

# Adoption and Generations

By Linda Yellin

It's never easy to answer the question, "How has adoption been meaningful in your life?" First, at any point in one's life, adoption's meaning can have many layers and avenues of expression. Further, as we move through life's significant passages, these meanings change and shift, as we re-interpret ourselves and our place in the world and in the lives of those we love. Adoption is a lifelong and inter-generational process for every adopted person, and for me the situation is made more complex by the fact that I am an adopted person, a parent and an adoption professional.

While growing up, I had many questions and feelings about being adopted; in my adulthood, I have continued to explore these issues. After joining a search and support group, I found many of my questions and feelings to be common to other adopted people. I searched for and found my birth mother more than eleven years ago, reuniting with her and her extended family and establishing an ongoing relationship. Eight years ago, I searched for my birth father as well and have continued contact with him. Post-reunion relationships — like all other human relationships — have their ups and downs, shifting and changing as time goes on. No matter how positive reunions may be, expectations need to be reevaluated at various times during the search process as well as after the reunion.

Becoming a parent for the first time may bring some important issues to the surface for adopted people. Adopted people may have fears about becoming parents. If they have not searched, they may be concerned about their medical history. And for an adopted person who has not reunited with birth family, that newborn child — perhaps the first biological relative an adopted person has ever seen or held — can elicit especially complicated emotions. At the time of my daughter's birth, I had not yet searched for my birth mother; for me, being pregnant, giving birth, and holding my daughter brought up a wealth of questions and emotions about adoption and about my birth family. I am

not alone in discovering that parenthood can reveal new layers to the experience of being an adopted person. In becoming parents, some of us discover a deep association between birth and loss, and connecting to the baby may stir up feelings of anger and grief about the loss of the birth family. It can also give rise to a sense of incredulity: in discovering the love one can feel for a new baby, the idea of relinquishing a baby can seem incomprehensible. On the other hand, some find that giving birth may also bring a deeper appreciation of the difficulty and pain that may have been experienced by their own birth parents.

And the re-evaluations continue as one moves further into the life of parenthood. All parents have reactions and experiences that are connected to their childhoods. But adopted people as parents may find it harder to let go and separate in a healthy manner from their children; they may have a heightened sensitivity to rejection if they are still struggling with their own issues of rejection. Talking to their own child about having been adopted may reveal shame, uncertainty, or confusion, but it can also provide opportunities to rework some of the unresolved issues adopted people carry into adulthood.

For many of us, becoming parents can reveal another unexpected consequence of adoption: that it affects not just our lives and the lives of our adoptive parents and birth parents, but the lives of the next generation as well. Sometimes, it's in trying to explain adoption to our own children that adopted people confront once more adoption's confusing and complicated effects. Just as the adopted child may have wondered, "Who are my real parents?" so, too, the child of an adopted person may wonder, "Who are my real grandparents?" During my daughter's young childhood, I had introduced her to the concept of adoption, modeling appropriate language and offering explanations appropriate to her age. Yet when I told her that I was an adopted person, she said, "You mean Grandma and Grandpa are my fake grandparents?" Though not adopted herself, her

response was similar to that expressed by adopted children of that age. What is real? What is fake? Where do I stand? Like adopted people themselves, children of adopted people also experience the lifelong task of developing an insightful understanding of what makes a family.

In many situations, children of adopted people have powerful feelings about the search and reunion process, and may indeed exert some influence on its course. Sometimes they are supportive of their parent's need to reconnect with the birth family, but many times they are not, and need help to examine the relational shifts, real or imagined, that a search may bring about. Whereas some children feel excited at this adventure, some may feel alarmed, conflicted, jealous or disloyal, particularly to the grandparents the child already knows. Just as the adopted person needs room, time and support to recognize and address adoption's issues, so too do the children of adopted people. In my case, it was important to help my daughter understand that knowing my birth family has enriched my life and relationships, providing

missing pieces that were essential to my well-being. Now a teenager, my daughter has come to appreciate that my reunion has allowed her to have a deeper sense of family and of origin.

Sometimes, the desire for reunion can stem not from the adopted person or the birth parents, but from the adult children of adopted people. Sometimes, it's the adopted person, not the child, who feels ambivalent about reunion, arguing that it's better "to leave well enough alone," while the adult child may carry the quest for identity and family. This situation raises interesting and demanding questions: Whose need is it to search? Whose "right" is it to initiate a search? In this case, as in all others, each family will involve its own unique needs, demonstrate different dynamics, create its own process. But in every family, it's important that all involved — inter-generational members of the triad, their extended families, and involved professionals — offer time, support and conversation to address the fears and conflicts that can be brought about across the generations touched by adoption.