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Inter-country adoption and me

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My beginnings

I am a war orphan, adopted at the age of 10 months, from Vietnam.

My birth certificate reads 'born to unknown parents and abandoned at birth.' I think that's the saddest thing I've ever read, but it is also reason for me to celebrate; that I received the life that I did. One of unconditional loving from a family made up of parents who openly love each other, and have done so for some 40+ years, and three older red haired brothers.

My family were colourblind in their raising of me. They never once acknowledged the fact that I didn't look like them. They probably didn't see it. We were only reminded when we stepped outside our home.

We lived in Melbourne for the first six years of life, then moved to the country coastal town of Anglesea for the following six years. At high school age we then moved back to Melbourne. I grew up feeling very special about being adopted. The book, 'Why was I adopted?' was a source of strength for me because in a town where I looked like no one else, and where there were no other Asian faces to relate to, the illustration in that book of a young Asian baby sitting in a war helmet was the only image I had that I could remotely relate to. My healthy association with being adopted is reflected in the tale my mum recalls, where at an early age when I jumped out in front of a man in a department store and he exclaimed, 'oh, where did you come from?' the three year old version of me replied 'Vietnam.'

When I was around 10 or 11 years old, I remember harbouring an extreme fear that someone, specifically a male figure, was going to come into our home and take me or physically harm me. I had this fear recur again when I was around 19 or 20 years of age. The concept sent me into panic and the only explanation I can attribute to this deep seeded fear was that it was an element of my past coming to the forefront; I can only suggest that perhaps the forgotten experiences or things I witnessed pre-verbal years, from my time in Vietnam were somehow entangled in those fears.

When I was aged around 23 and living independently in Victoria, I attended VANISH meeting with a friend who was a domestic adoptee. He'd convinced me to attend and explore my adopted roots. I agreed to go and listen. Secretly I thought that this could be the moment I meet other people like me. Surely there must be other inter-country adoptees and if there were, then this is where I'd meet them. When I got there, the meeting involved birth mothers, domestic adoptees and relinquishing mothers. I had never felt lonelier.

The upside however, was that it was through VANISH I became informed about the Colour of Difference project. This was the first time I sat down and thought about how adoption had affected my life and development of self.

After that project commenced I visited Sydney, where I met a group of other intercountry adoptees, many of whom were Vietnam born. For the first time in my entire life, I finally felt I belonged somewhere. It had taken me 26 years to find a place where I felt like I fitted in; where I was among common people.

I returned to Melbourne after that visit to Sydney and went directly to my parents house in the Eastern region of Victoria to tell them of my plans. It was pure synchronicity; I could move into my brother's house while he and his family moved to the States for six months, and I could bring a company up from Melbourne that I casually worked in, and establish a Sydney office. Everything was in place for this to happen. It was meant to be.

And so on 26 December in 1999 I made the move. And I've been on this amazing adoption exploration journey ever since.

RACISM

When considering inter-country adoption, there are two types of racism worth addressing. There is external racism, referring to incidents where a child is tormented by other people, as a result of them appearing different, and then there is internalised racism, where the adoptee feels racist towards people from their own birth country.

External

The bottom line about external racism is that your kids will experience it. The best thing you can do to make this experience minimal trauma for your child is to arm them with a healthy sense of esteem and confidence in their birth origins. If your child has confidence in themselves and their unique family structure, then they will be able to cope better with incidents of external racism than those children who are less confident and have a weaker sense of their racial identity. It's a great idea to talk openly about racism with your family members. A fellow conference delegate, Brenda informed me that she taught her children to say 'so what?' in response to such experiences, and that worked well for her family.

Internalised racism

During that first meeting with other adoptees, I recall all sitting on couches in the lounge room and one adoptee who hadn't said a word all day, unexpectedly came out with 'I feel racist towards Asians.' This statement was promptly followed by the rest of us bursting into tears. I couldn't believe that I wasn't the only one who felt that way.

As ashamed as I was to admit that I felt that way and had never actually disclosed it to anyone. But when it came out that another adoptee also felt racist towards Asian people, and she too was born in Vietnam, there was a sense of relief that spread across that lounge room pretty rapidly. When I began to explore why I had those feelings, I initially assumed that it was a result of being teased at primary school for having the only Asian face. Had I been tall, no doubt they would have tormented me about that, but my distinct difference was my race and so that was the basis of their teasing. I thought that because they made me feel bad and inferior for being Asian that I maybe took that on board and therefore grew up thinking that being Asian meant being a lesser person.

