

**ADOPTED**

**PERSON**

***RESOURCE***

**LIFE LONG**

**CONSEQUENCES**

**OF ADOPTION**

**ADOPTION RESOURCE SEMINAR 2000**

**Keith C Griffith MBE**



## Introduction

This Paper provides authoritative resource information for adopted persons. It seeks to bring new understanding of adopted persons, their birth parents and adoptive parents and core issues they face.

**A Resource for-**

- 1. Adopted persons-**
- 2. Reunions-**
- 3. Adoption support groups-**
- 4. Social work professionals-**

**Focus** The reality of adoption, and the life long consequences on 31 core issues.

As at the year 2000 in New Zealand there are an estimated 90,000 adult adopted persons, 150,000 birth parents and 120,000 adoptive parents.

Since the passing of the Adult Adoption Information Act 1985 there has been a massive opening up of adoption. As at 30/4/2000, 35,331 adopted persons or birth parents have applied for identifying information under the Act. Open adoption has now become the normal practice.

Members of the adoption community have come out and spoken openly of their experiences.

Researchers have undertaken substantive research.

New information has enabled us to demythologise adoption.

Adopted persons are normal people, subjected to some abnormal situations and stresses. Their experiences need to be understood and validated.

Adoption isn't a concept to be learned, a theory to be understood, or an idea to be developed. It is a real life experience about which adopted persons, have had and are continuing to have constant and conflicting feelings, all of which are legitimate.

The main source of support and healing comes from sharing and caring between adopted persons, and within the wider adoption circle. There is also a need for specialised counselling and support services, when required.

There is a need for resource material, that adopted persons become not only survivors but thrivers.

This paper does not discuss the pros and cons of adoption but deals with the reality of what is.

This is a working document, for use at the Seminar. It acknowledges and examines the important contribution of seven current professional adoption councillors, researchers and writers.

PTO

## CONTENTS

NZ Adoption History	3-5
Historical Societal context	5A-B
<b>Key issues—</b>	
Abandonment	6-7
Adoptive parents	7-9
Anger	9-10
Anti social behaviour	11-12
Birth parents	13-15
Bonding	16-17
Boundaries	18
Control	18-20
Defence mechanism	20-21
Fantasy	21-23
Fiction	23-24
Forgiveness	24-25
Ghost Kingdom	26
Grief	27-29
Guilt/Shame/Blame	30-31
Identity	32-36
Intimacy	37-39
Loss	40-41
Marriage	42
Myths	43-44
Numbing	45
Rejection	45-47
Reunion	48-76
Search	77-87
Secrecy	88-91
Sexuality	92-95
Siblings	95-97
Trauma	98-99
Trust	100-101
Victim	102-104
Wholeness	105-110
INDEX-Contents in detail	111-118

## Resource Publications

*Journey of the Adopted Self -  
A Quest for Wholeness*

Betty Jean Lifton  
Basic Books Harper/Collins 1994  
ISBN 0-465-03675-9 328 pages

*The Primal Wound  
Understanding the Adopted Child*

Nancy Newton Verrier MA  
Gateway Press Baltimore USA 1993  
Library of Congress 92-70164 231 pages

*Adoptee Trauma - A Counselling Guide For  
Adoptees*

Heather Carlini  
Morning Side Saanichton BC Canada 1997  
ISBN 0-9696295-2-4 155 pages

*Searching for a Past - The Adopted Adult's  
Unique Process of Finding Identity*

Jayne Schooler  
Pinon Colorado Springs USA 1995  
ISBN 0-89109-868-2 199 pages

*Adoption Wisdom - A Guide to the Issues  
and Feelings of Adoption*

Marlou Russell Ph.D. 204 pages  
Broken Branch Productions Santa Monica,  
California USA 1996 ISBN 1-888511-12-5

*The Family of Adoption*

Maguire Pavao Ph.D.  
Beacon Press Boston USA 1998  
ISBN 0-8070-2801-0 138 pages

*Birth Bond- Reunions Between Birthparents  
& Adoptees- What Happens After*

Judith S Gediman & Linda P Brown  
New Horizons Press Far Hills NJ USA 1991  
ISBN 0-88282-072-9 285 pages

The above books are recommended for purchase.

While this document presents key thoughts of the authors regarding the core adoption issues, the extracts should be looked up in the respective books, for full context and additional information. The books contain very extensive case material of relevance to professionals and members of the adoption circle.

## Terminology of adoption

### Adopted Person

Since 1975 'adoptee' has been used to describe anyone who is adopted. However, over the last five years in New Zealand, the term has fallen into disfavour, 'adopted person' has become the preferred term. Adoptee is seen to denigrate the 'person'; whereas 'adopted person' acknowledges their full person-hood in their own right. The term 'adopted person' is used in this publication. The terms 'birth mother' and 'birth father' are used to describe the birth parents of the adopted person.

### Adoption Triangle

The adoption triad consists of the adopted person, the birth parents, and the adoptive parent or parents. Every adoption involves these three participants whether they personally know each other or not. Like any triangle, all parts are necessary and support each other. Adoption triad members are linked to each other for the rest of their lives. They share a bond and relationships that cannot be severed by time, distance or denial. Russell 1996 p20

### Adoption Circle

In New Zealand as a result of the opening up of adoption and thousands of reunions, the term adoption 'triad' or 'Adoption Triangle' has been largely replaced by the term 'Adoption Circle'.

"It is said that for every adoption that takes place, fifteen people are affected. Not only are the primary triad members affected, but so are the people related to them. This includes the birth and adoptive grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, and sisters of the birth and adoptive parents, and any siblings of the adopted person. What society doesn't get is that I didn't just lose my birth mother and birth father, I also lost my grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins and siblings." Russell 1996 p21

If 15 people are affected in some way by each adoption it means that in New Zealand with about 100,000 adopted persons, about 1,500,000 persons - almost half our population have at some time been affected by adoption.

### USA Adoption Statistics

The most widely accepted figure is that five million Americans, or two percent of the population, are adopted persons. On a year-by-year basis, the number of adoptions between 1952 and 1973 ranged from a low of 85,000 to a high of 171,000 in 1970. Gediman & Brown 1991 p18

### Publications by K C Griffith MBE

'The Right to Know Who You Are - Reform of Adoption Law with Honesty and Integrity'. Pub K Kimbell Ottawa Ontario Canada 1993 ISBN 0-9695151-0-3. 200 pages \$22

'New Zealand Adoption - History and Practice, Social and Legal 1840-1996'. 750 pages \$85  
ISBN 0-473-04005-0

These books are available from K C Griffith 20 Herewini Street, Titahi Bay, Wellington. New Zealand. Phone 04-2366215. FAX 04-2366625.  
Email keith-griffith@clear.net.nz

## NEW ZEALAND ADOPTION HISTORY

New Zealand adoption has a fascinating history. Maori adoption has been a custom for hundreds of years. Europeans practiced informal adoption from the earliest days of settlement. Legal adoption was introduced in 1881, the first in the British Empire.

### George Waterhouse Adoption Law Founder

This well educated social reformer introduced his Adoption Bill in 1881. The reasons he gave were—

- Adoption was to benefit children deprived of their natural parents, that would otherwise be exposed to want and privation.
- Adoption would confer full parent-child status at a time when illegitimate children were *nulis fillis* the child of no-one.
- His own personal experience; “He could not sit down without saying that he was moved in this matter in a great measure from his knowledge as an individual of the advantage of adoption.” NZPD Vol 40 p4

### Adoption of Children Act 1881

The Act was not a Government policy, but a hard fought Private Member’s Bill, as was the Adult Adoption Information Act of 1985.

*Openness of adoption 117 years ago.*

- The main thrust of the Adoption Act was concern for the adopted person.
- Adoption proceedings were in open court, any person could make a submission.
- Birth parents could withdraw consent at any time prior to the adoption order.
- Adopted persons birth certificates gave their birth and birth parents’ names, was available of right at any age.
- Adopted person’s birth surname was retained and hyphenated to the adoptive surname.
- All parties could have access to the other’s identity. The Adoption Act 1881 was replaced by the Adoption of Children Act 1895. Consolidated in the 1908 Infants Act.

### Social Background to Adoption

Our adoption law was enacted in the Victorian period, that strongly influenced our society and law for a hundred years. The notion of children as parental possessions, power rests with the parents, children should be silent and obey, and birthmothers of bastards should be punished and banished were part of Victorian society.

### Baby Farming 1880-1920

Provided quick, confidential disposal of illegitimate children and the family shame. Illegitimate babies were hard to place. Many mothers were simply too poor to maintain the child. For a down-payment the baby was taken off their hands with no questions asked and adopted out. The sooner a baby farmer disposed of a child the greater the profit. Some infants suffered an early demise. The hanging of baby farmer Minnie Dean in 1895 served to satisfy public anger and expiate the guilt of society.

### Humiliation of Unmarried Mothers

- Before 1900 illegitimacy was seen as a major threat to public morality.
- It was unthinkable for Charitable Aid Boards to assist unmarried mothers to keep their babies.
- Many illegitimate children were placed in orphanages and industrial schools.
- The 1907 death rate of illegitimate children was 2.5 times higher than legitimate children.
- Unmarried mothers faced humiliation in ‘Homes for Fallen Women’.
- Until the 1930s unmarried mothers, giving birth, were often denied pain relief as a punishment and deterrent.
- The Government stressed education as the answer to high death rates of illegitimate children, but ignored the major cause of economic and nutritional deprivation.
- Until the 1940s, many believed keeping an illegitimate child was a fitting punishment for the mother’s sin.

### Adoption Act 1955

The Act 1955 sought to reform adoption and implement the *Complete Break* ideology. Some positive changes were, State supervision of adoption procedures and protection of children.

### Complete Break Adoption 1950-1980

- By 1955: Environmentalism was the ideology of the day, it believed environment could overcome heredity.
- Regarding child development, environment, not heredity would determine the outcome.
- Therefore, a baby transplanted into an adoptive family would grow up *as if* born to them.
- The more complete the break the more effective it would be. Therefore—
  - \* Birth parents and the adopted person must cease all contact with each other for life.
  - \* Adopted persons must be denied access to their adoption records and original birth certificate for life.
  - \* The adopted person’s dual identity must be suppressed.
  - \* If adoptive parents really do their parenting task, good adopted persons will not want to know their origins.
  - \* As good birth mothers put their past behind them and forget, so will good adopted persons.

□ Complete break adoption was an ideology accepted without question thus it required no research of outcomes.

□ Complete break and it’s walls of secrecy shaped our adoption policy for 30 years.

### Bonding Theory

- A complete break provided maximum security for bonding of the adoptive parents and child.
- Psychodynamic theory held unmarried mothers were immature, unstable and conceived to fulfil neurotic needs.
- To heal their dysfunctional personality birth mothers needed a complete break.
- Whole focus was on the new relationship created ‘as if’ born to. The genetic birth relationship was ‘as if’ dead.

**Myths of Complete Break Adoption**

From 1955-1985 closed adoption, secrecy, and legal fiction enabled adoption myths to grow and flourish—

- The myths were sustained and protected by secrecy that prevented any critical analysis.
- The myths became so pervasive in our society that many members of the adoption circle believed them.
- It was asserted only a small number of adopted persons, the misfits, would want to know their origins.
- Birthmothers forgot the past, would not want old wounds reopened or privacy disturbed.
- Birth mothers need protection from adopted persons.
- Lifting secrecy would increase abortion.
- Opening adoption would break up adoptive families.
- Adoptive parents would lose their adopted child.

**Demise of Complete Break 1970-1985**

While professionals continued to defend the complete break practice its foundations were collapsing—

- *Existentialism* stressed personal experience, importance of knowing oneself, freedom of choice and personal responsibility for your own actions.
- *New psychological theory* Erickson's identity formation explained why adopted persons need their origins.
- *Political activists* learned their skills from the civil rights movement and promoted adoption law reform.
- *Testimony* of adopted persons and birth parents refuted assertion that searchers were pathologically dysfunctional or needed counselling.
- *Research* exposed some key foundations of the complete break as myths. Found many adopted persons and birth parents had a profound need to know the truth.

**Decline of Adoptions caused by Social Changes**

- Decreased stigma of illegitimacy reduced social pressures to give up the child.
- Financial benefits enabled mothers to keep their child.
- Child care options gave solo mothers access to creches. They could retain their child and work.
- Economic independence through labour force participation gave financial independence.
- De facto marriages became more acceptable.
- Less pressure from medical, social and legal professionals on the birth mother to choose adoption.
- Status of Children Act 1969 Recognised reduced social stigma of illegitimacy and removed legal stigma.
- Since 1976 legal abortion was more freely available.
- Parents became more supportive of young unmarried mothers keeping their baby.

**1980-1997 Opening up adoption**

- The opening up of adoption was done not by the professionals but by the adoption circle lifting the lid off.
- Adopted person broke silence first, then birthparents and adoptive parents.
- At first the Legal and Social Work authorities strongly resisted the opening up of adoption.

