

Feelings of Differentness

by Jean Benward

I have spent most of my life thinking about adoption: first, as an adopted person; then, as a therapist; and most recently, through my own infertility. Adoption touches our deepest experiences of self and others, our most intimate relationships, our definition of who we are, how others see us, and our sense of where and to whom we belong.

In trying to define what makes adoption painful, what imbues it with the sense of loss and of not being whole, the word that always returns to me is "stigma." It is that attribute which makes me different from others, of a less desirable kind, and has accorded the most constant sense of internal dislocation. Because of the stigma borne by adoption, I have lost my status of being "normal." While the stigma is a definition imposed from without, I am likely to hold the same ideas about my identity that society does. Thus, my deepest feelings about myself leave me prone to feeling that I fall short of what I actually ought to be.

For children of color who have White adoptive parents, the stigma of adoption is highly visible, always on display and combined with the issues of minority racial status. Thus, the child (and usually his family) is likely to be doubly discredited. There is no way to keep the stigma secret. It intrudes on one's social interactions and overshadows other attributes of the individual. Shame then becomes a central possibility for one's experience of self. One lives with uncertainty about how one will be identified and received.

Adoption can also be an invisible "handicap." Unlike minority racial status or physical disability, where I would have to deal with others' reactions to me, I now face a more subtle problem. I must decide how much of myself I reveal to others, thus trying to establish some control over my failing. Do I tell or not tell; do I lie or not lie; and in each case to whom, how, when and where? Do I try to pass for "normal"? I face the prospect of living a double life, and because of the rewards, I will decide to pass as "normal" on at least some occasions. I will find some place between complete secrecy and complete disclosure where I can comfortably live most of the time.

Can I acknowledge that adoption carries stigma and yet keep it from looming large in my life? Perhaps, but the actual ability to do so is neither fixed nor guaranteed. I can decide what constitutes a comfortable situation in which to reveal or

conceal; I can decide to counter shame by not attempting to conceal my status and I can vow never to accept the negative attitudes of others toward myself and my family. I can find support from others who have shared my experience; I can also devise guidelines for handling "normal" people's tactless remarks, and I can make efforts at re-educating the well-intended.

I wish that I had understood this phenomenon of stigma as a child. I abided the feelings of differentness, the need for secrecy, and the sense of living a double life. My inner world was often preoccupied this way. My external world was marked by the complete absence of acknowledgment of the stigma and, of course, the silence only reinforced my isolation and loneliness.

In parenthood, I more fully appreciate the desire to protect children from rejection and pain. I see parents unwittingly encouraging their children not to disclose - understanding, but not confronting, the stigma that could await them. I see parents postponing telling their children of their adoption, again knowing but avoiding the emotional reasons for doing so. I find myself ambivalent about when and how to discuss my daughter's "other mother" with her. It is an even more challenging prospect for me because it recalls my experiences of stigma.

Looking back, I believe that I would have come to terms with myself and the meaning of adoption more successfully if the hard parts of it had been talked about. My parents opted for secrecy, which was the expectation of the time; it also reflected their fear of the stigma. However, if we had been able to discuss the negative aspects of adoption - the differences - with a degree of acceptance, then I would have been in better position to learn coping skills, and separate self-definition from the social norm.

Our collective and individual denials of difference only further the isolation of the adopted. The choice of baby stories, the denial of the pervasive power of racism, the denial of the need for knowledge of our origins - all unwittingly confirm the stigma. One knows there is something operating here that is not spoken to. One senses that life is being organized as a way to avoid something.

As an adult, I came to see that even the most fortunate of “normal” people are likely to have a half-hidden failing, and for every failing there is situation where it will loom large for him. The norm in our society has been the two-parent, heterosexual, biological, Caucasian family. These are norms from which an increasing number of families differ. Stigma management is a fact of society, a process that occurs wherever there are norms for identity. The truth is that the

“normal” and the “stigmatized” are cut from the same cloth. They are not persons, but perspectives.

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