But, as I continued to examine the issue I came up with other theories, such as rejection from my birth country or fear of the unknown causing me to gravitate away from the culture and the people. I suspect that the actual reason for the development this internalised racism was partly all of them, rather than one particular reason.

The way to avoid this occurring in future generations of inter-country adoptees is for parents to ensure they instill pride in their children about their birth heritage. This is what my own upbringing lacked and I do believe it makes a significant difference. If an adoptee is armed with a firm sense of racial identity then they are a lot less likely to develop internalised racism.

ISOLATION AND LONELINESS

I was never unhappy as a child. Some may say I was too busy being grateful and trying to please people! - but in hindsight now, as an adult, I do recognise that I experienced considerable isolation and loneliness at not having any Asian faces or role models.

The consequence of this absence of reinforcement of the value of being Asian, coupled with the lack of exposure to my birth heritage resulted in me never developing a racial identity or pride in my birth heritage. In fact, I actually grew up rejecting all things remotely Asian.

I have never been comfortable talking about myself, especially with strangers, and so tend to deflect questions about me to focus on other people. Even today, in social groups, I experience a sense of isolation, even when physically surrounded by a social group.

Despite feeling isolated in my Asian and adoption situation, I had an abundance of friends. I won Citizenship Awards year after year at Primary School, which were awards voted on by students and given to those who everyone liked. The reason everyone liked me during these years was because I was a constant people pleaser. I could never say 'no' to anyone, even if it inconvenienced me or was to my own detriment.

And although I was liked and appeared to have many friends, I don't believe any of them actually knew the 'real' me. Throughout my younger years I learned to develop different personas to suit different environments; there was funny Analee, school Analee, work Analee, etc. My lack of willingness to display one persona to all situations relates to my ingrained fear of abandonment. Subconsciously I suspect that I felt if I only show the exterior that people want to see, and never actually show 'real' me, then I will protect myself from being vulnerable enough to be rejected by

those around me. And this is intertwined with the fact that I question my own worthiness to be loved.

FEAR OF ABANDONMENT

The Primal Wound is a book written by Nancy Verrier, which addresses the impact of separation from one's birthmother. It's a thought-provoking read that is often found useful, to varying degrees, to adoptees.

As a result of the separation from our birthmother, adoptees can grow up with an overdeveloped sense of gratefulness and appreciation. I was one of these children. Everyone has a fear of abandonment and rejection to some extent, but for inter-country adoptees, and adoptees in general, we carry around an amplified fear because we know that it can actually happen.

As a child, this ingrained fear led me to be a people-pleaser type of child. I tried to be a perfectionist and a high achiever to ensure that I delivered a good daughter to my adoptive parents so that, by my reasoning, they would have no reason to ever give me up.

These days, my ingrained fear of being abandoned still affects my relationship with my parents. My adoptive parents love me more than anyone could ever hope for their parents to love them. But to be honest, they do not know WHO I am. They don't know the real me, my thoughts, my dreams, my wishes, my fears because I can't bring myself to show them all those things. And the reasons for this are twofold. 1) I have never showed them who I am in case they didn't like what they saw and wanted to discard me. So what I tried to be the 'ideal' daughter; never troublesome, challenging or difficult. It was my way to ensure they would be proud and therefore have no reason to abandon me. And our relationship is still predominantly like this. Slowly, I am trusting them more with the "real" me, but I still do feel more comfortable keeping them at arms length.

And 2) I think deep, deep down, I can't bring myself to get close to them because one day they will leave; my subconscious tries to protect me by preventing me from getting too close because eventually, one day, they will die and I will lose my parents. Again. For the second time in this life.

I do believe these are the reasons why I shy away from being emotionally open and close with my parents. I am most comfortable confiding in them via e-mail or telephone. In person, I clam up. For me, there is a definite sense of security in non-face-to-face communication with them. Why? I'm still not entirely sure.

Interestingly, my friendships are also very similar. I am a very hard person to get to know because I don't reveal much. I tend to encourage people to talk about themselves, so I don't have to expose much about me; the rationale is, that if they don't know me, then they can't make a judgement of whether they do or don't like me and therefore, they have they can't have a reason to leave me. And I have to admit, that I am also extremely uncomfortable sharing my friends. One of my biggest fears, even as an almost 30 year old, is introducing my friends to each other because when they meet and find out how great they all are, then I get insecure that they will have no reason to be friends with me. It's really bizarre behaviour, I know, but it's my life!