- 1976 Jigsaw and Adoption Support Groups formed. Provided mutual support and a base for political action.
- 1976 questions asked in Parliament.
- 1977 Jigsaw petitioned to Parliament.
- 1979 First successful access to adoption Court records.
- 1978-1985 Hon J Hunt Private Bills in Parliament.

**Adult Adoption Information Act 1985**

After a ten year campaign. This Act was a milestone in opening up adoption and consolidating change. Adult adopted persons and their birthparents were given rights to obtain identifying information, subject to counseling and veto provisions.

**Where are we now?**

The opening up of adoption has exposed the need for a critical re-examination of practice and policy.

- 35,737 adult adopted persons or birth parents have applied for identifying information under the Adult Adoption Information Act 1985 as to 31st July 2000.
- About 75,000 or 84% of adult adopted persons now possess identifying information, either by application under the 1985 Act or being part of the 50% approx that always had some form of identifying information.
- The majority of adult adopted persons in stranger adoptions have now received their birth information.
- Of estimated 45,136 stranger- now adult adoptions 30,548 or 68% have applied for identifying information per adopted person or birthparent applications 1985 Act.
- With over 20,000 reunions, the full story of adoption is now being revealed by the persons directly involved.
- Most find the search and reunion a positive therapeutic journey.
- Support groups help in search, reunion, working through grief, anger, joy, integrating new knowledge and experience into their self identity.
- In 1985 submissions 50% adoptive parents were in favour and half against the Act. Most now support it.
- The significant differences between biological and adoptive parenthood are now acknowledged.
- Most found reunion strengthened the relationship between adopted persons and adoptive parents. There has been a swing to openness, and open adoption.
- Most searching adopted persons want to know their birth parents and are open to reunion.
- Reunions are not a panacea or end in themselves. They are one important step in completing the *adoption circle*.
- Adopted people can successfully integrate two or more families into their lives.
- Finding birth relatives does not mean they relinquish their adoptive ones.
- Regardless of what they learn, most adopted people have no regrets about searching.
- The adoption triangle has been replaced by the adoption circle— inclusive of siblings and relatives.
- Searches and reunions are becoming a normal expected part of adoptive relationships.

□ Open adoption is now normal practice. Contacts range from exchange of information, visits, to extended family with all siblings and relatives in open contact.

□ Adopted persons self identity is helped by relating to people of their own origins, and obtaining direct answers on their adoption. Adoptive parents obtain important health and background information. Birth parents know what happened to the child. Open adoption is not a panacea, but is a major improvement.

<b>Statistics Adult Adoption Information Act 1985</b>	
<b>Applications to 31st July 2000</b>	
<i>Adult adopted persons applications</i>	
Male = 10,995	Female = 17,033 Total = 28,028
<i>Birth parent applications</i>	
BFather = 901	BMothers = 6,908 Total = 7,709
Total Applicants = <b>35,737</b>	
<b>Adult adopted persons knowledge of origins at 2000</b>	
Adult adopted persons population 1999	92,084
Approx 50% know origins without 1985 Act	46,042
Adult adopted persons not knowing origins approx 50%	46,042
Applications Adult adopted persons or BP per 1985 Act	35,737
Deduct 10% applicants who applied but already had identifying information	-3574 = 32,163
Deduct 32163 from 46042 balance not knowing origins	13,879
<b>Adult adopted persons Population 2000</b>	
Have no identifying information	13,879 = 15.1%
Have access to identifying information	78,205 = 84.9%
Total adult adopted persons at 2000	92,084 = 100.0%
<b>Active Vetos at 31st July 2000</b>	
Vetos placed by Adult Adopted persons	220
Vetos placed by Birth parents	785
Total active vetos	1005

### Adoptive Healing Movement

□ Adoption is a lifetime experience with consequences flowing through all relationships.

□ Both search and reunion can be of powerful therapeutic value in adoption healing.

□ There is often a need to work through the complex issues. Like AA, we have found that healing requires a series of steps. Support is most effectively provided by persons directly involved.

□ We have to accept what cannot be changed, but have the courage to change what can be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference.

□ The National Conference on Adoption and Healing at Wellington in 1997 is evidence of the growing need for healing of traumas, and reintegration of self identity.

□ Healing needs to be more than running an ambulance at the bottom of the cliff. It must also demand the removal of factors that push people over the top.

### Law Reform

After 15 years of unfilled political promises, a review of the Adoption Act 1955 is at present being undertaken by the New Zealand Law Commission. A draft of the proposed Law Reform is expected September 2000.

### Maori Issues

The issue of Maori adoption and Treaty rights has been placed before the Waitangi Tribunal. The main issues of contention are the place of Maori custom, cultural deprivation and loss of whakapapa, and rights of Whanau in Maori/Pakeha adoptions.

### Other issues we now face

Assisted Reproductive Technology repeating the mistakes of adoption secrecy. Intercountry adoption and interracial adoption. Reintroduction of premium payments for adoption. Privatisation of adoption and exposure to market forces. Should we move out of adoption? Adoption v Guardianship.

### Where are we going?

We need a Commission along the lines of NSW Review of Adoption, to undertake a widespread consultation open to public submissions. The whole philosophy of adoption needs review. It would need to address such special issues such as International Conventions-UN Rights of the Child, Hague Convention, Maori adoption and the Treaty, intercountry and interracial adoption, artificial birth technology, prohibited marriage relationships, open adoption, guardianship alternatives, provisions for state and private adoption agencies, accountability, support and regulation. New legislation could then be drafted on the basis of the Commission report.

### Suggested Amendments to Adoption Law

□ Birth parents' consents may be withdrawn within 26 days of the birth, and may attend adoption hearings.

□ Legislative provision be made for open adoption agreements, changed only by mutual consent or Court order.

□ Adoption orders may be discharged by the Family Court in cases of irretrievable breakdown of adoption.

□ Adoption creates complex relationships. The Family Court have dispensation in special cases to allow adopted persons to marry within the prohibited degrees.

□ Provide alternative adoption procedures in accord with Maori custom and the Treaty.

□ Guardianship in an amended form be made available as an alternative to adoption.

### Adult Adoption Information Act

□ Similar application provisions apply to adopted persons and birth parents.

□ Minimum adopted person application age be 18.

□ The Family Court may grant relatives and siblings access to information.

□ Where special needs exist, any party to an adoption, may apply to the Family Court for access to records.

□ The veto system be abolished. All existing vetoes would terminate on their expiry date.

□ All counselling be optional.

□ Administration of Adoption Act be transferred from Department of Justice to Department of Social Welfare

□ Provision of adequate Information, Support and Counselling services.

**ADOPTION HISTORICAL AND SOCIETAL CONTEXT**

**Schooler**—In recent decades, adoption has served two additional functions—to meet the needs of couples whose dreams of a family were shattered by infertility and to provide a solution for birth parents who found themselves facing an unintended and untimely pregnancy.

What emerged from the latter two functions of adoption during the middle decades of this century was an idealistic picture, one which characterized a perfect solution to a societal problem. As Dr. Miriam Reitz, a family therapist, and Watson state: ‘Adoptive families and adoption agencies collaborated to present adoption as what it can never really be—a chance for birth parents to go on happily with their lives, for children to grow up in trouble-free families, and for adoptive parents to fulfill themselves and find immortality through children to whom they have sole claim by virtue of adoption.’ *Adoption and the Family System* Guilford Press NY 1993 p3

What this “perfect solution created were myths that were safeguarded throughout the adoption world. ‘Years ago,’ according to Sharon Kaplan-Roszia, ‘myths were perpetuated through the adoption community. One myth taught those whose lives were touched by adoption that the most healthy attitude for all members of the triad was to make a clean break.’ That break meant no looking back for anyone, forever. Growing up around that particular paradigm were other myths that fueled secrecy, forced denial and lies, and created unexpected heartbreaks. Schooler 1955 pp39-40

**We did what we were told to do**

One primary attitude adoptive parents were told to assume following the finalization of the adoption was, ‘Take this child home, love him, and forget that he or she is adopted.’ ‘Adoptive families were told to act just like biological families,’ Roszia commented. Birth certificates were amended to represent the adoptive parents as biological parents, a procedure some adopted persons now call ‘legal fiction.’ Parents were also told that secrecy is best for everyone. Those simple instructions were played out in how parents handled the issues that were a part of their unique parenting experience. Schooler 1955 p40

**We kept it a secret**

For hundreds of adoptive parents of the last generation, adoption was cast as merely an event in time—a static one, with no reference to the future. Many parents acted on the belief that there was no hidden agenda within adoption and that keeping the event a secret was the best approach. ‘Pretending’ was promoted as the healthiest coping mechanism within the adoption community.

Watson remarked that ‘the implication of the adoption on the subsequent development of the child or the family was either viewed as inconsequential or denied altogether.’ These perceptions—‘we are just like a biological family; adoption has no reference to the future, and things are best kept a secret’—further established a precedent on how children were told about their adoption, if they were told at all.

**We made up a story**

Many adoptive parents were directed to take this route in order to protect a child’s perception of his original family. The predicament for these parents was how to discuss adoption with the child in a way that gave them full entitlement as parents because they had ‘rescued’ the child yet not paint a negative picture of the birth parents and do damage to the child’s self-esteem.

It was not uncommon for adoptive parents, acting on the recommendation of their agency, to fabricate explanations for the circumstances of their child’s birth and how they entered the family. Parents used a string of stories, from a range of freak accidents to unexplained disappearances, all done with the best intentions.

Parents were told to forget about the adoption, maybe not even mention it. They were instructed to deny any differences adoption might create within the family relationship and to fabricate stories about the adoption. Many parents were also handed another myth—‘If they did a good job, their child would never wonder about his birth family. He would never want to search.’ Schooler 1995 p40

**Exposing the Myth**

Carol Demuth, in her book *Courageous Blessing: Adoptive Parents and the Search*, says adoptive parents were given the message ‘If you were loving, nurturing parents who acknowledged your child’s adoptive status early, there would be no need on his part to know anything else.’

<p><b>A model of the Myth</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What parents were <i>Taught</i> It’ll be just like a biological family.</li> <li>• What Parents <i>Understood</i> Secrecy and fables are best.</li> <li>• What Parents <i>Expected</i> Child would never look back.</li> <li>• Parents <i>Discovered Reality</i> Many adopted persons have missing pieces, feel empty, and must seek resolution.</li> <li>• Parents <i>Experienced Frustration</i> Issues of adoption and search are difficult to handle.</li> <li>• Parents <i>Experienced Anger</i> Someone didn’t tell us the truth.</li> <li>• Parents <i>Felt Betrayed</i> Someone really lied to us.</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;">David L Schooler MPC cf Schooler 1995 p42</p>
---

**Parents feel betrayed**

‘Not by their child—but by the system that perpetuated a false image of what adoption could be. Parents were unfairly led to believe they could be everything to their children, that they would never need to know anything beyond what the family could provide. It was as if the adoption decree was supposed to do away with the child’s birth family.’ Carol Demuth cf Schooler 1995 p42

One of the most dynamic ways you can tap into the historical and societal context present at the time of your adoption is simply to ask questions. When you bring up this issue in an attempt to understand why your parents acted as they did, some of the following questions may be helpful: Schooler 1995 p44

1. What was it like for you when you made the decision to adopt?
2. How did the agency or people you worked with

make you feel? 3. Did you feel free to talk about the adoption with family or friends, or did you keep it quiet? 4. How did the agency advise you to discuss adoption issues with me?

Assessing the historical context of adoption and its impact on adoptive parents is one step in preparing to communicate with them about the need to search. A second step is to take a look at the patterns of family communication that existed a generation or two ago and recognize how those patterns have changed. Schooler 1995 p43

#### **Changes in family communication**

Why didn't my adoptive parents ever ask me how I felt about adoption? Why did I get the message that I should never question anything that had to do with my adoption or really inquire about any other issues? Why wasn't I allowed to get angry when no one would tell me anything about my birth family?

Being raised within a family as an adopted child by the grandparents and parents of the past two generations was quite different from today...

Today's baby boomers who inherited relatively closed patterns of family communication from parents and grandparents have refashioned those patterns. This generation focuses much more extensively on openness, expression of feelings, and removal of masks. Looking back at what it used to be like in most families a generation ago may provide clues about why issues were left untouched, feelings untapped, and questions unanswered.

A generation ago, according to author Dolores Curran, 'people paid little attention to what went on inside a family-whether there was good communication, emotional support, or trusting relationships.' People were only concerned about how well the family functioned.

'Our parents' generation,' said Anu Sharma, 'was very duty minded. Not that they weren't good at relationships, but they emphasized achievement.' They were concerned about how the family functioned economically, educationally, socially, religiously. Little thought was given to how individual family members related to each other or to other issues and concerns in their life.

