

Adoption and My Life

Gail Steinberg

When did you first start to think about adoption as an aspect of your own identity and what first brought the issues into focus for you?

My friend Sharon does research on aging. It wasn't until she first started talking about her idea that each person's life has a theme that it occurred to me to look for one in my own. I started to think that adoption was the unifying motif of my life. Then I thought of so many examples that I couldn't imagine why I hadn't seen the connections between them sooner. Everything that had ever happened to me seemed included, from the passing fancies to the really big deals. Here's some of what I mean:

My favorite kind of cooking is the "make it up as you go along" kind where you figure out a way to combine whatever you have on hand into something unexpected that also manages to be tasty. Synergy - the idea that one plus one equals three, the whole is bigger than the sum of its parts - continues to attract me. When Shira, Jeremy, Seth and Liza were little, once in awhile on a rainy Saturday I used to let them loose in the grocery. Each got to pick one food. The fun was to put everything all together into one dish for dinner. "Berry sticky noodles," a casserole of noodles, fresh berries, ice cream, corn flakes, marshmallows and peanut butter is sometimes still requested when comfort food is needed. Don't laugh. Redbook magazine once published the recipe. What I like to do best is find relationship among what seems diverse. If that isn't what adoption's about, I don't know what is.

In my first career, I built a small company to bring handicrafts made by artisans in the villages of Afghanistan to the US market. "Jasmine and Bread" was the name of the company. It came from an Afghan proverb: "If you have two coins, use the first for jasmine, the next for bread. One will give you life, the other a reason for living." What I loved about the work was the clarity of those priorities. Adoption supports the same spirit: life and a reason for living.

In the opening scene of *Open Secrets* (my someday to be finished novel), Rissa separates 72 eggs for Passover cooking and ponders the origins of dividing white from yolk (mother from child). Bringing together elements that have been separated is a central issue of the book (and of adoption). You can't unscramble eggs, I think she'll conclude. Call that a weakness or call it a strength.

It makes perfect sense to me in hindsight that I married the son of an adopted person and that our family came together through adoption. Deepening the connections between us, though we did not at first seem to be related; deepening

consciousness of our common origins; finding ways to live out our highest priorities; and seeking unity with respect for diversity - these have been at the heart of everything. In the moments when these goals are met, the feeling of "this is the way it's supposed to be" takes me over. My work for the children of Pact continues the same theme.

Was there any particular event that that changed adoption from an idea to an explanation to yourself for how your world works?

Seth was an active baby and an early riser. When he was eight months old, our family rented for a week a cabin overlooking the ocean. Every morning at sun rise, I carried him down a steep hill to the deserted beach in a straw hamper before the rest of the family woke up. The top of his head gave off the scent of sweet churned butter. Watching him practice his curious baby yoga at the water's edge made something deep inside relax for me. My feelings about being a mother by adoption changed.

Utopia, someone once said, is having everything all at once. I imagined generations of mothers and children before us had sat in just that place in the sand cherishing a quiet moment. Sitting beside my child, I felt connected to all of them. Watching his complete concentration on just what he could see and touch, I felt part of a universe far greater than myself. I felt entitled to count myself in without having to prove my worth. Blood ties felt like no stronger means of connection than intention. And I saw I could no more control how major events shaped my life than the sand dollars that washed up on the shore could control Seth's need to taste them.

I felt I would never be more connected to anyone than I was to Seth or more content. Yet circumstances had just happened to make him the one beside me. Any of my children or my husband or a dear friend might have been in his place. I would have felt as connected and content. Realizing this took nothing from what Seth and I shared, but it did soften a certain rigidity inside me. I don't know if I could have welcomed my children's birth parents into our lives later if I hadn't had that experience then.

Talk about adopted people as parents and the generational effects of adoption. What patterns do you see in your family?

My parents were both the children of first-generation immigrants and grew up with tremendous independence. They married and became parents during the time of the Holocaust. My sister and I were sheltered and protected, true Jewish American princesses, the objects of our parent's complete

attention, as if safety were in absolutes, as if everything we became reflected back on them. I grew up promising myself that when I got to be a mother, my highest priority would be to let my kids have the space to find their own way. I see change as a way to make things better and feel desperate when I feel stuck.

My husband's parents were both separated from their birth parents as young children and grew up as second-class family members, adopted by relatives. During World War II, when they married and became parents, they too provided their children with the kind of protection they felt they had missed. They were deeply resistant to change, untrusting of outsiders, and determined to live by the rules of their community. Mel grew up feeling as if the rules do not apply to him and determined to let his children make their own choices. He accepts change cautiously when it occurs but he does not seek it on purpose and has far greater tolerance than I of ambiguity.

Shira and her husband Andy are the first of our children to have kids. They are doing a great job; the proof is our wonderful granddaughters. Leah is eight and Kai almost two. Shira gave up her career to be a full-time mother. She believes being available to her children full time is her most important use of herself. She and Andy seem determined to shelter and protect their kids, to provide better attention than Shira thinks we gave her, and they believe in living by the rules. Both of them seek change as a way to make things better. Jeremy, our oldest son, and his wife Patty say they are waiting to have kids until they can buy a house with a yard. Jeremy feels that Mel and I made most of our choices in life based on self-interest. He is determined not to do the same when he's a dad. Jeremy does not take risks. He lives by the rules and is slow to make changes. He has always been terrific with kids and we look

forward to watching him raise his family as soon as he is ready. Seth and Liza, our two youngest children, have chosen not to settle down and become parents as yet, but both seem to be dreaming of the time when they will. They have both been risk-takers so far in their lives, make changes frequently, and think they can find a way to bend any rules that don't support their goals.

Generational patterns? Like waves, the flow of what seems important goes in and out, always moving. My experience with my in-laws and with my children tells me that in spite of what life deals them, they each carry a lot of anger and sadness which affects their responses. Is that a result of losing a birth parent early on? I think it is. On the other hand, living with Mel, the child of an adopted person, makes me think that optimism and a deep sense of entitlement and self-worth may be the second-generation effects of living with a parent who experienced early loss. Leah and Kai, the other children of an adopted person that I know best, seem to share their grandpa's sense that they are more than okay in a pretty good world.

Why did you choose to work in adoption?

The most precious things of life do not belong to us and still they are ours.... That's why I've always dreamed of living beside the ocean. Waves come and go. You can't hold on, no matter how you try. I believe children who grow up adopted have a greater chance to become themselves than children who are thought of only as extensions of their parents. Adoptive parents can't assume their children are exactly like them. I like to think this creates a need to work at understanding and the possibility of healthy boundaries. I also believe children grow up best in nurturing families. I can't think of anything I'd rather be doing at this time in my life than helping to build healthy adoptive families for children who can't remain with their birth parents.