



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Director's Corner

Why Did This Happen To Us?

by Beth Hall

For twenty years my husband and I have lived in the same house in Oakland with our two children, both of whom joined our family through adoption. Now young adults, they were both too young when we moved in to have memories of living anywhere else.

On the night of December 7, 2011, as we slept, nine-millimeter bullets were shot into our home, two of which missed our son's head by less than six inches. We have not stayed a night in our house since; we have moved out and are in the process of selling the place our children have always called "home" – a second trauma visited in response to the first.

The night of the incident the police came, took fingerprints, collected the casings, and told us that it looked as if it was a targeted hit. When we responded with horror, they suggested that we move out of our home for a while, but encouraged us to understand that this is simply par for the course in city living and that the likelihood that they would be able to find the perpetrator was very low. They urged us to get on with our lives.

Since then the police have had no further information to offer us, nor any services, since physically "nothing happened" to us except for the holes in our walls. The terror in our hearts, and the trauma we have experienced as we try to recover from an incident over which we had no control and for which we still have no explanation, do not qualify us to access whatever "victim services" might be available.

As I have tried to process this, and support my husband and children in their own processing, I have been thinking about how adoption plays into our family and individual reactions. We keep being told we should be grateful that nothing worse happened, and of course we are, immensely. But this language of gratitude is strikingly similar to that which so many adoptees hear over the course of their lives. I find myself thinking, in this still-early stage of response and recovery, about the insight this gives me into my own children's adoption experience, and that of other adoptees I know and work for and with.

Trauma (noun) 1. emotional shock 2. bodily injury; Synonyms: upset, disturbance, ordeal, suffering, pain, strain, distress and damage.

Traumatic events are external and uncontrollable and can encompass everything from abuse or neglect, to witnessing tragedies or natural disasters, serious accidents, and loss. The degree of trauma imparted relates to how helpless a person feels during the event or events. Psychic trauma occurs when a sudden, unexpected, and overwhelming emotional blow or series of blows assaults a person. Trauma impacts the brain mostly in the amygdala, the area of the brain that responds to danger and fear with a "flight, freeze or fight" response. This area of the brain is hardwired to react to both perceived and actual threats. Early trauma is likely to have an impact on how we respond to later traumatic experiences; when children experience early stress or trauma there is a resulting impact on brain architecture that can refine brain connections by enhancing some reactions and reducing or eliminating others.. Many adopted children have experienced early trauma, related to the sudden loss of their birth families and/or the circumstances that led to them being separated from their first family.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) 1. A severe anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to any event that results in psychological trauma 2. This event may involve the threat of death to oneself or to someone else, or to one's own or someone else's physical, sexual, or psychological integrity, overwhelming the individual's ability to cope.

Anxiety disorders are characterized by extreme worry about things that are often outside of our control. The amygdala is located near the memory center of the brain, so often trauma rooted in an experience can reawaken other, earlier traumas, including pre-verbal experiences. External trauma leaves imprints on the brain known as unconscious memories. These memories and the feelings they evoke can be activated by sensory experiences that may be related to the initial trauma, even when danger is long past. In this way, traumas—sudden

losses, violent disruptions, extreme distress—in adulthood can reawaken childhood traumas for adopted people.

PTSD itself is defined by four symptom types: 1) re-experiencing (or reliving) the event, 2) avoiding situations that recall the event, 3) feeling numb and 4) hyper-arousal (feeling keyed up). Common reactions after a trauma are fear/anxiety, sadness/depression, guilt/shame and anger/irritability, which are sometimes accompanied by behavior changes such as self-health neglect, excessive alcohol/drug use or abuse, aggression or social avoidance.

Normative responses to anxiety typically evolve to correspond with developmental stages:

- 5-6 year-olds experience separation anxiety, fear of imaginary creatures and burglars, are unable to sleep alone the dark.
- 7-8 year-olds exhibit fear of being alone and of personal harm, are triggered by media exposure to unrelated scary events, are susceptible to a sense of failure and criticism, have scary dreams.
- 9-12 year-olds are susceptible to a sense of failure and criticism, sensitive to rejection, reactive to peer bullying and pressure, fear kidnapping and other uncontrollable outcomes.
- 13-18 year-olds can experience social alienation, fear of failure, embarrassment, humiliation, serious illness, fear of or fascination with death or danger.
- At all ages, perfectionism is often associated with anxiety disorders as an attempt to regain control of a circumstance or event over which a person has (or feels they have) no control.