From the past generation to the present, the emphasis of the family is changing rapidly from considering how a family functions to how members relate to one another. The language of emotions has modified as it passes from one generation to another. Fishel accounts for movement in three areas that provide explanation for the question, Why didn't we ever talk about adoption in my family? Schooler 1995 p43

#### **A broad spectrum of emotions**

As this generation of adopted persons grapples with the issues of adoption, they do so within a wider range of acceptable emotional expression. This expression of feelings allows the presence of a dark side as well as the happy, bright side. It allows for ups as well as downs. It allows for questioning of what seems to be the norm. It is unlike the experience parents of the 1940s and 1950s encountered while growing up and passed on to their children. Schooler 1995 p44

#### **More willingness to resolve conflict**

The 'good' family of the past was taught to hide its real issues and problems. It even went further than that. The 'good' family of the past had no issues and no problems. Denial was a key coping mechanism. It was used to portray an image of health, wealth, and prosperity.

Adopted persons who questioned, acted out, or otherwise rocked the boat were called ungrateful or 'bad seed.' Families were spared the nasty business of confronting issues by throwing it off as the fault of the adopted child.

Today's adults have taken the inheritance of denial and made something new. Today's adults show a willingness to face issues and conflict more openly, which holds true for those adults dealing with adoption issues. They do not attempt to live in denial or sweep issues under the rug.

A companion to facing issues and conflicts, according to Elizabeth Fishel, is a "greater awareness about problem solving and more ingenuity in generating a whole host of solutions to puzzling family issues". Schooler 1995 p44

#### **More readiness to solve family problems**

Years ago, a misconception existed that said 'everything in good families runs smoothly and easily and something is terribly wrong if a problem arises.' Today's families, according to family system theorist, Dr. Jeny Lewis, realize that problems are a part of life to be recognized and solved.

Allowing more emotional leeway, accepting feelings as they are, being willing to resolve conflict, and having a greater awareness of problem solving techniques mark a keen difference in family communication across the generations.

How can you best tap into the patterns of communication your parents learned and handed to you? Again, by asking them key questions:

1. As you were growing up, how were issues and conflicts handled in your family?
2. What was your perception of how to handle feelings? 3. If you had a problem, how did it get resolved?
4. What would you change about the communication in your family while you were growing up?

Understanding the historical context of adoption and learning about family communication patterns of the past generation hopefully will aid you in coming to an understanding of why certain events occurred in your family the way they did. Schooler 1995 pp39-46

**Source** Jayne Schooler *Searching for a Past*. Pinon Colorado

## ABANDONMENT

### Abandonment is a core issue

Yellin— 'When one is adopted, no matter how accepting, loving, or nurturing the adoptive parents are, consciously or unconsciously there is still a blow to one's self-esteem as a result of not being kept.' Some, if not all, issues for adopted persons begin with a sense of abandonment and rejection. From that grow other issues that confront adopted persons throughout life as they put adoption within the context of their life history. Schooler 1995 p14

Abandonment leaves pain and emptiness in its wake for the adopted person. When the birth mother has gone from the child's life, a piece of the adopted person goes with her, leaving a sense of emptiness that cannot be filled until they reunite with the birth mother. Carlini 1997 p21

### Clinicians underestimate trauma

Most works on clinical aspects of adoption, after acknowledging the fact that the child was initially abandoned by their biological mother, then ignore this as an integral part of the problems demonstrated by the child. Treatment usually focuses on the relationship between the child and their adoptive parents without truly considering the impact which the original trauma might have on the child and, hence, the family situation. Verrier 1993 p2

### Disappearance as abandonment

The mother who relinquishes her baby for adoption, for whatever reason, does not perceive it as an act of abandonment, but rather as a way of giving the child a better life than she can offer. She is opting for what the Romans called 'the cure for chance' the chance to make up for a hapless birth. But the baby, vulnerable and helpless, is not ready to start gambling on chance. It wants its own mother; and can only perceive of her disappearance as an abandonment. This sense of abandonment and mystery about origins will shape the child's life. Lifton 1994 p20

### Abandonment complex

Inside every adopted person is an abandoned baby. It lies coiled in the core of the adopted self like a deep sorrow that can find no comfort. Jungian analyst N Schwartz-Salant 'The condition of abandonment is not unique,' 'But the extremity of abandonment in the adopted person is unique.'...Jung said that abandonment is necessary if the child is to evolve toward independence, and that the child cannot do this without detaching himself from his origins. But the Jungian analyst Gilda Frantz, who was abandoned by her father as an infant, believes that if children are abandoned before they are old enough and strong enough to cope with the experience, they may be unable to integrate its purpose or meaning. This is certainly true for adopted persons, who go through life unable to make sense of the purpose or meaning of their being cast out into the world alone. They have an 'abandonment complex,' H G Machtiger, writes: 'Individuals with loss and abandonment complexes are torn between an overwhelming yearning to return to a symbiotic state of existence and an equally strong urge to assert their separateness as individuals.' Lifton 1994 pp110-111

### Abandonment adoption experience

All of this rhetoric ignores one simple but critical fact: *The adopted person was there.* The child actually experienced being left alone by the biological mother and being handed over to strangers. That they may have been only a few days or a few minutes old makes no difference. They shared a 40-week experience with a person with whom they probably bonded in utero, a person to whom they are biologically, genetically, historically and, perhaps even more importantly, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually connected, and some people would like them to believe that it is the telling of the experience of the severing of that bond which makes him feel so bad! It has been noted by parents and clinicians that many adopted persons demonstrate little or no discernible reaction upon being told of their adoption. Might it not be possible this lack of reaction is a result of unconscious awareness of the fact of their adoption on the part of adopted persons? Verrier 1993 p10

### Who is the abandoner

I believe that it is their actual experience of the abandonment which causes them to project the abandoning mother upon the adoptive mother: She is, after all, available, while the birthmother is not. The child's perception of the adoptive mother vacillates between seeing her as the rescuing mother and as the abandoning mother. As a result the child demonstrates ambivalent feelings of compliance and hostility in it's attitude toward her. These feelings, which are protecting the child against vulnerability and possible annihilation, are confusing to both mother and child...Even if the child recognizes that the adoptive mother is not the abandoning mother, she certainly could become one. After all, if it happened once, it could happen again. Verrier 1993 p55

### Abandonment splitting phenomenon

The question 'Who was the abandoner?' And the subsequent projection onto the adoptive mother the role of the abandoner is often experienced as a phenomenon called 'splitting,' in which a child assigns all 'good' attributes to one set of parents and all 'bad' attributes to the other. Even a child who does not have more than one set of parents, will, when feeling rejected by a parent, fantasize that they are not really the child of this rejecting parent, but that they will be rescued by another all loving parent who will let them do what they want. Freud called this the 'family romance' theory. Verrier 1993 p55-56

### Love and abandonment

One of the dualities of adoption is the declaration that loving means letting go. Women considering adoption are told that if they really love their child, they will release them for adoption. Adopted persons are told that their birth mothers loved them so much that they gave them up for adoption. Logically, it does not make any sense to believe that if you really love someone, you will stop having a relationship with them. Emotionally, it is what people need to believe to participate in adoption. It becomes clear why love and abandonment can be so closely tied for triad members. Russell 1996 p61

**Abandonment reality**

Just because they do not consciously remember the loss of their mother does not make it any less devastating. It only makes it more difficult to deal with, because it happened before they had words with which to describe it, and is, therefore, almost impossible to talk about. For many of them, it is even difficult to think about. In fact, some say they feel as if they either came from outer space or a file drawer. To allow themselves the memory of being born, would mean also having to remember and feel what happened next. And that they most certainly do not want to do. Verrier 1993 p12

**Fear of abandonment not fantasy**

Therapists write about the fantasies related to abandonment which cause adopted children to cling to adoptive parents or fantasize about a reunion with the birthmother. There is often a discounting of the importance of these fantasies or an implication that they are irrational. It should be noted that, although the fear of being abandoned by the adoptive parents might be fantasy, there is a precedent for that fear in the original abandonment experience, which may be felt only unconsciously. The fear, therefore, should not be perceived as irrational. One learns from experience, after all, and all adopted persons have experienced abandonment. Verrier 1993 p77

**Abandonment greatest fear**

Abandonment, to any child, is the greatest fear of all. Even children who are abused by their parents have a deep sense of loyalty toward them and a fear of being separated from them. In myth and fairy tale the theme of abandonment is dominant. Is it not possible that this fear hangs like the sword of Damocles over the heads of all adopted persons all their lives, but about which they might not be consciously aware? I believe that it is possible, and that it is this unconscious fear which causes the anxiety experienced by so many adopted persons. Although they might not be consciously aware of the fear of abandonment, then felt as free-floating anxiety, there is an attitude which can be readily discerned. It is a kind of watchfulness or cautious testing of the environment, called hypervigilance. It may be an anxious response to abandonment and a way a relinquished child hopes to avoid a repeat of the abandonment experience. Verrier 1993 p77

**Trauma of abandonment and adoption**

What the general population considers to be a concept, a social solution for the care of children who cannot or will not be taken care of by their biological parents, is really a two-part, devastating, debilitating experience for the child. The *first* part of the experience is the abandonment itself. No matter how much the mother wanted to keep her baby and no matter what the altruistic or intellectual reasons she had for relinquishing it, the child experiences the separation as abandonment.

The *second* part of the experience is that of being handed over to strangers. Even if the adoptive mother has established a relationship with the birthmother and aided in the birth of the baby, the baby will recognize her as an impostor, a substitute for the mother with whom he spent the first nine months of his life. Verrier 1993 p14

**ADOPTIVE PARENTS****Decision to adopt**

People want to parent for various reasons. The decision to adopt is a conscious decision that necessitates action and follow through. Sometimes the decision to adopt is made after an extensive period of time of wanting to raise a child. Sometimes adoption is seen as one of the few options available to be a parent. Russell 1996 p97

**Adoption a permanent decision**

Adoption should be entered into as a permanent decision. Children are not returnable. One way in which children feel secure and move beyond their separation from their birth parents is by having a safe environment and dependable people around them. Russell 1996 p98

**Expectations of adoptive parents**

It is expected that adoptive parents have received the *seal of approval* by *passing* all the tests required of them for an adoption. Pre-adoptive parents must go through a home study, get an attorney or go through an adoption agency, and have the money and the perseverance to get through the adoption maze. It can feel unfair that other parents don't have to expend as much time, energy and money to parent a child. Adoptive parents are expected to be stable, secure, financially fit, and able to provide a healthy environment in which a child can grow and prosper. Birth parents especially have expectations of adoptive parents since they are told or believe that adoptive parents will be better parents than they could be. Russell 1996 p108

**Acknowledgment of differences**

Adoptive families who acknowledge and embrace their differences are more flexible and tend to have more open communication. Acknowledging adoption allows all family members to be honest and express feelings in a safe environment. Adoptive families who acknowledge the differences created by adoption fare better than adoptive families who deny the differences of adoption. Pretending to be something you are not consumes energy and is draining. Being different is not bad. It is just different. Honoring the special aspects of adoption makes for a more functional adoptive family. Russell 1996 p109

**Biological v adoptive parenting**

Love does indeed make a family. But biology matters, especially to the adopted person. Sometimes adoptive parents have a difficult time accepting and understanding the meaning of biology for the adopted person. Respecting the importance of the birth family in the adopted person's life allows the adopted person to embrace all that he or she is.

In biological families, there are no questions about where people come from or who is related to whom. It is understood that everyone is related by blood and that kinship ties exist among family members. Families of adoption need to spend more time explaining the relationship connections and dealing with the feelings that arise because of the extended stories that are part of adoption. Russell 1996 p105

**Infertility**

The issues of infertility stay with people throughout their lives, even when they parent children through adoption. This is a fact that we have not paid attention to until quite recently. It is important for people considering adoption to know this, so that they are not led to believe that they will be cured of their loss and then feel disappointed by the feelings of loss that continue to ebb and flow throughout their lifetime. Pavao 1998 p22

**Integrating infertility and adoption**

Infertility is an issue that will weave its way through the lifetime of an adoptive parent. Sometimes people are caught off guard by the timing or degree of feelings about infertility issues. Being able to acknowledge one's feelings about infertility is important. The losses and gains in adoption are very near to each other and sometimes acknowledging one brings up the other. Being honest about one's feelings and allowing oneself the time to feel their impact is healing. Russell 1996 p104

**Second choice**

It may sound harsh, but adoption is the second choice. In the best of all worlds, the birth parents would not be dealing with an untimely pregnancy and the painful decision not to parent their child. In the best of all worlds, the couple struggling with infertility and planning to adopt would have been able to give birth to a child. By the time adoption is the choice, most couples are ready for that decision. Adoption may have been the second choice, yet the child is most certainly not. The bottom line is that these folks want to parent. Pavao 1998 p22

**Role as parent**

An adoptive parent is no less a parent than a biological parent. Adopted persons love their adoptive parents as any child loves a parent. The adoptive parent's job is to raise the child, love the child, and consider the child's best interest. Adoptive parents share the role of parent with all other parents in the world. Russell 1996 p101

**Bonding versus attachment**

Bonding is a biological process. It happens in utero between a pregnant woman and her unborn child. Attachment occurs after birth and outside the womb. Birth mothers bond with their babies. Adoptive parents form attachments to their infants and children. Each relationship is crucial to the well-being of adopted persons. Russell p100

**Loving your child**

Adoptive parents do not love their children any less than non-adoptive parents. Most adoptive parents state that the minute they saw their child they loved him or her. Adoptive parents love their children as any parent does. Russell 1996 p101

**Acknowledging birth parents**

Birth parents are a part of every adoption. To deny an adopted person's birth parents is to cut off a part of the adopted person's identity. To acknowledge birth parents is to respect the adopted person's history, which is rich with the contributions of both the adoptive parents and the birth parents. Russell 1996 p103

**Birth mothers and birth fathers**

Every person has a birth mother and a birth father. In adoption, adopted persons are raised by caretakers other than the birth parents. It is important to acknowledge the role and necessity of birth parents when talking with adopted children about their origins. Wanting to know information about oneself is a natural curiosity. Adopted persons wonder about their history and where they come from. Adopted persons do not think less of their adoptive parents when they have questions about their birth parents. Russell 1996 p103

**Whose child?**

It can be very difficult to know that you are pregnant with a child that someone else will raise. Many birth parents and adoptive parents adjust their thinking and beliefs to be able to embrace all that adoption means. For some birth parents, knowing the prospective adoptive parents is reassuring. Other birth parents trust that whoever the adoptive parents are, they will take good care of the child. Maintaining the thought of carrying a child for other people allows the birth parent to have some emotional distance from the situation.

