pact's point of view
serving adopted children of color

First published in Pact's Point of View © 1997
Do not reprint without permission.

Adoption and *The Prophet*

By Eloise Rivera

As I search my memory to discover the first time I encountered the concept of adoption in any way that had a strong personal impact, I find myself recalling a time when I was very young. It was so long ago that the memory is very foggy. I could be six or seven years old. The essence of the memory is that my older brother tells me that I am adopted. He tells it to me in a manner that is taunting, invalidating. I recall the sudden sense of panic, the anxiety that, if I were not the child of my parents as I had always assumed I was, then what? Perhaps my place in the family was not solid and permanent as I had believed. The pronouncement, "You are adopted!" affected me like an earthquake - sudden, powerful and immensely frightening. The stable ground of my existence shifted beneath my feet as it never had before, solid ground turning to quicksand and threatening to swallow me up into non-existence.

But I had had enough experience with my brother by the age of six to know that he did not always tell the truth or have my best interests at heart, so as soon as the initial impact of the tremor subsided, I immediately went to my mother for verification. She reassured me that my brother's declaration had no truth to it whatsoever, that indeed I was her child, had always been and always would be. With her reassurance, my brother's words lost their frightening power. Why would a brother say such a thing? Now that I am a parent, I know. The little one comes along after a few years and disrupts the older one's precious, exclusive enjoyment of the parents' love and devotion and the anger finds many ingenious paths of expression. To watch a moment of agonized self-doubt in the eyes of the unwelcome intruder is a fleeting moment of sweet revenge for the older sibling, and really a small compensation at that.

From this memory my thoughts shift directly, without detour, to a later time. I am fourteen and in my sophomore English class along with thirty other teenagers, only one or two of whom I know, as I am a new kid at the large high school. We're alphabetically arranged, so I am sitting in the back of the room, far from the teacher's awareness. Here is a back-row culture of note-passing and wary whispering, doodling and general non-attention to the business at hand. A friendly, outgoing, talkative girl named Cecelia sits next to me. One morning, she leans over and whispers an odd message. She murmurs confidentially, "Tom says you are Mexican." Cecelia smiles as she presents this bit of tasty gossip to me, raising her eyebrows to convey a mixture of mischief and expectation. I don't know how to respond to that piece of "news." In the essentially lily-white, Midwestern community, the high school population of 2500 can claim one Black student, one attractive blue-eyed, dark-skinned half-Cherokee, one possible "Mexican" (me), and that's it. I look at Cecelia and say, "Who's Tom?" She leans back and points him out, another resident of the back row, a pale, blond boy with a butch haircut. He is looking at the teacher with a rather nasty expression on his face, scrunched-up forehead, glaring eyes. At this moment, I can't quite comprehend the meaning of his remark, so I ask Cecelia again, "He said what?" She repeats it and it feels like I am being stabbed, like suddenly I need to explain and defend myself. I notice, as I write about this, that my heart is beating faster and the heat in my face is exactly as I recall the physical effect on me then. This is, I believe, one of my earliest experiences with racism. Not the first, but it made an impression, since I was the object, not a spectator.

Today I am the mother of two beautiful, dark-skinned, adopted daughters from Central America. I fervently want to protect them from all harm and pain, physical and emotional. And I know that I cannot. If I remember to this day such minor, fleeting incidents of "adoptism" and "racism" that I experienced so long ago, then I wonder if my daughters have, at ages three and eight, already felt the painful reverberations of these "-isms." If not yet, then when? How will they cope? How will we as a family cope? There are no easy answers. In order to understand how the challenge might be met, we first have to understand what the underlying issues are.

As a child, I think I feared that if I were in truth "adopted," I would not be child of my mother, whom I trusted completely and to whom I felt so close. If that were the truth, it would be a terrible truth. It could mean that I was not truly loved, perhaps only pitied. If my most basic belief, that I was the child of my mother, was in fact not true, then all reality would crumble before me and I would not know who I was -perhaps I would be no one.

The attitude of adoptism in the world is at least in part about these fears concerning identity and acceptance and an acknowledged place in family and in society. Sometimes "adoptism" is expressed in pity for the "unwanted, abandoned" child or the infertile parents or admiration for the "moral or spiritual superiority" of adults willing to raise the unfortunate children of others. Adoptism can also involve an individual's projection of the feeling of alienation onto a sort of

"scapegoat." The adopted person, then, not the "adoptist," is the misfit, the outsider, the one whose identity is unclear, who is the rejected one, abandoned, unwanted, unloved. Those who utter racist or "adoptist" remarks of a more cruel and rejecting nature are frequently, at core, unhappy, alienated people, who themselves feel insecure, like outsiders.

It may have been one such individual who uttered a remark I overheard, again some years ago, this time on my honeymoon in Yosemite. One evening was marred by the behavior of our noisy, rowdy, beer-drinking tent "neighbors." As the night wore on and the drinking progressed, they became even noisier and more vulgar. I do not remember a word of their verbal exchanges in those late hours except for one riveting sentence which pierced the summer night air. One of them took aim at another and fired off this utterance with slurry, venomous disdain, "Oh Rich, you're adopted!" I didn't hear any response. The remark seemed to have caused only a momentary hitch in the conversation and then was lost in the ensuing mix of gibes and laughter. I don't know whether Rich was or was not adopted, what he did or said to precipitate the barb, or how he reacted, if he reacted at all. Perhaps it was the unseen, unintended audience in the surrounding darkness that was affected the most. I do feel that those words were the precise equivalent of "You are the son of a whore," with the dark and vicious implications of all remarks that reflect prejudice against women, minority races and cultures, or any group that the speaker defines as "other."

While I believe that it is inevitable that adoptive parents and children will encounter such attitudes and projections of "adoptism," I also believe the modern adoptive family has special strengths and opportunities. What is required of adoptive families in order to meet the challenges of "adoptism" is really what all healthy families need to meet a variety of challenges: flexibility, humor, the desire to acknowledge, explore and embrace the whole truth of their circumstances in open and honest communication. A generous dose of patience and compassion can also go a long way.

The desire to acknowledge, explore and embrace the whole truth of their circumstances is crucial. At the very foundation of adoptive families is an initial sorrow and loss that require recognition. The biological family did not develop and thrive. The separation of birth parents and children and the unrealized dreams of infertile couples are real losses that may find grieving expression at various points in the lifetimes of all involved. But loss is not all there is. Living in an adoptive family is potentially a lifelong process of healing, growth and affirmation.

"Adoptism," like racism, embodies insecurity and fear, especially of "difference." The unique opportunity that life offers the adoptive family is a the opportunity to demonstrate the overcoming of the fear of difference - in fact, the celebration of difference. The adopted child will never look like or be like Mom or Dad or Grandma Mary or Uncle Dick. The adopted child will never be a "chip off the old block." Once the adoptive family lets those expectations go, they can embrace the mystery and excitement of the newness, difference and unique qualities of the child or children who have become their new generation. Adoptive parents do not need to struggle quite so much as birth parents to understand the wisdom of Kahlil Gibran's Prophet when he says:

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself..
Though they are with you, they belong not to you.
You may give them your love, but not your thoughts
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them,
but seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

Adoptive parents and children who understand and live in the light of this wisdom not only are far less vulnerable to "adoptist" challenges, but they can set an example from which others can learn.