

The Spirituality of Adoption

by Father Thomas Brosnan

Fundamental promise: that somehow we have become fragmented, separated in some degree from our true sense of self and our creator. Religion, from the Latin re-ligare, can thus be taken to mean "a re-uniting of what has been previously separated" (von Balthasar).

Adoption literally means to choose for. To choose a child for another family. While the chosen family may indeed be beneficial for the child, the act of choosing rests on the indisputable fact that the child must first have experienced separation from his family of origin. Abandonment or relinquishment is thus always the implicit foundation of the adoption experience. Every blessing which adoption may bring is founded on the terror which every adopted person experiences when separated from his mother. Although these are usually pre-verbal experiences, they are nonetheless remembered in some form. The task of the adopted person is somehow to embrace his past and to make sense of it in the present here-and-now.

Myths of literature and legend abound with this image of returning to our beginnings. Likewise, religious pilgrimage is a physical manifestation of the inner journey towards that same end, the reunion with the lost self, the return of creature to creator. Perhaps T.S. Eliot said it best:

"We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring,
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time."

The adopted person's experience of separation symbolizes, as perhaps no other human experience can, the dread of not-belonging, feeling oneself an "exile from one's past" and experiencing the simultaneous desire for belonging. This ambivalence is the necessary starting point in the process of healing. It is, in religious terms, the work of salvation, leading the adopted person in search of a "phonic resonance" of sorts, a pilgrimage through time rather than space, an uncovering of beginnings. Like the complementary aspects of body and soul, nurture cannot be separated from nature without causing fragmentation, pain, and crises in identity. Whether acknowledged or not, adopted people have four parents, and like all the great saints and mystics of the past, we eventually come to realize we belong in more than one place.

Secret knowledge, sealed records, the closed adoption system — are all products of a dualist thinking that has long been a threat to authentic spirituality. Dualism reduces reality to an either/or certainty. It cannot endure the ambivalence inherent in the two realities of a single phenomenon, whether we are speaking of nature and grace, body and soul, matter and spirit, nature and nurture, heredity and environment, or relinquishment and adoption. Dualism pits one aspect against the other, creating insoluble conflict. In dualist thinking, reality must be seen as either/or, it can never be both/and.

Dualist thinking permeates the adoption experience. Not only does it lead adoptive parents to falsely believe that their child was born a "blank slate," according no import whatsoever to the role of genetic inheritance, but it also misleads the adopted person himself into believing that belonging to one's adoptive family necessarily precludes his rightful place as a son or daughter of his birth parents. I remember sitting in front of a doctor who asked me for a detailed medical history of my family. Without questioning myself, I proceeded to give the medical history of my adoptive family. Years later, after I found my birth mother, I told my adoptive parents this story, expecting to make the point that secrecy had led me to make such a foolish response. Instead, my father told me that he had heard that you could get heart disease from working with people with type A personalities. A hallmark of dualism is the willingness to go to extremes to preserve an either/or certainty. Anyone can become its victim, especially those indoctrinated over long periods of time.

Dualist thinking, with its urgency to choose one family over the other and deny the need to integrate one's past and present, often results in a crisis of identity. Fr. John Courtney Murray S.J., perhaps the most important American Catholic theologian to date, offered the following thoughts regarding the importance of identity. "Self-understanding is the necessary condition of a sense of self-identity and self-confidence. The peril is great.... The complete loss of one's identity is, with all propriety of theological definition, hell. In diminished forms, it is insanity." A priest friend of mine once told me of his jarring experience when visiting a home for emotionally-disturbed adolescents. The priest walked into the home and heard a young man singing the Irish ballad, "Danny Boy." While singing, the young man had his back to the priest. When the song was finished, the priest went and tapped the young man on the shoulder, thanking him for such a beautiful rendition.

The young man quickly turned, revealing an Asian face. The priest instinctively laughed: "I'm sorry," he said. "I thought you were Irish." The boy's eyes filled with tears and he angrily responded: "I am Irish; my name is Michael O'Brien." Insanity and hell are the dangers we court when we will not permit the truth to be acknowledged.

An authentic spirituality of adoption does not settle for an either/or solution, but rather seeks to hold the tension of both/and. When I found my birth mother ten years ago, she told me that she named me for her brother, Tom, who had been a Jesuit priest. Some say synchronicity is a mark of authentic spirituality. I was reminded of the importance of names this past Easter when Christians read the gospel accounts of the appearances of the risen Christ. One of the initial appearances occurs when the apostle Thomas is absent (John 20). The others tell him of their extraordinary encounter with Jesus. "I'll never believe it," Thomas says, "without probing the nail prints in his hands, without putting my finger in the nail marks and my hand into his side" (John 20:25). This graphic story finds a resonance within me. I think it is meant to do so. Thomas is telling the others that he is not interested in disembodied spirits. He will not bother himself with ghosts. Thomas wants the real thing. He demands evidence, he wants a "hands-on" experience. Like Thomas, adopted people eventually tire of fantasy; we want to embrace a real history: that is, our unique personal history, which originated in the real sexual union of two flesh and blood individuals.

The task of an authentic spirituality of adoption is to overcome the dualism that pits body against soul, matter against spirit, nature against nurture and to embrace the truth that we as adopted persons are not disembodied ghosts but embodied spirits who have received the gift of self from four separate individuals. Our identity is formed from the unique interplay between genetic heritage and environmental experience. We really do have four parents. We truly do belong to two different families. The paradox is that, the more we accept the truth of belonging in two distinct places, claiming both nature and nurture, the more fully we can belong where we find ourselves presently. As another spiritual pilgrim, St. Catherine of Sienna, once said: "All the way to heaven, is heaven."

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