**Honesty versus secrecy**

The adoptive parent is a role model for honesty in adoption. If the adoptive parent can be honest with the adopted person, the adopted person will not feel as though there is something bad to hide. Secrecy promotes low self-esteem, mistrust, and a lack of safety. Russell p98

**Telling your child**

Some adoptive parents worry about how to tell their child that he or she is adopted. It is important to remember that on some level the adopted person already knows about the separation and adoption. It is usually the adoptive parents who have a difficult time with talking about adoption. Children want to know about their adoption because it is about them. All children like to hear stories about when they were babies and what they were like growing up. It is important to be truthful with children and to give them enough information to answer their questions. Sometimes adoptive parents are so concerned about hurting their child by telling him or her that they are adopted that they miss the real questions being asked. Adopted children need to know that they are born like all other children. Russell 1996 pp101-103

**Talking about adoption issues**

Many adopted persons have questions about adoption that they don't ask their adoptive parents. Adopted persons typically worry about hurting their adoptive parents' feelings. Openness on the part of the adoptive parents can help create an atmosphere in which adoption issues can be discussed. Russell 1996 p103

**Handling questions about birth parents**

Adoptive parents sometimes fear questions about birth parents. Not all questions about birth parents will be difficult. Adoptive parents may even be surprised by their child's insight and understanding of adoption issues. Talking about birth parents can be difficult for the adopted person also. Adopted persons turn to adoptive parents to obtain information about their birth parents because they

are a key source of information. The adoptive parents are the link to the birth parents since both were involved in setting up the adoption. Russell 1996 p106

#### Fears

It is natural to have fears about adoption. Some adoptive parents worry that their child will be defective in some kind of way. Some adoptive parents fear that the birth parents will change their mind. Clear communication of expectations and feelings can relieve some of the fears that surround adoption. Russell 1996 p99

#### Fears about birth parents

Birth parents will have lots of feelings about the adoption. It is natural for a birth parent to think about what it would be like to raise their child. Most birth parents do not want to change an adoption plan once it is in place. Only a very small percentage of birth parents take action to reclaim their child. If all parties in adoption have counselling, and especially if the birth parent considers the option of keeping the child, then there is less chance that a birth parent will try to reclaim a child. Russell 1996 p107

#### Adoptive parent perspective

Adoptive parents are parents. Adoptive parents consider their children to be their children, not their adopted children. Most adoptive parents enter into adoption with the understanding and commitment to raise the child as their own forever. It is usually those outside the triad who don't understand the permanence of adoption. Russell 1996 p107

#### What adoption means to an adoptive parent

Adoption is shared parenthood. Biologically and genetically. We did not give our children life. We came in late--we are not the child's whole experience! To help a child put into his life all the factors that made him the person that he is, we must acknowledge that we are part of this shared experience and be willing to help our child look both backwards into his past and forwards into his future-- which might well include a search for the people who gave him birth...

Studies have shown, over the years, that to share parenthood does not have to mean that someone wins and someone loses. To the contrary, studies show that adoptive families who helped their children find and incorporate past history into their lives actually seem to end up with a closer relationship to the adoptive family that raised them. Searching together and accepting and incorporating the past together seems to reap its own rewards for everyone concerned.

Recognising the reality of "shared parenthood" and its implications is going beyond the jealousy that comes from claiming "ownership" of a child we didn't produce...it helps us come to grips with the realities and potentials of many different forms of open adoption. I believe we will find more of these open relationships occurring in the future as we really come to grips with the fact that to share a child's life may well be a major factor in enhancing the quality of the relationship the parents have and maintain with that child. Barbara Tremiere cf *Issues* No.10 1998.

**Also See Reunion- Adoptive Parents pp53-58**

## ANGER

Anger is a perfectly good feeling, given to us for a specific purpose, to help and protect us from injury, hurt, and exploitation. Instead of being a friend and protector, anger has often become a major problem.

#### Adopted persons rage

Like other victims of trauma, adopted persons often turn their rage at the unspeakable thing that happened to them onto their caretakers. Although some reunited adopted persons speak of feeling rage for their birth-mothers or for the society which caused their separation from her, many will say that they feel no ill-will toward her, but have all their lives exhibited oppositional behavior and intense rage toward their adoptive parents. Paradoxically they feel a tremendous dependency upon and need to connect to those same adoptive parents. This ambivalence is the source of great confusion and enigmatic behavior. Verrier 1994 p73

#### The angry self

Lifton—Anger, the other side of depression, is always waiting to be tapped in the adopted persons, especially in adolescence. 'Adolescence is about separation, identity, and sexuality,' says a male adopted person who is also a therapist, 'but the biological unknowns for adopted persons complicate and handicap this process. It was a tough time for me. Although I remained a model student at school, I became an unhappy and angry teenager at home.'

Children who are not given permission to express their negative emotions while they are growing up do not get practice in venting them appropriately. Adopted children, who get the message that not only were they chosen, but they were chosen to be the light of their parents' lives, often do not feel entitled to express any negative feelings, such as grief or anger at being cut off from their origins. Some become so successful at *splitting off* their feelings and keeping up a cheerful facade that they do not even know when they are angry. p89

Anger that adopted persons have built up over the years can erupt as uncontrollable rage. There is the unexpressed anger that they are adopted; anger that they are different; anger that they are powerless to know their origins; anger that they cannot express their real feelings in a family climate of denial. When this anger is allowed to build in a child over the years, it will eventually surface as aggression, stealing, setting fires, destroying property--and, if left unresolved, as violence. When treatment is sought, the adopted person is usually identified as the patient, but therapists are beginning to pay attention as well to the unconscious hostile interaction between parent and child. p90

The psychologist Stanley Schneider, who directs a residential treatment center for adolescents in Jerusalem, believes that there is a greater tendency in adoptive families for a child to act out the unconscious hostile and sexual impulses of a parent. Schneider sees the adopted child's internal world as a seething caldron containing—

**Four elements of anger—**

- Anger of parent who gave the child up for adoption
- Anger of the child's adoptive parents
- Child's anger at the natural parents
- Child's anger at the adoptive parents.

If the adoptive mother and father are having difficulties in their marriage, they may project onto the child their underlying feelings of hostility toward each other. One parent may be angry at the other for being infertile. They both may be angry at the child for not being the child they might have had. They may even harbor unconscious anger at the birth mother for conceiving, when they could not, and producing a child who does not live up to their ideal. p90

*The birth mother and birth father are both angry* at fate for getting them into this situation. The mother is angry at the father for deserting her, at her parents for not helping her to keep her baby, and at the system, which did not provide the support that would have enabled her to raise the child. p90

*The child is angry at the birth parents*, especially the mother, for giving him away. He is also angry at the adoptive parents for taking his birth parents' place and not providing information about them. He is angry at the system for sealing his records. And at fate for making him different. Upon reaching adolescence, the adopted child, according to Schneider, has to contend with all these elements of anger. They may explode into tremendous rage, which manifests itself in destructive acting-out behavior. Lifton 1994 pp89-91

**AP's and adopted persons up the wall**

When treatment is sought, it is usually only for the 'bad kid,' the acting-out child. The 'good kid,' as constricted and shut down as he may be, is not seen as having any problems. One reason that the difficult child is sent into treatment is that the parents can no longer cope with their behavior. And with good reason: The provocation and aggression caused by the anxiety about a further rejection become more and more destructive and unbearable to the parents as the child tests their commitment to him/her. The provocative behavior often plays into the parents, insecurities about being good enough parents and into their own rejection issues. They then become defensive and retaliatory, instead of understanding and steadfast. Sadly, their defensive reactions often produce the very outcome which the adopted person feared in the first place: abandonment—being sent out of the home to residential treatment centers, boarding schools, or simply out on the street. If the adopted persons behaviors was seen as attempts to avoid pain, rather than deliberate provocation of the parents, the parents might be able to identify the signs or manifestations of that trauma and help their child integrate it. Verrier 1994 pp73-74

**Anger barrier to positive relationships**

We are not talking about legitimate anger at something that someone did to us. That kind of anger is appropriate and can lead to resolution. I am talking about that overwhelming anger that seems to come out of nowhere and which either explodes onto the scene or is so buried that it

makes one numb. I am talking about infant rage. This rage seems so powerful to the person who suspects that it lurks within him that he often fails to feel it at all. Other people always seem to be angry at everyone and everything. Verrier 1993 p189.

**Histrionic anger**

Sometimes anger is genuine and other times it is histrionic. The histrionic anger is more drama than true feelings and does nothing toward integration. If anger is real and justified, then expressing it at the appropriate person in an appropriate way will dissipate it and release us from the tension of it. One cannot hang on to true anger. It is a very brief feeling. Anger is also a great motivator. It can get one going toward righting societal or personal wrongs. It releases a great deal of energy; it stimulates power; it can point one toward assertiveness, so long as it is appropriate to the situation. If it is inappropriate, it will stimulate aggression, which is an attempt to control or intimidate others or it can lead to passivity, which is another form of control, controlling by what one doesn't do. Verrier 1993 p189

**Aggressive feelings**

The adopted person may suffer from emotions which they cannot describe. Often they have a need to act out their unresolved trauma. Emotions are the primary motivating force in life. They make us defend ourselves, especially when we want our basic needs fulfilling. Anger, for example, moves us to protect our rights. The adopted person often feels their rights were taken away from them at birth, creating a core of anger they cannot explain. p29. Many adopted persons suffer emotions they cannot put a name to, but often feel a need to act out this unresolved trauma...This inward anger has caused many adopted persons and birth parents alike to want to do something to bring about a change in the adoption system because they have all had to suffer too much over the years. Carlini 1997 p93

**Anger source and political expression**

Anger? How would you feel if people had done things to you when you were an infant or small child, when you were essentially unconscious? Your whole world was destabilized, and then, like magic, you were a different person. It's okay. We can heal, but there's going to be some anger. No longer toward our parents, birth or adoptive—they had their own problems and losses to contend with as we all did- but at the situation. We older adopted people, whose adoption took place in the especially closed era, can't stand secrecy and get very angry if people are clandestine or hide things through passive aggression. Just tell us the truth! The truth may hurt, but having it kept from us is even more devastating and infuriating. The truth is what we've always wanted. Openness and sincerity. Our anger is dynamic. It *moves us to get involved politically*, to want to change the world because our world was changed so dramatically. We can focus our anger and use it to challenge what is wrong. We can be agents of change, as we were infants and children of change. Change is our legacy and our strength as well as our downfall. Pavao 1998 *Also see Search may trigger anger. p87*

## ANTI - SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

### Rejection

There are adopted persons who run away, or steal cars, or cause other serious trouble in order to make themselves unwanted and to provoke rejection. Adopted adolescents often do things to see if they will be rejected. Since they sometimes fear that in a sense they will no longer be adopted after they reach adulthood, they also want to be in control of the rejection by causing it rather than having it happen to them. Pavao 1998 p79

### What are adopted persons seeking

I see those who act out as crying for attention and help, while fighting to preserve their integrity. Just as Winnicott spoke of the 'true self in cold storage,' we could say that these adopted persons are trying to thaw out the true self, to bring a dead self to life. Their antisocial behavior is the unconscious strategy they seize upon to feel authentic, vital, and alive—their form of self-cure. In order for therapists to help with the cure, they must, in Winnicott's view, manage 'to meet and match the moment of hope.' Therapists should not be asking why adopted children are angry, but why shouldn't they be? Lifton 1994 p88

**Angry self-** see *Anger* pp9-10

### Disproportionate referrals

It is no longer a secret that there is a disproportionate number of adopted persons in hospital adolescent psychiatric wards and residential treatment centers across the country but professionals disagree about the cause. The rationale one hears that middle class adoptive families are more inclined to seek psychotherapy does not explain why their adopted children are disturbed enough to need it. Other reasons given are genealogical bewilderment (lack of knowledge of origins); interaction between parents and child, such as the parents' overreaction to the child's sexuality; good medical insurance for in-care treatment; a proneness of insecure adoptive parents to hospitalize children unnecessarily; genetic impairment in the child; and the consequences of the birth mother's anxiety and poor prenatal care. I suspect another cause might be the difficulty that many young adopted persons have repressing their grief and anger and sense of powerlessness in the closed adoption system, which has been called a seedbed for a personality disorder. Reports in the psychological literature that adopted children often show identity problems because they do not know their antecedents have proved threatening to some adoptive parents, who attack these findings as 'cultural prejudice and myth' and interpret them to mean that adoptive families are 'defective,' that adoptive children are 'doomed to psychological pathology,' and that adoption is 'somehow inferior to biological parenting.' The need to idealize the institution of adoption in order to ward off their own fears unfortunately prevents these parents from being in touch with their children's pain. It is as if they want to believe that if the professionals don't write about the problems they observe, then those problems don't exist. Lifton 1994 p91

### Adoption syndrome

David Kirschner, a psychologist in treating young adopted persons, gave the name 'Adopted Child Syndrome' to the pattern of disturbed behaviors and characteristics he observed in his young patients. The children's symptoms include pathological lying, stealing, truancy, learning problems, running away, setting fires, sexual promiscuity, an absence of normal guilt and anxiety, and extreme antisocial behavior that often gets them in trouble with the law. He found their personalities were characterized by impulsivity, low frustration tolerance, manipulateness, and deceptive charm that covered over a shallowness of attachment.

