

by **Beth Hall**

## **Blended Families**

I think I was about 8 years old the first time someone told me that there must be something wrong with her because she was adopted. I remember being upset. I remember getting angry.... I would never be that kid's friend again. I also remember secretly wondering whether or not they were right.

My parents love to tell the story. I was about seven and Barbara, my sister was four. They described to us the two ways children could come into the family: through birth and through adoption. In the end, it was me, not Barbara, who burst into tears. The adoption scenario had sounded so good...

Several years later, Barbara had gotten into my stuff again. "She makes me sooo mad. It is so unfair sometimes, having a 6-year-old sister is always getting into my stuff." There she was with my broken doll; mad and probably ashamed, she said it was a stupid doll anyway. I had never been so angry with her. What could I say or do.... "You're not my real sister anyway. You don't even belong in this family."

I still feel guilty when I think that I said that, an 10-year-old's design for vengeance. I think the most painful part of that memory is that I was tearing at the fabric of my family, which ultimately left me terribly insecure. Growing up in a blended family has brought me a unique perspective on adoption and family building.

I spent a lot of my life feeling the need to defend my sister against the questions and judgments of the uneducated. Please don't misunderstand: adoption was a normal and comfortable part of our family vocabulary. Two out of our three cousins were also adopted. The problem for me? I never allowed myself to ask or voice the secret questions and doubts that I couldn't help but learn from society. It was only much later that I have been able to face my fears and come away with answers: while we were different ways that other siblings were are nevertheless sisters -- yes, oh yes, we are absolutely family.

*continue on reverse page*

## **Let's Pretend**

You know how your parents tell you stories about yourself? Stories about things you did or things that happened in the family? Those stories become fables, signposts in our lives....

When I was two years old or so, my parents and I were playing on their bed. My father asked me what color the pillowcase was. I answered proudly that it was white. My father, with a gleam in his eye I was too young to understand, said that it was black. I stood up for the truth. He was a teaser and I knew it was white. He, with a perfectly straight face, said no, it was indeed black. "Go ask your Mom." I did and she concurred. It was indeed black. I kept looking back and forth between the two of them and the pillowcase and finally, I burst into hysterical tears.

My parents tell this story now with chagrin as well as with laughter. They had no idea at the time how dependent I was on their view of the world - what an impossible dilemma they had created by asking me to choose between believing them and believing what I knew to be true. Sometimes I wonder if I actually remember this event, or if I simply remember the family lore about it. This I know: it happened. I know this because when I return to my emotions, I still feel the pain and horror of that dilemma. It still makes me feel afraid and alone. To this day, I am completely intolerant of what I call "let's pretend" attitudes.

Back in the days when my parents and I adopted my younger sister the little book from the adoption agency said, "Tell them they are adopted. Don't try to hide it. Once it's out in the open, you've done your job. Now you can treat them just as you would your natural children." This little book had more pages devoted to acknowledgment of an adoptive family as a real family (just like a natural family!) than it did to adoption. I remember wondering why was there a book? Why did people ask me if my sister was my real sister? I knew what they meant and I didn't like it. I didn't know what to say and I felt ashamed of that.

*continue on reverse page*

## Blended Families

Society has such strong expectations for matching. I have always looked like a carbon copy of my father. People found it easy to say that Barbara looked like our mother. It used to be a family joke, because we knew it wasn't true.

My parents always loved to play games. As I grew up, I found I was good at it too. I could remember the cards that had already been played - that sort of thing. Just like our parents. Barbara doesn't play games too much anymore; she never really fit this family pattern and it still holds pain for her. I struggled for years with piano lessons, though I still try. I am barely able to bang out simple children's songs. Barbara can hear a tune and sit down to play it. Genetics!

I believe people need to understand and acknowledge that there are differences between siblings who are born into vs adopted into the family. Trying to pretend otherwise is debilitating to both. When I hear parents say that it makes no difference to have one child adopted and another not, I cringe. I can't help thinking that even my own parents' occasional protestations of sameness must have had to do with their own fears about our differences.

We adoptive families are in the minority.... There is strength in that only if we can stand up and be honest about that which makes us different. Blended families can work, but like any family that works, it takes honesty about who we are and are not. This I know: it was when my parents acknowledged the truth of our differences and uniqueness that Barbara and I were able to bask in the confidence of having a family that was a hundred percent behind us. When they tried to mold us into samenesses that might have worked in other families, we felt uncertain and insecure about our ability to fit.

Grown now, my sister and I are still just that - sisters. We can be the best of friends and the worst of enemies. We have been there for each other and let each other down. We are similar in certain ways and could not be more different in others. I love and cherish my sister. The bottom line - we are connected forever. You see, we are family.

## Let's Pretend

It is only much later in life that we, as a family, have been able to talk about the worries we all had about being an adoptive family. It is only in talking about it that we have each begun to heal our own sense of fear and shame - fear that maybe we weren't as "real" as we wanted to be, and shame that we felt such a fear.

It's funny: back then I think many people looked at our family with a tinge of envy - the All-American family with a little bit of sainthood thrown in because of adoption. Once we acknowledged how we are different than other families and were more open about our individual struggles and doubts, I think we all felt more sure of our membership than ever before. Now that we've talked about it, it's difficult to imagine that there ever was a fear.

Understand this: adoption is an issue for all members of the adoption triad. Adoption is one part of our makeup as a family. Like our race and our gender, it is integral to us but not all that we are. The beginning of support for all of us comes from comfortableness with the truth. This doesn't mean no fears, no worries, no shame or no sadness. It does mean acknowledging the feelings and experiences we have and figuring out what we choose to do with them. Don't play "let's pretend" with adoption, in doing so we present children with the intolerable dilemma of choosing between what they know and what we say.