pact's point of view
The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Transracial Adoption of Mixed-Race Youth: A Diary of a Child's Journey

by Gail Steinberg and Beth Hall

Dear Diary,
There I was, all cozy in my bed, the scent of mom's perfume still coming from my blankie after her last nighty-nighty kiss. Suddenly, out of nowhere everything changed. I can't remember what happened but when I woke up I was in another bed with a blanket that had no smell and a different mom and dad I had never seen before talking to me and trying to make me smile. I cried an ocean but a kid has to eat or else she'll die, so when I got hungry I had to let them take care of me. Now I'm used to them and I love them. They adopted me. They're my mom and dad and I'm their kid, but lots of nights before I fall asleep I'm scared something will move me again… it happened once, why couldn't it happen again?

A Child's Experience of Adoption
What if you had been forced to leave your family and move in with a new family when you were a kid? From a child's perspective, that is the experience of being adopted. Only in rare circumstances is the child given choice or control over a change that will turn her life upside-down. It is the child who must do the demanding work of making a transition from an environment that (s)he is used to (and which therefore represents security) to an entirely new world where more things may feel different (and isolating) than the same (and safe). Birth parents and adoptive parents remain in their familiar worlds but the child has to adapt. All adopted children have dual identities, inheriting their temperament and talents from their birth family and learning how to live from their adoptive family. In addition transracially-adopted biracial kids must come to terms with their dual heritages in the context of both adoption and race. The good news is that because human beings have a will to survive and are resilient, most adopted kids adapt well to their new life circumstances and many thrive. Reasonably, however, the process of joining a new family through adoption creates certain emotional sensitivities that become a permanent piece of the adopted person's legacy—a sense that the world is not a "controllable" place or at a minimum not a place that the child can control.

What is Transracial Adoption?
Transracial adoption means the joining of racially different parents and children together in adoptive families. Most transracial adoptive parents are white. Most transracially-adopted kids are of color. Transracial adoption includes children adopted from other countries as well as those born in the United States. This means that kids in transracial families usually must learn to negotiate the racial issues they encounter in our race-conscious society without the benefits of having parents of color who have also had to deal with racial bias and racism. Very often this means that children of color grow up thinking of adoption and race as the same thing. When they are young and concrete thinkers, they notice that people see their adoption by noticing their race. And it continues from there, leading to a sense that sorting out their racial identity is inextricably linked to understanding their adoptive one. Both the experience of being adopted and that of being multiracial are profound and important to the understanding of self. Together they are more and not less than the journey or either alone.

Dear Diary,
Here's the deal. In order to feel real, I have to figure out where I exactly belong. Mom and Dad are white and I know I belong with them. Even though they don't say so I'm afraid that if I don't act white like them, they won't want me with them anymore. After losing my birth family, I can't take that risk. Even among other biracial people with whom I have "so much in common," I feel separate. They talk about the cultural wars between parents: Mom wanted to fix won tons, but Dad insisted on corn beef. I am different once again even when I almost can fit in exactly… I realize that once again I am on the periphery. Everyone seems to come from a family with two identifiable mirrors. They get to see the source of their mixture, their differences split by their blended roots. It's as if my mirror is covered up.

Transracial adoption adds an additional level of complexity to a biracial or multiracial child's life Many white adoptive parents have been told by adoption "experts," that it is more acceptable for them to adopt a child who is "part white" because the child will be half like them, making them feel there is a legitimacy to their becoming the child's parents. But basing the success of adoption is on matching doesn't work. Even when the children match their parents racially they don't match genetically and if they try to "replicate" the traditional family where children are born to their parents they can never measure up. If children are taught to believe that they belong with their family because of the white part of their heritage, they risk seeing their identity as people of color as somehow working against family unity. The child in this context must put priority on developing the characteristics (being or trying to be white) that help him or her belong in the family. Reality and self-image have to split. The child must hide half of herself behind a white mask in order to feel part of her family. Can anyone wear a mask all of the time and maintain his or her pride?