The idea that there could be an adopted child syndrome is understandably very frightening to adoptive parents and is perhaps the most controversial issue in the field today. Some professionals who agree with most of Kirschner's findings are uncomfortable with the term syndrome because it implies pathology in medical usage, although Kirschner means it as behaviors grouped together. One writer, an adoptive mother, called it a 'pseudosyndrome' and accused those who use it of 'scare tactics' that will frighten away those who want to adopt. This need to wage a semantics battle to deny the complexities of adoption is unfortunate, for the professionals who write about the pain and trauma of the adopted child are publishing their observations in an effort to help adopted children and their families. As the child analyst Steven Nickman, himself an adoptive father, writes: 'The family with its support systems, and ultimately society at large, bear a responsibility for recognizing the dilemmas of adopted children and youth.' By living up to this responsibility, they can help 'avoid contributing to the development of full-blown character disorders in later life.'

I have seen enough evidence in the constellation of disturbed behaviors exhibited by adopted children and adults I have worked with to accept that there is an adoption syndrome. I prefer, however, to call it *cumulative adoption trauma* because...there are a series of traumas. They begin to accumulate from the time the child is separated from the mother at birth, learns that they are not the biological child of his family, and then dissociates in order to live as if they do not need to know whose child they are." Lifton 1994 pp91-93

### Behavior continuum

"In order that the term cumulative adoption trauma not sound the clarion call for alarm, I suggest that it be seen on a broad continuum: from mild to serious to pathological disturbance. My own work with nonclinical adopted persons who have grown up in the closed adoption system reveals that virtually all of them can be located somewhere on the continuum, even if *mostly on the lower end*, as they struggle with issues around self-esteem, lack of trust, and fear of abandonment, to name just a few. Acting-out adopted persons—those with antisocial and self-destructive tendencies make up the broad middle range. A small, extremely disturbed subgroup who exhibit criminal and murderous behaviors, and make headlines, are on the pathological far end of the continuum." Lifton 1994 p93

**Dislike special occasions**

Adopted persons dislike special occasions. Such events always remind them that they have another family 'out there somewhere' to which they also belong. 54% of the surveyed reported they disliked special occasions so much that they *sabotaged their own birthday celebrations*. Carlini 1997 p30

There seems to be a memory built into the psyche and cells, an anniversary reaction, which sends many adopted persons into despair around their birthdays...They begin by having a sense of excitement, but often end up sabotaging the whole affair...Yet is it any wonder that many sabotage their birthday parties? Why would one want to celebrate the day they were separated from their mother? Adopted persons of course, have probably never really understood, themselves, why they do this. Verrier 1993 p16

**Acting out**

Among the acting-out behaviors that we find in the middle range of the continuum, most common are lying and stealing, running away, addictions to drug, alcohol, or food.

**Lying and stealing**

Winnicott places stealing at the center of the antisocial tendency, along with lying. Since adopted children often feel that they are living a lie that is endorsed by society, how can they know what truth is?

A young woman says: 'Being adopted is a life of lies. Who I am born, I am not. Now I am given to someone else. Now I am this person. I was Italian. Now I am Irish. I see I am different, my hair, my skin. Flesh tells me, I lie constantly for no reason. Stories. Always telling stories. No one understands why. When they notice.' A man says: 'Living a lie that is endorsed and fueled by society makes it easy to evolve into a person who is incapable of knowing what truth is. This is costly to oneself and eventually to society.' According to Winnicott, 'the child who steals an object is not looking for the object stolen but seeks the mother over whom he or she has rights.' Many adopted persons recall stealing from their parents' wallets when they were young because they felt they had been stolen from their mothers and ripped off by the adoption system. Stealing can be a form of revenge, taking the 'reparations' adopted persons often say they feel they deserve. Or it can be an expression of rage. Laing saw stealing as a way of taking control. Lifton 1994 pp93-94

**Stealing and hoarding**

Another behavior which manifests in adopted children is stealing or hoarding. The child may steal or take money or food in a seemingly irrational concern about there not being enough 'food.' The precedent forming experience has been that the 'feeder' disappeared, resulting in a pervasive fear that he may some day have to be on his own and had better be prepared. The people from whom the child steals are those he likes or respects the most: his parents, siblings, teachers, or best friends. Some adopted persons, reflecting upon this as adults, say that part of this is a feeling that they themselves had been stolen (which is easier to accept than the fact that their mothers gave them away), and that, therefore, stealing must be all right. It is a legitimate way to get what one feels one needs. And there

is a tremendous reluctance to return that which was stolen, which is connected to the fear of being rejected or returned by the adoptive parents. 'If I have to return the money, my parents might have to return me.' If the parents can acknowledge this fear as a way of expressing an earlier experience and yet let the child know that the behavior cannot be tolerated, the anxiety level may be lowered and the need to hoard and steal diminished. Children need to know that they are understood, and they need help in understanding their own feelings and behavior. Verrier 1993 p78

**Running away**

Running away has been called the '*roaming phenomenon*' and a 'symbolic search' for the parents. We could say that the adopted adolescent is not running *from* but *to* something. One man remembers that he would head toward Denver, where he was born, with the thought that his birth mother might be there. It didn't matter that he didn't know her name and had no way of looking her up. Some adopted persons go to live in a friend's house, as if wanting to try another family out for size. This substitute family can satisfy their fantasy of what it would have been like to grow up with their real family. Others run for the sake of running, as if they can somehow escape themselves or their fate. 'Running away from yourself is the hardest thing to do' according to one woman who ended up a ward of the state at thirteen. Lifton 1994 pp94-95

**Drug, alcohol, food addictions**

Adopted persons who become addicted to food or alcohol often feel that they are hiding out from grief and pain. 'I need something to fill me up,' one woman said. 'I can't stop stuffing myself.' And another said: 'Even before adolescence, food meant nurturance. I became a compulsive eater, snitching and hoarding food until a binge. Lifton 1994 p95

**Suicidal self**

For detailed consideration of adopted persons suicidal issues see Lifton 1994 pp97-101 Also Verrier 1993 pp45-47

**Adopted persons who kill**

How do we go from suicidal adopted persons whose rage is turned inward to those who kill? "Behind every suicide is a homicide," David Kirschner tells me. He believes that many of the adopted persons who murder were more suicidal than homicidal. 'Their histories show that they often made repeated suicidal attempts first. They smashed up cars, took pills, courted danger. You don't hear about the suicide attempts in the media. They're not sensational enough.' Lifton 1991 p101

**Extreme end antisocial continuum**

The painful truth is that at the extreme end of the antisocial continuum we find a very small subgroup of adopted persons who commit violent crimes, such as serial murder. It is as difficult for me to report this as I am sure it is for the reader to absorb, but we must pay attention to this group, for, as the criminologist Jack Levin points out, adopted person serial killers have become household names. Lifton 1994 p101. For detail on 'Son of Sam' murders and Parricide- killing one's parents See Lifton 1994 p101-104

## BIRTH PARENTS

There have always been mothers and fathers who have not been able to, or not chosen to, or not been allowed to, parent their children, whether because of substance abuse, war, poverty, youth, scarcity, illness, or coercion. Not all mothers and fathers are parents, and not all parents give birth to the children that they raise. This is how it has always been and how it will always be. Pavao 1998 p1

### **Name terminology**

Sometimes, birth parents are called 'biological parents,' as if they were 'baby machines' without feelings. This is not how most mothers and fathers who conceive and produce a child feel. Sometimes, they are called the 'real' or 'natural' parents. This makes the adoptive parents feel discounted. The truth is that both sets of parents are 'real.' We use 'birth mother and birth father' to describe the parents who gave birth to the child; 'adoptive parents' is the preferred term for the parents adopting and raising the child. cf Pavao 1998 p2

### **Pressured decision making**

For the birth mother especially, there are huge pressures: pressures from family; pressures based on fears or based on truths; pressures communicated by the agency or the social worker; pressures from society. With all of these pressures, the decision to place a child is a terribly hard one to make, in part because it requires abstract thinking about what giving up this child actually will be like, not just now, but forever. The decision to parent-often to parent alone-requires equally abstract thinking at this stage. Either decision will last a lifetime and affect many lives. Pavao 1998 p3

### **Birth Mothers**

A pregnant woman becomes a birth mother after she gives birth to her child and agrees to an adoption plan. She signs a legal document that terminates her parental rights to that child. For many birth mothers, the entire experience from conception to pregnancy to adoption and beyond is emotional, overwhelming, confusing, and unforgettable.

Birth mothers typically have memories and feelings about their entire experience. Being pregnant, considering options, getting or not getting support from others, the relinquishment, and the after effects of the adoption are all momentous occasions for birth mothers. For many birth mothers, signing the adoption papers does not signify the end of their adoption experience but rather marks the beginning of a whole new phase.

Any woman who goes through a pregnancy and then relinquishes her child would be expected to have strong feelings about the experience. Some women are immediately aware of their feelings at the time, while others shut down emotionally to protect themselves from the intensity of their feelings. Sometimes it takes years for birth mothers to realize the full extent of their feelings about the adoption. Russell 1996 pp79-80

### **Birth fathers**

Birth fathers are perhaps the most forgotten part of the adoption triad. Some birth fathers were never told of the pregnancy. Other birth fathers are told that they cannot take part in the planning for the future of their child. Some birth fathers leave of their own accord because they don't want to deal with the situation.

Birth fathers can have strong feelings about the adoption of their child. Birth fathers and birth mothers are forever linked to their children. Adoption does not erase this fact.

The loss of the birth father will be felt by the adopted person. *It is difficult to disregard half of who you are.* Adopted persons who want to know where they come from know that they had two birth parents and that both contributed in their own way.

Some circumstances keep birth fathers away from their children and from taking part in planning for the child's life. Every effort must be made to include each parent when making major decisions. Acknowledging and expecting both parents to be a part of a child's life is positive because it means that they are coming together for the sake of the child. Russell 1996 pp80-81

### **Birth mother / birth father relationship**

The kind of relationship that the birth mother and birth father have affects the process of adoption and the feelings connected with the crisis in their lives. Sometimes the losses of adoption are magnified by the additional loss of the birth mother and birth father relationship. Sometimes the relationship between the birth mother and the father is distant, or there is no further communication between the two. This additional loss of connection and support will affect the adoption and future feelings about the time surrounding the adoption. Russell 1996 pp81-2

### **Stages birth parents go through**

The stages birth parents go through are very real and need to be understood. Many adoptive parents who make plans for some open contact through letters, etc., are gravely disappointed and feel betrayed when the birth mother does not write back. It may be that it is too painful for the birth mother at that particular time and they can't always respond on schedule. Pavao 1998 p10

### **Initial period**

The initial period of grieving lasts roughly *five to seven years*. Remember that for the birth parents there are no rites of passage and no ceremonies that include one's friends and family, that gather around them in the grieving process. For the most part their grieving is done alone. And this is true in open, semi-open, and closed adoptions. The best thing adoptive parents who hope for contact can do is to keep the lines of communication open. Adoptive parents are wise to continue sending letters and pictures, even if there is no response at the moment.

Many birth parents spend the early period, after the surrender, as do people who have other kinds of post-traumatic stress. There is a period of emotional moratorium, and often there is no interest in opening up the intense

pain of the initial loss, even in the planned open adoptions that are being done more frequently these days. In some instances, the adoptive parents understand the need for connections and are trying to make the relationship more open while the birth parents are holding back. This can be frustrating if adoptive parents do not know that this period of separation is a normal part of healing rites for many birth parents. Pavao 1998 p10

### **Forgiveness**

The task for birth parents is to forgive themselves. Many birth parents carry the burden of blame and guilt around for years. Some birth parents want forgiveness from the adopted person, their family, or society. To forgive oneself is a gift that every birth parent deserves and can learn to do. Forgiveness can also extend to the people who were in the birth parent's life at the time of the pregnancy and relinquishment. Most likely, everyone involved was doing what they felt was best at the time.

