powerlessness. We are all stronger. Yet I can still wish that none of us had had to deal with such pain and crisis: not my eldest, not my first-born and middle child, not my youngest child and only daughter, not their father. Perhaps the hardest thing, next to acting on unconditional love, was watching the younger two children struggle to cope, to feel safe, to grow and to love their brother. I love all three of my children. I have a close, warm, loving relationship with each of them. I am thrice-blessed.

I have learned from my heart and in my gut that families come together by many routes and that they stay together through love and commitment.

Holly van Gulden is the author of Real Parents, Real Children and the director of education at Resources for Adopted Parents (RAP) in St. Paul, MN.