Dear Diary,
Now I'm black! Mom and Dad want me to be black and proud. Every night at dinner they teach me black history. Well, I guess I can do it; I have pretty good experience at finding ways to "fit."

Over- or under-emphasizing or simplifying racial issues doesn't serve transracially-adopted children. Sometimes adoptive parents push African, Asian, Native or Latino identity for their biracial child and feel guilty or ashamed if the child does not rigidly identify that way. These parents are concerned that if their kids deny being of color when everyone else who looks like them is considered of color the child will subjected to all the liabilities of being of color, but lose out on the positive benefits. They agree with Lise Funderberg that biracial kids "should be taught to claim their black side first because that's the side that needs sticking up for." The downside to this approach it is that pressure is put on the biracial or multiracial child to deny a portion of her heritage and once again choices are removed from the child and being "decided" by others. She is given the message that she must identify according to the way others identify her or expect her to identify. Again, she is being asked to adopt a false self, to abandon a part of her racial inheritance, leave it behind as if it was of no value.

Dear Diary,
I finally figured it out. It's okay that I'm different. I get along best with other people who feel different. When I'm with my friends of color I feel like I belong, I know how talk the talk and walk the walk, the only thing is, I know a lot more about white folks than most of them do and that's okay, sometimes even good. The same thing happens when I hang out with white kids. I know a lot more about racism and what it feels like to be of color than they do but I can walk their walk and talk their talk. Just call me chameleon…it's not a bad deal.

Feelings of belonging do not come in halves; one either feels part of or separate from. If a strong goal of any child who has been disconnected from birth family is to feel the reassurance of fully belonging to their adoptive family, their peer group, their community, their culture, their ancestry, their country, their universe, then they have the right to skills to help them meet those goals. What is required is a racial identification that can remain fluid and contextual …an ability to locate self between identities and make a seamless transformation at will, somehow continuing to be oneself in various identities. This comes from being able to understand the cues and being able to identify with ALL that one is. This means that parents have to give their children the opportunity to experience both (or all) of their birth heritages so the child can learn the cues and become equipped to negotiate their own identification in the context of both groups. It also means parents will need to give their child explicit and implicit permission to identify as they feel comfortable so the child does not feel they risk losing membership in their family by trying on any of the different identities that are their birth right. This is easier said that done for adoptive families who, unlike their interracially married counterparts in birth families of multiracial children, have not necessarily had firsthand experience of dealing with issues of racial difference before becoming a parent. These parents need opportunities to normalize their own experiences through interactions not only with other transracial adoptive families but also with other families of color who have experienced racial bias and have cultural strengths to pass along to their children in ways that whites in America generally do not.

Denying difference is not an option. Celebrating and acknowledging our differences can ultimately lead our children to strength in understanding all that they are. It takes work, but the richness and fullness of the journey are well worth the struggle.
see the baby again, I was secretly relieved. I coveted this child; I wanted her for mine. When we got home with our most precious gift, I did not feel like her mother. I felt like a thief. I still blush with shame at my need to serve myself rather than giving Ana back some small measure of the enormous gift that she gave us. I decided to fly back with Sophia to see Ana before she signed the documents that would make Sophia our legal child forever. Looking back, I think it may have been the smartest thing I have ever done. I remember people saying I would lose the baby. "She gave her up. Leave it alone. Why can't you just enjoy being a mother?" But as I watched the two of them spend time together, I saw Ana's joy and grief intertwine. Funny, at the time I thought I was doing it all for Sophia and Ana. In the end, I think I gained the most—for it was on that day that I truly became a mother.

If you are fearful of your child's birth parents or feel they don't really matter, maybe it makes sense to explore your or own sense of legitimacy as a parent. All of us have to face a society that believes "blood is thicker than water." This makes us, as adoptive parents, more susceptible to self-doubt and uncertainty. But the truth is our strongest ally. Our love for our children, for all that they are—which includes the legacy that they bring from their birth parents—is the strongest cement for long-term family connection.