It is important to remember that birth parents today have choices that were not available in the past. Society has changed in many ways that have opened up options and choices. Forgiveness can be accelerated by acknowledging the differences in time and attitudes from the past to the present. Russell 1996 p82

### **Shame**

Shame is a feeling that can paralyze people and cause people to hide the truth. Shame is the feeling that you have done something wrong and that people will think badly of you. In adoption, shame can last for years beyond the actual time of the adoption. Some birth parents, because of their shame, have never told anyone about their adoption experience. Russell 1996 p83

### **Guilt**

Guilt is a common feeling for a birth parent to carry around. There can be guilt about having sex, guilt about getting pregnant, and guilt about deciding on adoption. Guilt feelings can mean that the person has not yet forgiven himself or herself for behaviors or events of the past. However, if people can realize that they can do nothing about a situation, they may then be able to release their guilt. Russell 1996 p84

### **Relief**

There can be a sense of relief when birth parents decide that adoption is the best option. The decision to choose adoption is usually reached after all the other options have been considered. This is not to say that other emotions will not also be present or arise later. Russell 1996 p84

### **Anger**

Birth parents can become angry at some point in their lives about their experience with the adoption process. For some birth parents, this anger is present during the decision to relinquish, while for others the anger comes years later. Anger is an emotion that naturally occurs when there is loss or a feeling of being out of control. Anger can also motivate people to actions such as searching for their child or fighting for adoption reform. Russell 1996 p84

### **Sadness**

A birth parent's sadness can seem to take on a life of its own. There are no time limits to mourning the loss of a child. Some birth parents are surprised by the depth of their sadness so long after the relinquishment. It is best to acknowledge this sadness, let oneself feel it, and know that people don't get more than they can handle. All feelings pass. Russell 1996 p85

### **Depression**

Depression is a feeling of hopelessness and helplessness. There is a sense that things will never change and that there will not be brighter days ahead. It is natural to feel depressed after loss. Losing a child is a major loss in a parent's life. Birth parents will feel this loss in one way or another. Russell 1996 p85

### **Relationships**

Being a birth parent has an impact on relationships. The low self-esteem that many birth parents describe can get in the way of their starting and keeping relationships. Birth parents sometimes find it hard to believe that someone could truly care about them and love them. Trusting others can also be a stumbling block.

Some birth parents feel doomed to failure because of their experience in having gone through the process of pregnancy, deciding on adoption, and the relinquishment. Future relationships will be affected by how the birth parent views himself or herself in terms of the adoption process. Russell 1996 p86

### **Sexuality**

For some birth parents, sex is a reminder of the adoption experience. Acknowledging and dealing with the many feelings associated with being a birth parent can help to make sex a more enjoyable activity. Russell 1996 p87

### **Scars**

Many birth mothers carry the physical signs and scars of having given birth. Getting dressed and seeing stretch marks or a C-section scar can be a trigger to birth mothers. Deciding to have a physical relationship with someone can also prompt old feelings and force a birth mother to tell her partner about having been pregnant. To many birth mothers, these are painful reminders of a difficult time both emotionally and physically. Russell 1996 p87

### **Role confusion**

A birth mother is a mother in many ways- physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Many birth mothers describe feeling very connected to their unborn child. Bonding with one's unborn child is a natural part of being pregnant. It can be confusing to feel so connected to a baby that one will not raise. It can be confusing to be a parent and not a parent. Birth parents will struggle with their identity as it relates to their role as a parent. Are people still mothers or fathers if they don't raise their child? Russell 1996 p87

### **Pregnancy = Crisis**

For every birth parent, pregnancy is a crisis. People in crisis often have difficulty making decisions, may find that their moods shift easily, and may react in ways that seem

unusual for them. Those around the birth parents may also be feeling the effects of the crisis and act in ways that help or hinder the situation. Russell 1996 p88

### **Loss**

Birth parents are not the only ones who feel the loss of adoption. Sometimes there are full siblings in a family who also lose their brother or sister to adoption. In every case, adoption is a difficult decision. When adoption involves separating more than the birth parents and child, it can feel like even more of a loss.

Loss is loss regardless of the circumstances. Even in families where a child is taken out of the home due to abuse or neglect, the child still needs and craves an emotional connection to his or her birth family. Without the truth, many children create ideas about how things could be. These children grow into adults who continue to search for the truth and mourn what might have been had they remained with their birth family. Russell 1996 p88

### **Pregnancy result of rape**

Clearly, being pregnant as the result of a rape adds to the trauma of being pregnant. Along with the shame about being pregnant and carrying a child, the violence of the conception stays with the woman for her lifetime. For any birth parent, the story of conception can be difficult. When conception involves rape, it can weigh more heavily on a birth parent's mind.

Birth mothers who conceived during a rape have to decide how to tell their child of the circumstances of their conception. Understandably this piece of information is difficult for all concerned. However, as in other areas of adoption, people deserve to know the truth. Russell 1996 p89

### **Treatment of birth mothers**

Many birth parents report being treated in negative ways by people during their pregnancy and the adoption process. Some birth parents were separated from their most important support system of family and friends while they were pregnant.

Some birth parents lost the support of their own family members when they became pregnant. If they had no place else to go, they stayed with their families and tried to deal with the relationships around them. It was not unusual for birth parents to be told that they deserved to be treated poorly because of what they had done to become pregnant. Russell 1996 p90

### **Relinquishment**

Relinquishment is when the birth parent releases the child for adoption. The hospital experience, childbirth, seeing the baby or not, treatment by the doctors and nurses, and the signing of the adoption papers are all a part of the relinquishment experience. Russell 1996 p91

Some birth parents are not allowed to see their infant. It was typical for birth mothers to be placed in rooms on floors other than the maternity floor and to not be expected to see their baby. For these birth parents, the good-bye can be more difficult. How can a person say good-bye if there has never been a hello? Russell 1996 p92

### **Post-relinquishment experience**

Many birth parents describe feeling numb during the time period immediately after relinquishment. Post-relinquishment is a time when birth parents need to heal and recover from a traumatic experience. Support, especially from family members and friends, is crucial. To not talk about the relinquishment only postpones the healing.

Adoptions of the past were more secretive than they are today. Many birth parents of the past had to live in secrecy about their pregnancy and adoption experience.

The relinquishment experience is not forgotten. Birth parents can later get married and have more children. However, getting married and having more children does not erase the relinquishment or adoption experience. Russell 1996 p93

### **Support then and now**

Many birth parents looked to their parents for permission to keep their child. In the past, government assistance programs did not exist as they do today. Many birth parents were dependent on their parents for emotional and financial support, which meant that their parents were part of the adoption decision.

During times of crisis people need a strong support system. Many birth parents did not have a support system of family and friends. This lack of support adds to the trauma of an unplanned pregnancy. It is sad that at a time when support is so crucial, a birth parent can feel so alone and frightened.

Some birth parents do not get the support they need until years later. Support groups offer birth parents a safe and supportive place where their feelings can be validated and they can speak honestly and freely about their experiences. Russell 1996 p94

### **Future children**

The decision to have future children can be a difficult one for birth parents. Thoughts of the child relinquished for adoption can make birth parents doubt their ability and capacity to have more children. Some birth parents decide not to have more children. The fear is that future children would be a reminder of the child relinquished for adoption. Russell 1996 p95

### **Birth parents never lose birth role**

Birth parents never lose their role as those who gave birth to the child. The child's connection to the past is through this birth mother and father and their genes and stories. The story may be sad, or hard, or even horrible, but it is the true story for a child who is adopted. The fact of adoption means that the birth parents do not have the role of "parent." It does not mean that they do not have the role of caring, and thinking about the child, and maybe even wishing things had been different. We continue to have funny notions about what a birth parent is. If we care about the children, we must have some positive and even loving thoughts about the people who gave them life. Pavao 1998 p20

**Also See Reunion- Birth Parents** pp58-65 this book.

**Also See Search- Rejection** pp83-84 this book.

## BONDING & ATTACHMENT

### **Bonding and Attachment**

Attachment is not something that happens on the part of the children. The parents must attach as well.

Many parents do not understand that all parents taking their child home, whether it is the first, second, or third child, or whether the child is adopted or born into the family have to *develop a relationship* with that child, that person. This is where and when attachment begins.

*Attachment* is the relationship that both birth mother and birth father, or adoptive parents, or foster parents have to *develop* with the child, and the child also has to develop this new relationship with the parents.

Sometimes parents have a hard time if a child is not quick to attach. Some parents feel rejected by the child and this starts the relationship off in an awkward way. Even with birth parents and child, attachment is not always automatic. Some relationships take more work than others, and it is the job of the adult, the parent, to work on this attachment process.

Many children who are adopted, both domestically and internationally, are still in shock from the trauma of leaving the familiar person, their birth mother, or from the cumulative trauma of moves from foster home to orphanage. Sometimes this is compounded by physical or sexual abuse or neglect. We know, from the perinatal psychologists, that infants clearly identify who their birth parents are by smells and sounds and that they do have grave reactions to loss. Some people find ways to attach instantly and simply do it. Other people need some help if they are having difficulty making the attachment to a child or if the child is having trouble attaching to the family.

Some parents are embarrassed by this lack of automatic connection. They may feel rejected or ashamed and, often, they do not seek the help that they very much need. This is the time that attachment can be *best* treated. This is the time when the connections can be made in ways that will be everlasting.

These crises are not the crises that everyone experiences, but when families are having difficulties in the first few days of having the baby, or child, at home, it would help if they thought of this as a normal situation for any child who is in shock.

As in all cases of shock, the child may be overly adaptive for a length of time, and these issues may only surface later, seemingly out of the blue. It may be a case of a child now feeling safe enough to move from shock to his true feelings, and for some parents, this will feel like a rejection...

With an older child and some internationally placed older children there is often a need for post adoptive services earlier on during the transition and settling in time. The work done at this time can often prevent later problems for the family and the child, and can give the child an opportunity to begin to make sense of the complexity of adoption. Pavao 1998 pp34-35

### **Bonding**

The difficulties of an adopted persons bonding have been recognized in literature and Statutes since 2000BC. The issue has been brought to the fore recently by Nancy Verrier's book '*The Primal Wound*'. Attempts are now being made to bring together research that may explain more fully the special bonding difficulties of adopted persons. Their bonding and attachment process is complicated by the trauma and grief of separation, lack of mutual biology, and the waiting time between birth and placement. KCG

### **Genetic bonding**

The genetic bonding with the birth parents is imprinted on every cell of an adopted persons body. Take any cell from the adopted person and within the chromosomes are living copies of their complete genetic makeup. Every gene in our body is a reproduction of genes carried by our birth parents. The gene is only living part of us that is physically passed on from one generation to the next. We are all made of second hand genes that have lived in countless generations of our ancestors. Our only claim to fame is that we are a unique collection. It is impossible to break the genetic bond with our birth parents. KCG

### **Complexity of adoption bonding**

Most adopted persons feel uncomfortable discussing the subject of adoptive bonding. Most books by adopted persons avoid the subject. The fact of their dual origins and dual identity makes any bonding to anyone difficult. Their fundamental problem is that the primal bonding with their birth mother has been severed shortly after birth, but the full genetic and some memory bonding remains. They were in effect separated and abandoned by the birth mother. The adoptive mother became a substitute for the birth mother, but can never fully replace her. No matter how good the adoptive mother is she lacks resonance with the child's genetic personality. Most adopted persons are more comfortable with the concept that they are 'attached' rather than 'bonded' to their adoptive family. KCG

### **Difference of bonding and attachment**

The two terms are often used interchangeably. I believe that it would be safe to say that most adopted children form attachments to their adoptive mothers. This is a kind of emotional dependence, which may seem crucial to their survival. Bonding, on the other hand, may not be so easily achieved. It implies a profound connection, which is experienced at all levels of human awareness. In the earliest stages of an infant's life, this bond instills the child with a sense of well-being and wholeness necessary to healthy emotional development...The question as to whether or not an adopted person is at a disadvantage as a result of missing the earliest imprinting or bonding experience has been raised by many professionals. Verrier 1993 p19

### **Baby specific needs**

Winnicott...believed that the biological mother is specially prepared through that bonding to meet the needs of the child, which are communicated through intuition and other phenomena, unobservable to anyone else. There is just a

knowing what the baby needs. Unfortunately, too many mothers do not or cannot (because of work or other distractions) tune in to these unconscious signals and instead rely upon 'experts' to tell them what to do. Experts can't really help, however, because it isn't just a matter of knowing how to care for a baby, but what this particular baby needs at this particular time. Verrier 1993 p20

### **Bonding programmed**

It seems as if a mother may be biologically, hormonally, and emotionally programmed to bond and respond to her baby at birth in the same way that she was able to do when the fetus was in the womb. There are a series of sensations and events, some of which begin in utero, which aid in the postnatal bonding experience: breast feeding, odors, eye contact, touching, and familiar sounds, such as the heartbeat and voice. That a baby knows its own mother at birth has been proven over and over. Verrier 1993 p20

### **Stage specific bonding**

Some psychologists believe these events to be stage specific, which means that if they are delayed, as in the case of a newborn separated from his mother, both mother and child will experience grief. An adoptive mother may be at a disadvantage in coping with the affective behavior of her child, for she doesn't understand the form or depth of his grief or the limitations placed upon her as his mother. The infant has missed something which cannot be replaced even by the most motivated of adoptive mothers. Verrier 1993 p20

### **Effects of broken bond**

What the child has missed is the security and serenity of oneness with the person who gave birth to him, a continuum of bonding from prenatal to postnatal life. This is a profound connection for which the adopted person forever yearns. It is this yearning which leaves them often feeling hopeless, helpless, empty, and alone. In working with adopted persons, it is apparent that no matter what happens a month, a year, or several years in the future, that period immediately after birth, when the infant has made the transition from the warm, fluid, dark security of the womb to the cold, bright, alien world of postnatal life, is a crucial period. It is a time when a baby needs to be in proximity to his mother in order to find the world safe and welcoming instead of confusing, uncaring, and hostile. At that time the mother is the whole world for the baby, and his connection to her is essential to his sense of well-being and wholeness...