Kartya's Story, a book written by adoptive mother, Nola Wunderle is a fascinating read. It depicts her family's story about her second adopted daughter's journey into

drugs and despair as a result of her sadness and identity loss. In some ways, Kartya's behaviour was a test of the strength of her parent's love. There are many tales of adoptees who try and push people away as a defense mechanism, to avoid being pushed away later, or to test the resilience of the love that is directed towards them. Kartya's Story is a really good example of this.

It is our deep-seeded fear of abandonment that causes us to question our worthiness to be loved.

WORTHINESS, IDENTITY AND SELF PERCEPTION

Worthiness

Traditionally, mothers are the people you can rely on to love you unconditionally and be there for you, but ours left us. Our mother gave us up, and although consciously we know there are often rational reasons for this decision or situation, the fact remains in our psyche that maybe we weren't good enough to keep; we question whether maybe we weren't good enough to be loved. And from there, if our own birthmother felt that way - the person in the world who is supposed to love us above all - then how could anyone else think differently? These are the sorts of emotions that run through us. And this exemplified fear of abandonment and rejection stays with us and manifests itself in our development of self. Our confidence, our security, our beliefs - they are all affected by this fundamental incidence of abandonment.

A fellow conference delegate (adoptee) said to me yesterday, so succinctly, 'we were adopted, so that means we were wanted by someone. And that's good. But in order for that to happen, someone had to not want us to begin with.'

Deep down, in our core, we carry around the question of 'why were we not good enough for our birth mother to want to keep us?'

And if she decided that we weren't good enough - the person who is supposed to love you above and beyond all others - then how could anyone else choose to love us? This question affects adoptees in so many ways and to varying degrees, such as anger, depression and/or drugs (Kartya).

And for those that we meet along the way who try to convince us that we are worthy, it can be a challenge and one that requires extreme patience and persistence. My heart goes out to anyone who is trying to cultivate a relationship with an adoptee. I know from first hand it can be very challenging trying to make an adoptee feel safe and secure in an intimate relationship and I do commend those that embark on that task!

For me, having grown up with the absolute belief that anyone and everyone I love will eventually choose to leave me has impacted detrimentally on my intimate relationships. This particular belief compelled me to prematurely sabotage more than one relationship in my time; the 'I should get in before they do' theory was a large part of my intimate relationships up until only two years ago. All I can say is I'm glad I figured THAT one out, even if it did take me a while!!

Identity

The definition of 'identity' for me, refers to how we see ourselves and how others see us.

For my 25th birthday I got a tattoo of a jigsaw puzzle piece to represent the missing part of life that comes with being adopted. It may sound sad to some, but for me it's another reminder of how lucky I really am.

Inter-country adoption brings questions that non-adopted people don't ever have to ask. Such as:

- Who am I?
- Where and who do I come from?
- Where do I fit in? Am I Australian or am I Vietnamese?

For many adoptees, answering these questions is a lifelong process. And we all travel along the journey at our own pace.

Self perception

'Fitting in is a pretty healthy desire but when you always have a sneaking suspicion that you don't fit in, it can cause the kind of pain that is silent and constant. Throughout my years at school I was embarrassed by my physical appearance, and somehow being different was internally translated into being ugly and invalidated'. Leonie Simmons Thomas from 'Redefining a version of family and nationality' (e-mail analee.matthews@fitnessnetwork.com.au for full reference). In a recent online discussion group at www.adoptedvietnamese.org the issue of eyelid surgery was raised in light of a young Korean adoptee wanting the procedure done in order to appear more Western. Although a radical example, this portrays the conflict that inter-country adoptees feel between our internal and external perceptions.

A simple example:

Let's pretend everyone here lives in South Australia and drives a car with South Australian registration plates. So you drive around with these number plates and you feel great because you're a local and you live here in SA and your registration plates confirm that to anyone who sees you on the road but doesn't know you.

But then one day, your car needs to go into the mechanic and the mechanic gives you a courtesy car that has Queensland plates. And you have to drive this car around for, let's say a week. So for one week everyone in SA who sees you on the road and who doesn't know you personally, assumes you are from QLD. How do you think you might feel with people making that assumption about you? Special? Proud? Novel? Mysterious? Ashamed? Embarrassed? Compelled to explain the real story to people?

Then what if the mechanic then phoned you and told you that your car was unfixable and you'd have to drive around with the courtesy car forever? What do you think you might want to do? Registration laws aside, would you accept it and learn to live with people assuming and judging you based on the registration plates? Or would you change them over?