In the days and weeks following the assault on our home, my family and I have found ourselves exhibiting most of the behaviors described for every developmental stage – an indication that either all of us are regressing in response to this trauma (which is probably normal) or that there is no “normal” under non-normal circumstances.

As I observe my own reactions and those of my family to the trauma we have experienced, I cannot help but see the parallels to the experience my children have already had of being adopted. Friends’ and family’s first response to our experience is always one of fear for us. But once they understand that none of us were physically harmed, many of them go into a litany of questions about whom it might have been that did this and/or if we might have done something to bring this onto ourselves. When we explain we have no idea or explanation they respond with ever more probing questions as if to jog our memory or somehow loosen our tongues with confessions of the actions any one of us might have taken to contribute to our plight. I am now saddled with the same “narrative burden” to explain my situation that my children, as adopted people, have experienced throughout their lives.

We lived for almost two months in hotels and friends’ homes, the four of us sandwiched into two rooms, eating at

restaurants and feeling as if we might never again find a place to land that felt solid. This month we moved into a new house. We are still living among boxes, with furniture that doesn’t fit the way it used to, if it fits at all. Windows without curtains make us feel vulnerable and we find ourselves still afraid to tell people where we actually live. In other words, we feel displaced and often crazy when what we need is security and calm.

I think of all the adult adoptees who speak about feeling displaced, even though they love their adoptive families. I remember how many adopted adults have said they don’t feel as if they have a solid place in the world. Relating my experience to theirs, I can’t help but think that we would be better off empathizing with their experience instead of sending them to therapists in the hopes they will get “fixed.” The research on trauma indicates that it is natural and normal to have a strong reaction to events we cannot control and did not bring on ourselves, but often society seems to say otherwise. The tone and words of the police who told us to “get on with our lives” or the friends who remarked we were “lucky” certainly would be familiar to many adopted people (and birth parents) who have been told to “stop focusing on the past” and be “grateful.”

When people question us about why this happened or if we know who did it, their questions reverberate within us and our deepest fears rear their ugly heads: maybe this did happen to us because of something we did, or even worse, because of who we are. I’ve come to realize that events like this open doors to all our dormant fears and anxieties; the impact of adoption on our own children and family is being revisited in ways that we thought we had laid to rest. Have we yet again failed to be perfect parents? Have we once more proved not to be a “normal” family? Do permanence and security once again feel like illusions for my children?

All of us are triggered up, down, and sideways. Waking up at night sweating afraid to go back to sleep. Jumping at unfamiliar noises. Considering lifestyle changes that we never would have been entertained before. We are talking to therapists, considering medications, and trying to be supportive of one another. Each of us at some point has turned in anger, blame or pain to someone else in the family and attacked or rejected because sometimes our feelings are so strong and out of control that we lash out.

I have found it impossible not to take personally the decisions and actions of those whom we don’t control or perhaps even know—we all have at times. As I ponder our conscious and unconscious choices and consider our responsibility for unanticipated or unimagined consequences—I feel a new affinity for birth parents and adopted people and the questions they live with for a lifetime. Love is not enough to take away these questions or feelings, in fact healing can only happen as we face and address our fears and concerns—even when that is hard.

Are we over-reacting? Is it reasonable for us to feel anxious and afraid when the unexpected and unexplainable has happened to us? Frankly I think it is impossible not to. How quickly do we internalize not only our own experience but also the response of others who are trying to help us by suggesting we get over it and put it behind us? Instantly.

And even while all of this is true, our family has become even closer than we were before because we have shared this experience and supported one another (most of the time) through it.

Does that mean we are glad it happened? Definitely, no.

Does it mean we are glad we have one another in the face of the trauma we have experienced? You bet.

Are we scarred for life? Maybe. At the very least we have been altered by this experience in ways we do not yet fully understand. But we are not debilitated. And we should not be pathologized for this any more than should our children for having been placed for adoption. Perhaps on good days we are also stronger because we are surviving and moving forward under challenging circumstances.

Why did this happen to us? I don't know, nor do I think that there is a simple answer to that question. Bad stuff happens to good people without cause or reason sometimes. As we heal, we will certainly have to ask the question over and over again and we will need stability and care while we do it.

What I do know is that it is not helpful to ask us to get over it or on with it. We certainly can't be grateful for the experience. But it helps to have support in our process as we deal with it; we need understanding and empathy without judgment more than anything.

And that, my friends, is the very best model for adoptive parenting.

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