It is my belief, therefore, that the severing of that connection between the adopted child and their birthmother causes a primal or narcissistic wound, which affects the adopted persons sense of *self* and often manifests in a sense of loss, basic mistrust, anxiety and depression, emotional and/or behavioral problems, and difficulties in relationships with significant others. I further believe that the awareness, whether conscious or unconscious, that the original separation was the result of a 'choice' made by the mother affects the adopted persons self-esteem and self-worth. Verrier 1993 pp20-21

### **Multi-sensory connection**

Scientists in recent years are finding that a baby's world is far different from what they ever imagined. They now know that a special bond exists between mother and child even in utero, a bond that continues after birth. For instance, it is known that a newborn receives antibodies from the mother's milk to fight infections. Studies have found that when the baby is placed next to the mother, it regulates its own body temperature, as well as its hormone and enzyme levels, metabolic rates, heartbeat and breathing...A baby's cry triggers the mother's milk to release.

A baby needs to hear the mother's voice, smell her body odor, see her facial expressions, feel her skin next to its own and taste the mother's milk. It is a multi-sensory connection that is one of the first and most important connections every human makes in a lifetime. It is a connection which sets a precedent for all other relationships to follow. Breaking this vital connection leaves both mother and child with an inner sense that something is missing in their lives on many levels. Is it any wonder that separating mother and child causes physical and emotional problems for them both! Carlini 1997 pp22-23

### **Difficulty receiving hugs**

Carlini, referring to effects of the primal wound states—"This explains why so many adopted persons involved in the research... said they hated to be hugged as children and would occasionally go rigid when the adoptive mother hugged them. It also reveals that the sense of loss for the birth mother has been acknowledged and remains as a strong memory. The child may go through life with a sense of unrelenting grief and be unable to trust people, form relationships or experience intimacy.

Here again, the birth mother often suffers from the same symptoms of trauma. In my survey of adopted persons, over 59 percent said they had difficulty accepting hugs as a child and many of them still do as adults. When asked how many had trouble forming lasting relationships, 61 percent reported they had. These results should tell us that the initial separation from the birth mother can actually have a long lasting effect...At the same time some adopted persons may not have suffered at all. However, they may still be able to relate to some of the symptoms of grief and mistrust in relationships that are described above." Carlini 1997 pp22-24

### **Attachment?**

We were uprooted; our roots are delicate because they've once been torn. We will reattach well once, if the people we're placed with are also good at attaching. But don't move us too often, or we'll have no ability to stick to it. We'll get too good at moving from place to place and will have a hard time with jobs and with relationships. We learn well and early: too often we've been taught about attachment by being taken away, and then placed, and then taken away. So we attach on the surface very quickly; it's part of how we adapt. We need to bring along a transitional object, *a familiar object*, when we're in strange places. After all, our first familiar object, our birth mother, disappeared! Pavao 1998 p91

## BOUNDARIES

*Carlini*—The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines a boundary as something that marks or fixes a limit. In recovery a boundary is defined as ‘a limit or a personal territory’. Often the adopted person will have an unclear sense of themselves. They find it hard to define where they end and the other person begins. They are sometimes so unsure of their own feelings they prefer to ‘own’ the feelings of others. They own blame, shame, guilt and a sense of responsibility that are not really theirs. As a consequence they are very unsure of their own territory.

Boundary also describes the action of ‘setting a boundary’ as in setting limits with someone. When this happens, the adopted person tells the other person that he or she cannot hurt them any further, use them or take their possessions. Above all, they will no longer take abuse. When it is difficult to define these boundaries for ourselves, our sense of self as an individual and the ability to distinguish the self from others becomes ambivalent.

Melody Beattie expresses the concept of boundaries very clearly in her book\* ‘Each of us has our own territory. Our boundaries define and contain that territory our bodies, minds, emotions, spirit, possessions and rights’. Our boundaries define and surround all our energy, the individual self which we each call ‘me’. Our borders are invisible but real. We think ‘This is the place where I end and you begin.’ The adopted persons goal in recovery is to learn to identify and respect that line.

At times, adopted persons feel as if they have nonexistent boundaries because they keep trying to conform to family behaviors which are quite different from their own. However, at the expense of conforming, much of what they really feel is forgotten and never acknowledged. Many are people pleasers, they have a tendency to tune into the needs of others, without realizing their own needs. Some adopted persons with identity diffusion problems suffer from a lack of self-esteem. The shame and guilt they carry inside them damages boundaries. If a sense of boundaries does not exist within, they fail to recognize them in others. If they continue to take responsibility for other peoples’ feelings, their boundaries become damaged. Without boundaries, relationships are frightening for the adopted person because they fear being out of control of their life. On the other hand, if those boundaries are too rigid, they will avoid relationships and will discourage them. The ultimate goal in recovery is to develop healthy boundaries which are not too loose nor too rigid. *Carlini 1977 pp111-3* [\*Melody Beattie *Beyond Co-dependency: And Getting Better All The Time* 1989 p174]

### **Complex adopted persons boundaries**

As with the complexity of bonding it is their dual identity that makes the defining of boundaries difficult. In fact different sets of boundaries will apply to each of the dual identities. There is thus often no stable single set of boundaries for the adopted person. The establishment of clear boundaries is only achieved when the adopted person reconciles their dual identity. KCG

## CONTROL

### **Control aspects of adoption**

Adopted people for the most part feel they don’t exercise much control in their own lives. They were placed. Their names were changed. Everything’s been done to them... being adopted is sort of like being in an F.B.I. witness protection program...you are *taken*, and *moved*, and *transplanted*, and given *new* names and *new* identities. For young adults who choose to search for birth parents it can be an important move away from the sense of impassivity that’s colored their lives. The search and the information it yields can give one the experience of having control over one’s life. Pavao 1998 78p

### **Mastery and control**

Adoption alters the course of one’s life. This shift presents triad members with additional hurdles in their development, and may hinder growth, self-actualisation, and the evolution of self-control.

Birth parents, adoptive parents, and adopted persons are all forced to give up control. Adoption, for most, is a second choice. Birth parents did not grow up with romantic images of becoming accidentally pregnant or abusing their children and surrendering them for adoption. In contrast, the pregnancy or abuse is a crisis situation whose resolution becomes adoption. In order to solve the predicament, birth parents must surrender not only the child but also their volition, leading to feelings of victimisation and powerlessness which may become themes in birth parents’ lives.

Adopted persons are keenly aware that they were not party to the decision which led to their adoption. They had no control over the loss of the birth family or the choice of the adoptive family. The adoption proceeded with adults making life altering choices for them. This unnatural change of course impinges on growth toward self-actualisation and self-control. Adolescent adopted persons, attempting to master the loss of control they have experienced in adoption, frequently engage in power struggles with adoptive parents and other authority figures. They may lack internalised self-control, leading to a lowered sense of self-responsibility. These patterns, frequently passive/aggressive in nature, may continue into adulthood.

For adoptive parents, the intricacies of the adoption process lead to feelings of helplessness. These feelings sometimes cause adoptive parents to view themselves as powerless, and perhaps entitled to be parents, leading to laxity in parenting. As an alternative response, some adoptive parents seek to regain the lost control by becoming over-protective and controlling, leading to rigidity in the parent/adopted persons relationship. Silverstein/Kaplan

### **Control**

When the adopted person develops a deep sense of mistrust, they see the world as unreliable and unpredictable. This builds an inner need to be on guard and in control at all times. A form of control madness emerges that can become com-pulsive, eventually resulting in severe relationship problems.

Many adopted persons believe their lives were controlled and manipulated from the beginning with the original separation from their biological roots. Not knowing why they were placed for adoption...they feel victimized and helpless for being so cruelly manipulated through adoption. This may result in the adopted person becoming very much out of control, or the opposite may occur so that he becomes too controlling of others. Carlini 1997 p84

#### **Need for control a key issue**

Control is another key issue for adopted persons, who, from the time they are born, are moved about without any say in their fate and forced to live by the strictures of a contract they never signed. As children, they feel controlled by adoptive parents who cannot or will not tell them what they need to know.

Gratitude is the unspoken currency they are expected to pay. Once they move out of the adoptive home, they are determined never to go into emotional debt again. I remember the man who stressed how much he loved his adoptive parents, only to blurt out later in the conversation: 'Adoption I hate it. The lack of control. I had no control when I was dumped and no control over who picked me up.' Despite having a Ph.D. and law degree, he changes jobs every few months and disappears periodically from his marriage. Like so many adopted persons, he takes control by not letting himself be controlled by any situation or person...Lifton 1994 pp116-117

#### **Need to be in control at all times**

Having been manipulated at the beginning of their lives makes some adopted persons manipulative and controlling. Families of acting-out adopted persons will know what I am talking about. There seems to be an almost desperate need to be in control at all times. Some adopted persons control situations by becoming isolated and detached, while others are more overt in their controlling mechanisms. In the first case there seems to be a need to avoid being in a situation again which might trigger rejection and possible abandonment, while in the other there seems to be a need to relieve anxiety by getting the inevitable abandonment over with. In both cases the adopted person feels like a victim desperately trying to gain some control over his situation.

Parents and clinicians should not dismiss the feeling of victimization on the part of the adopted person as a rationalization and a means of avoiding the resolution of conflicts with his parents. They should, instead, first acknowledge the child's feelings, then go on to the interpersonal problem. Verrier 1993 p97

#### **Control foil for abandonment**

One of the ways in which children (and adults, too) try to prevent future losses is to try to be in absolute control of every situation...At times my daughter's need to be in control seemed like a matter of life and death. Nothing I suggested, from what food to eat to which clothes to wear, was ever right. And yet, she could never really make up her own mind. Getting ready to go anywhere became a nightmare. Verrier 1993 p78

#### **Desperate need of control**

I hear similar stories from many, adoptive parents. The simplest household decision or suggested deviation from routine becomes an immense struggle for control. It isn't just a matter of opinions or taste, it is a matter of survival. The child was not in control of the situation at the beginning of his life, and look what happened! It becomes intolerable to these children ever again to allow anyone else to be in control of their lives. They fight it at every turn. These struggles can be won by neither parent nor child, because if the parent gives up and allows the child to decide for himself, the issue then becomes, 'You never help me,' or 'You don't really care'. Parents often feel as if they are in a Catch-22 situation. Verrier 1993 p79

#### **Battle for control**

This appears to the parents like obstinacy, which technically it is, but it emanates from a tremendous fear on the part of the child of another abandonment. That which looks to parents like hatred, rejection, or insolence has at the root of it an enormous dependency and need for acceptance, yet a lack of trust in those upon whom the child is supposed to depend. If the parents' need for acceptance rivals that of the child's, the problems become almost intolerable for everyone concerned. For adopted persons, the need to defend against the possibility of abandonment or other losses intrudes into almost every relationship, beginning with that of the adoptive mother and including their relationships to friends, lovers, and even themselves. Verrier 1993 p79

#### **Not in control of life. Life isn't fair!**

This feeling has a paralyzing effect on an adopted person because even though he/she tries to control their environment, they still *don't feel as if they are in control of their life*. Their striving to be complete was disrupted by someone taking over their life and altering it forever. This feels unnatural and may stymie the natural continuity of developmental tasks, such as learning the relationship between cause and effect or, more personally, that their actions have consequences for which they are responsible.