For many, being adopted from one culture into another is like living with someone else's number plates. We look like we belong to one culture, so people who don't

know us assume we do, when in fact, we actually belong to another. I look Asian. But I'm an Aussie. On the outside I look Asian, but on the inside I feel like I'm a white, blonde-haired, blue-eyed surfer chick. So you can imagine the turmoil some adoptees have trying to establish a smooth and comfortable link between how they look and how they feel. Especially when the adoptee has grown up with no pride attached to their birth culture or country.

I grew up in a coastal town, with no other Asian faces to relate to. Inside I feel like a white Australian. And even today I'm still confused about my racial identity and where my pride lies. Example at Chinese Gardens when man asked about fruit in tree:

1. pride, because he assumed me to be Chinese and therefore knowledgeable about the fruit;
2. offence, because he assumed I was Chinese, when in fact I am of Vietnamese origin;
3. offence, because he assumed I was 100% Asian, when in fact I feel 100% Australian;
4. humour, because he was ignorant enough to assume that any Asian person could answer his question about a fruit in a Chinese garden.

Internally, my reaction was probably all of them. I felt a bit puzzled by what I should feel; the adoptive mother - who is very educated and sensitive to issues that her daughter may potentially face as an inter-country adoptee - was horrified at the man's ignorance. It made both of us think about life as an inter-country adoptee and the challenges that can be faced on a daily basis, and particularly when you're least expecting it!

TIPS FOR ADOPTIVE PARENTS

- Ensure your child has contact with other people in the same or similar situation. You can do this through the Inter-Country Adoptee Support Network (ICASN) - which services adoptees nationally, and your local post-adoption networks.
- Make the birth culture accessible to the child right from the start. Don't force it on them, but make sure they know as much as you do, about where they came from and cultivate some pride in their birth culture.
- Acknowledge the fact your child looks different to the rest of the family by talking about it with all family members. Have an open forum where everyone can say anything they feel without repercussion or judgement. And realise that both your natural born siblings and your adopted child could be receiving poor treatment from students during school hours; talk about racism and address these issues as they come up, as well as in advance. Open and honest communication is crucial in any family, but it is absolutely essential for a positive
- Be aware of your motives for adopting and how that translates during communication with your child. For example, infertile couples may unwittingly promote adoption as a second preference (e.g., 'well we couldn't conceive naturally so we thought we'd adopt'); think about how your adopted child might feel hearing this? Similarly, if you announce that you're adopting because you want to 'save' someone, then will your adopted child be inadvertently made to feel overwhelmingly grateful?
- Remember that your child may not even know that these issues reside in them. I never realised why I behaved like I did; never did I wonder why I wanted to please everyone or why I'd go to extraordinary lengths to make

people laugh or like me; I just felt compelled to do so. I never thought about why I didn't gravitate towards Asian people, I just knew I wasn't comfortable around them. Like any child, your adopted son or daughter will not know what motivates their behaviour. But you, as adopted parents, need to be aware of all the issues associated with the situation and acknowledge that some or all or, if you're lucky, not many of them will rear their heads during your child's life. Awareness and educating yourself is the best thing you can do for your child.

BOOKS FOR ADOPTIVE PARENTS

The Colour of Difference, edited by Sarah Armstrong and Petrina Slaytor
The Primal Wound, by Nancy Verrier

Kartya's Story, by Nola Wunderle

WEB SITES FOR ADOPTEES AND ADOPTIVE PARENTS

Inter-Country Adoptee Support Network - www.icasn.org

Adopted Vietnamese International - www.adoptedvietnamese.org

Post Adoption Resource Centre (NSW) - www.bensoc.asn.au/parc

CONCLUSION

As an inter-country adoptee, when we look backwards, it can be a bit confusing. Looking forwards can be a bit easier. For example, when we have children, we begin a new family tree. That's exciting!

As part of the first adult generation of inter-country adoptees who are speaking out about our exploration of the issues from our adoption, I feel honoured to be able to share our experiences to hopefully benefit the younger generations, by arming them with healthy esteem levels and pride in their birth heritage, to help make the inter-country adoption experience slightly less bumpy. Yesterday I was asked what I considered the best thing about this conference. For me, I think it is the fact that adoptees, adoptive parents and prospective parents are here. I commend you all and thank you for coming along. To those who are here for work, I thank you for wanting to learn more so that you can do your jobs better.

What is resounding to me after listening to so many thought provoking sessions over the past few days is that there are no answers to many of our questions. All we really can do is look back, take stock and move forwards.