

Prenatal Trauma and the Adoptee Experience by Sally Clark

I am feeling blissful floating here, connected, hearing the peaceful sounds of the beating of life. I sense each cell as light vibrating to a rhythm that is unknown to me. Sometimes I feel safe; other times I feel terror.

All of a sudden I am being pushed and moved from this sanctuary. I'm terrified. I have no choice as I am quickly propelled down a tunnel to a blinding white cold light. I feel angry. I am thrust into another place full of cacophony, hurtful lights, disconnecting coldness with frantic energy all around me. I feel cold. Suddenly I feel the sweetness of touch, only to be struck. I cry out in terror and anger at being in such a place.

Where is the familiar? All I feel is physical pain coupled with a longing for her. I feel so isolated. I feel her frantic energy wanting to touch me, but I'm gone forever. I long for her. She wants me. We both suffer and cry in our pain.

Again I am lifted, this time with warmth and loving arms. But oh, how short the connection before I am placed down again. I am wrapped but so alone in a harsh, strange land.

This birth experience formed a paradigm that has structured my life. I have carried the idea of a dual state that has had bliss and connection on one side coupled with terror and abandonment on the other.

Having spent many years yearning for a force or being that was always beyond my conscious mind, yet feeling restless until I connected with it, I have a deep compassion for other children who were separated from their parents at birth. My search has been driven by a deep longing that I could not understand. I went from feeling elation at realizing that it was my biological mother whom I was seeking to the next layer of realization that the seeking was for a tender part of myself. This part of myself is now my teacher. She is teaching me how healing occurs by connecting with those dark moments of gestation and the terror and grief at being birthed into a world where no one awaited my presence with love and anticipation. As each step is taken, more of my soul is reclaimed.

As I walk from this painful place, I become more and more dedicated to assisting others who were separated from their parents at birth and placed at the mercy of the department of social services. Connecting and having someone witness that pain seems to be freeing to children as well to adults who choose to remember where their pain originates. Even before birth, infants are not oblivious to their

environment. Hearing is developed at fourteen to twenty-four weeks of gestation. Regressive work has revealed that the client as a fetus is aware of many emotional states surrounding her. She may sense being unwanted, or her mother being afraid. Is her father present? Research is indicating that the uterine environment can influence the psychological development of a child. To think of consciousness beginning at birth is rapidly becoming as antiquated as thinking of the earth as the center of the universe.

Those nine months provide a profound connection. What relationship does that mother have with the unborn child? Does she try to hide him or did she consider an abortion? What was the nature of his conception? Adopted children start their life with handicaps, the biggest of which is a sense of rejection by their own mothers and fathers, a rejection which they carry with them for the rest of their lives. Although an adopted family may relate closely to the child, there are usually psychological aspects to that connection that are different with an adopted child than a biological child.

In her book *The Primal Wound: Understanding the Adopted Child* (Gateway Press, 1993) Nancy Verrier states the situation most forcefully when she speaks of an adoptee's life starting amid failure: failure of the adoptee's new parents to conceive and failure of the birth mother to keep the child. As a result, the adoptee often carries feelings of being unworthy. Adoptees live in the terror of future pain around separation. They feel, "If she (mother) could do that - what about you (current important person)?" The child doesn't care why the birth mother gave him up; he simply feels abandoned. And that child lives in each adoptee his whole life and affects other relationships. Abandonment means annihilation or at the very least a loss of hope. John Bowlby writes that abandonment is the greatest fear a child can suffer. This fear hangs over the heads of adoptees and presents itself as a generalized anxiety, an emotion without a specific object (Verrier, 1993).

Adoptees are left with an inability to deal with the lost self. Their feelings are bottled up, and the false self is created. The scared baby is buried inside, hiding her anger, sadness and hostility, and in its place is a people-pleaser. These feelings are expressed by R.D. Laing: "They [the parents of adoptees] are playing a game. They are playing at not playing a game. If I show them I see they are, I shall break the rules and they will punish me. I must play their game, of not saying I see the game."

Prenatal and neonatal traumas have imprinted the child deeply and need to be acknowledged and healed. According to Leah LaGoy, teenage years frequently re-stimulate early birth traumas, as this is a time of a major transition. Often, teenagers they become angry at their adoptive parents. At least some of this anger is repressed rage at the birth parents who abandoned them.

These children need to be reached early in their lives; I feel that in most cases a child who is adopted - including the large number of children born in foreign countries that are being adopted in the United States - has been traumatized and needs counseling. Watching these children tell their stories through play therapy is heartrending. Yet unless help is obtained, the dreams of adoptive parents may become shattered as the child matures. When the uterine and birth traumas are healed, not

only can the child enter into intimate relationships without fear and conflicts, but a more essential self is revealed and life's joys are more accessible.

As I work with adopted children and adults, I am continually amazed at their unique qualities. These qualities seem to come from their woundings which perhaps are instead sacred piercings of their souls. They are our teachers.

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