

Straight Talk

by Liza Steinberg

For me, being adopted is part of who I am. It is a part of my life experience. I have heard much anger and defensiveness from adoptive parents when adoption is talked about in a negative way or compared to a negative experience. These voices usually say things like, "Adoption, for our family, was a wonderful experience," or "Our family was formed through adoption and to talk about that negatively is saying our family isn't OK," "Adoption brought joy to our family." These statements are all true but they are not acknowledging the whole truth of adoption. What has been left out is the loss, the pain of loss and the struggles of dealing with this pain and loss every single day and minute. This loss is the experience of the adopted person.

Before I was adopted, I was separated from two families, my birth mother's and my birth father's. Two sets of people with whom I shared physical traits, characteristics and mannerisms. Two groups of people who, as society tells me over and over, are the most important people in my life and with whom I will have the strongest "bond." In my case, I was also separated from something else: my culture and my race. These losses are with me every day. These losses are part of my experience. These losses have been the hardest and most painful things I have dealt with in my life. And they are *huge*.

When I hear adoptive parents being horrified at a comparison of their child's experience to something as horrifying as a war, I am horrified that they think it could not be that bad. When I hear someone say it is distressing to hear such a negative comparison to adoption, I am just as distressed to imagine comparing it to something great.

What I have discovered is that for many people it is not always OK to say these negative things about adoption. I think that people interpret the negative (real) talk about adoption to mean that I wish I weren't a part of my family. Or that I am not connected to my family. Or maybe even that my mom and dad did something wrong by adopting me. Or that it means that I am *not* grateful. But you know what, I am *not* "grateful" that I had to be adopted. I am not "grateful" that I have to struggle with the loss of my birth family and that identity. And I don't feel "wonderfully lucky" that I was raised in a culture different from the one I was born into. What I do feel is that I love my mom and dad very much. I do feel totally connected to them. I wouldn't trade my family for any family in the world and I don't wish they were someone other than they are. I don't wish that I didn't have to participate in family events (well... about as much as anyone) and I feel totally supported by my family.

My biggest wish in the world is that we could talk honestly about adoption. All aspects of it. I wish that we could acknowledge the wonderful gift it brings to all of our lives as well as the tremendous loss and the horrific fear and confusion. I wish that children growing up adopted could know that, as well as feeling grateful and blessed, it is OK and normal to feel angry, seared, abandoned, out of control and totally alone. Like "being kidnapped or taken prisoner by invading armies. Or forced to migrate to another country or separated from what you call home." Don't you think that if children knew that it was OK to have negative feelings, they might feel comfortable and safe expressing all of their feelings?