While the rest of the family may feel as if the adopted person (if he is the acting-out type) is controlling the whole family, taking up everyone's space, and requiring 90% of the attention the adopted person himself may feel completely at the mercy of circumstances beyond their control. They may have feelings that life isn't fair, or that they really can't help what they are doing. Verrier 1993 p98

#### **Poor frustration or impulse control**

Adopted persons often have poor frustration tolerance or impulse control. This means that the slightest thing, such as difficulty in tying their shoes or finding an object, may make them inappropriately angry and reactive. It also means that they lack the inner brakes on impulses that might normally be expected for their age group. In other words it is easier for them to control the rest of the family than it is for them control themselves. One way that they do this is by making the whole family give in to their behavior in order to avoid conflict over mundane things. It is difficult for them to take responsibility for themselves,

especially as children and adolescents. It isn't a question of mind over matter, as many parents suspect. Adopted persons really don't feel as if they have any control in their lives. They really do feel like victims, so they react angrily to that feeling of helplessness. Verrier 1993 p98

#### **If they are compliant**

The 'walking-on-eggshells' type, however; they may appear to be overly responsible. Rather than it being due to a healthy integration of the relationship between cause and effect in the normal sense, however, this overly responsible behavior may be a response to anxiety. It may be due to the feeling that the original cause of their abandonment was that they were defective, so that in effect they now have to be perfect. As Rick said, 'I knew I had to be a better person than the one who was given away.' Verrier 1993 p98

#### **Reluctant job applications**

As adults, adopted persons sometimes find themselves to be perennial students, never quite figuring out what they want to do in life. Often even the idea of applying for a job or going to an interview fills them with dread. The fear of rejection paralyzes them, leaving them again feeling a failure. One mother said, 'Alan used to tell us constantly that he couldn't wait until he was 18 so he could move out. Now he's 23 and is still here. He lies in bed until noon, always promising to go out and look for a job. What can we do? We don't want him to feel like we're abandoning him.' Verrier 1993 p99

#### **Dilemma pushing a child out**

This is, indeed, a dilemma for families who are actually aware of the delicate balance between abandonment and the need to push for their children to grow up and take responsibility. The adopted person will often vacillate in his response to the parents by either telling them that they can't run his life or accusing them of not caring. Children who do leave home often do so as a defense against being kicked out, rather than as an appropriate response to the current stage of their developmental process.

Before one can truly separate, one must first connect, and I think that for many adopted persons, the inability to really bond with their adoptive mothers leaves them feeling as if they are not yet ready to separate. And if they are not ready to separate, how can they be autonomous, independent, adult beings?

Being adopted sometimes makes an adopted person feel as if he is perpetually a child. As B.J. Lifton says, 'Who has ever heard of an adopted adult?' The adopted person didn't choose the circumstances of his life, and he feels as if he is powerless over them even as an adult. Verrier 1993 p99

#### **Dual control**

The adopted person with dual identity often creates a dual control system. The trouble is there is likely to be considerable incompatibility between the two system. As with aircraft, incompatible control systems are likely to have serious consequences.

## DEFENCE MECHANISM

Carlini—"The adopted person begins to reject a buried part of their personality, the True Self, because no one around them can validate those special feelings which they have hidden. This part of their psyche begins to shut down and is harshly treated by the conscious mind should it try to surface. In its place an exterior personality emerges which enables the adopted person to pretend the hurt does not exist. In this manner in the False Self appears. Many adopted persons create a False Self which will accommodate a false sense that allows them to pretend they were doing well, when they were not. To keep the facade working, several defense mechanisms are used to survive the inner pain while protecting the True Self from being traumatized.

#### **Needs trigger defense mechanisms**

- 1 A constant search for ways to reduce the stress.
- 2 A drive to deny and distort reality.
- 3 A tendency to operate on a subconscious level.

Rationale defense mechanisms are actually a technique which the subconscious mind uses to hide feelings and memories which are unacceptable and intolerable to the conscious mind. Part of the recovery involves learning to recognize the various defense mechanisms which are used over the years by the individual. The second task entails learning techniques which allow the adopted person to let go of these mechanisms which keep them from alienating themselves from reality and from their own self.

#### **Basic defense mechanisms**

**1 Repression** If the adopted person learns to repress all their feelings towards being adopted and dreads to confront those feelings, they set up a system of repressions or hidden feelings they cannot handle in the conscious mind. As long as the feelings remain deeply buried, they are terrified of facing them or experiencing them as part of their own existence. In doing this, they cut themselves off from a part of self. The repression of emotions, memories and thoughts then becomes part of their facade... In the process they have disowned a part of themselves to protect their self-esteem.

**2 Disassociation** When an adopted person becomes aware of an emotion that is painful or threatening to their self-esteem, they will intellectualize it by saying 'I think it is sad that...has never met her birth mother because I think she needs to.' This induces a state of disassociation which enables them to escape from their own experience. It is an attempt to keep the feeling unreal, meaningless and out of their awareness. They do not want to face the fact that they are the one who needs to find their own biological family. When this occurs, the adopted person is seeking to escape from their inner experience and is switching their focus to another person by making statements about the other person's presumed intentions, feelings or needs. They do not want to face their own pain.

**3 Denial** Using the defense mechanism of denial allows the adopted person to deny his innermost feelings about

having been adopted. Denial then sets up an internal system within the psyche that enables the mind to push the feelings down inside and ignore them. The denial stage occurs when the adopted person tries to block out any painful thoughts about being adopted. They will do so by making statements such as 'Being adopted doesn't bother me'...When the adopted person makes such statements, they are trying to convince themselves that being adopted does not make them different, nor that it troubles them. However, inwardly, they are undergoing many conflicting thoughts and feelings. *Denial is the shock absorber of the soul.* It is the protective reaction to loss, pain and change. It protects us against feelings too powerful to handle at the moment.

**4 Intellectualizing** indicates a need of adopted persons to convince themselves and others that being adopted has had no effect on them, that it was the best thing that could have happened to them. This provides an unnecessary explanation for the issue, even if they are uncertain it is the truth. They say what they think others want to hear.

**5 Projecting** When the adopted person is projecting they repudiate an unwanted impulse by attributing the impulse to someone else. Thus, 'I don't want to find my biological family because they don't want be found' a projection that, in reality, may cover up the opposite feeling.

**6 Disowning** When the adopted person represses thoughts and memories they consider humiliating or shameful, they disowns a part of themselves to protect their self-esteem.

**7 Isolation** Is the separating of an idea from its emotional content while the memory of the unwanted impulse remains. All feelings connected with it are pushed out of conscious awareness.

**8 Avoidance** By avoiding discussions about adoption issues, the adopted person escapes dealing with the feelings and emotions attached to them.

**9 Reaction formation** By over emphasizing the opposite impulse, the unwanted impulse can be kept out of the conscious mind by exclaiming, 'I don't ever want to find my birth mother'.

**10 Numbing** Adopted children often try to shut out the subject of adoption. They separate one part of themselves from the rest of the self a pattern known as dissociation, disavowal, numbing, or splitting. Clinicians are agreed that children cannot form a healthy sense of self if they must disavow reality, yet this is what adopted children are asked to do. They are too young to articulate what is going on inside them, but adult adopted persons, looking back in sorrow as much as in anger, understand what they did to survive... D.W. Winnicott and R D Laing both used the terms True Self and False Self to describe the split in the human psyche that many children make. I believe it is more accurate to call the split in the adopted child Forbidden Self and the Artificial Self, neither of which is completely true, or completely false.

All of the above defense mechanisms serve to keep the body's system in balance, even if it is only on a dysfunctional level." Carlini 1997 pp42-43,51

## FANTASY

### Reality/Fantasy

People automatically try to piece a picture together or draw a conclusion from the information at hand. If pieces are missing, they will seek or create replacement pieces. If reality is not available, fantasy will take its place. It is not unusual for triad members to cherish the pieces of reality that they do have. Something, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, is better than nothing at all.

Russell 1996 p64

### Fantasy important aspect of life

Without the ability to fantasize life becomes very dull. It is part of imagination, and with no imagination there is no vision. Fantasy, imagination and vision are closely linked and help fan the spark of life into a more vibrant living flame. The novel from the writer's pen, the invention of the scientist, art, music and drama have a strong and important element of fantasy. Fantasy can become a fool's paradise, or maybe a source of intense fears, tensions and inability to cope with realities.

### Fantasy in adoption triangle

Causes complications in adoptive relationships where secrecy denies any solution, therefore the fantasy, being the actual truth, ever remains a possibility. Lack of factual information stimulates and feeds fantasy. If truth is denied then one can only imagine what it must be. Fantasy becomes an important preoccupation in trying to fill secret gaps in reality, imagination and fantasy is nearest we can get to reality in such circumstances. Adoption fantasies can affect adopted persons, birth parents and adoptive parents, and may range from the sublime to the horrific.

### The Family Romance

Lifton—All children keep some kind of secret place tucked away to which they can escape and fantasize about having better parents, especially in midchildhood when, as Freud told us, children begin to look at their parents more critically. They imagine that such insensitive people could not possibly be their real parents; that they were probably just dropped off by parents of noble birth, who will soon return to claim them.

Freud called this the family romance. The adopted child's family romance has much in common with other children's, with the difference that the adopted person lives in actuality the family romance that other children live in fantasy. The adopted person really does have another set of parents out there somewhere. The adopted person's fantasies begin when the child learns of his adoption, not in midchildhood, when most children struggle with their ambivalence about their parents. Their fantasies differ from those of the nonadopted in that they are negative as well as positive, and usually about the mother. The lost mother may be a famous movie star or a favourite teacher, but she can also be a prostitute or a drug dealer... Adopted persons fantasies, which reflect one's deepest hopes or fears, can fluctuate with one's moods. Lifton 1994 pp60-61

### **Fantasy structure of adopted self**

Adopted children spend an exorbitant amount of psychic time in fantasy. They may seem to be sitting quietly in their rooms, or just looking out the window, when really they are deep in the Ghost Kingdom imagining scenarios that might have been or still might be.

Jung said that fantasies are the natural expression of the life of the unconscious. I see adopted persons fantasies, both positive and negative, as an essential part of the building blocks of the developing self, as the fragile center beam around which the edifice of the adopted self is built. These fantasies are not just the passing fancies with which most people empower themselves at various periods of their lives but actual reality for the adopted persons inner; secret self. They are the mother replacement: the comfort zone that the mother did not provide. They serve the function of the surrogate rag doll that experimental monkeys are given after the real mother has been taken away. They are also a form of grieving, of conjuring up the lost mother; in the same way that children grieving for lost parents are known to conjure up their ghosts.

Adopted persons fantasies serve a different purpose from those of the non-adopted: they are an attempt to repair one's broken narrative, to dream it along. They enable the child to stay magically connected with the lost birth mother. Guntrip distinguishes healthy fantasies from pathological ones. The healthy ones prepare us for action in the outer world; the pathological ones are accompanied by withdrawal from the real world to avoid working things out. The adopted persons fantasies, based as they are in the Ghost Kingdom, cannot connect with the outer world. They run the danger of becoming pathological when they interfere with the child's functioning in everyday life." Lifton 1994 pp62-62

### **Positive fantasies**

Sometimes a young child reveals a cherished fantasy when she does a school assignment...Often adopted persons fantasize that they might encounter their birth mother by chance in some public place...Adopted persons hold on to positive fantasies of their birth parents as an escape from the mysterious reality in which they find themselves, and as a way of holding on to some self-esteem. Some adopted persons have serial fantasies-running scenarios that they add to and change over the years. Lifton 1994 pp62-63

### **Negative fantasies**

"Have a way of intruding into positive ones, because they are the ones that adopted persons fear are true. The very anonymity of the birth parents, people with no names or faces, devalues their status, and suggests that it is lower than that of the adoptive parents. The shame embedded in the secrecy surrounding an adopted persons identity can taint self-worth, which is tied to that of those missing parents...

When adopted persons' fantasies are negative they denigrate both the adoptive parents and the unknown biological parents, as well as the adopted persons themselves: in addition, the adopted person may also show self-denigration and self-blame as a 'rejected' child of the natural par-

ents and as an artificial child of the 'pretend' parents. The boundaries between who is the real parent and who is the real child, between reality and fantasy, may be blurred where reality has been validated or anchored in fantasies and where familiar secrecy surrounds adoption. Lifton 1994 pp63-64

### **Mystery of reality**

The blurred boundaries that adopted persons struggle with contribute to what Robert J Lifton calls the mystery of reality. 'The adopted persons condition highlights questions about what is reality for all of us. Their struggle to grasp cognitively what is real is an extreme version of what everyone is struggling to grasp'. He believes that we are separated from animals by our ability to reconstruct reality through images. These images are influenced by the culture around us. Natural children, who have parents, siblings, and other blood related relatives, are grounded in a reality from which they can spin their images. But adopted persons do not feel grounded or connected by any such reality. Much of their imagery is not centered on the adoptive family in which they live as if they belong, but rather in fantasy and imagination. They have a sense that their very perceptions are deceiving them. They have lost the ability to distinguish between what is real and what is supposed to be real. Lifton 1994 p64.

### **Adolescent fantasies**

The emergence of self-centered interest and emotional turmoil, normal in adolescence, is more profound in the adopted person. Their sexual preoccupation encompasses the mystery of their own conception and birth and creates a closer identity with their birth parents. As they speculate about their relationship, an adopted person may fabricate to their heart's content, for there are few facts to refute their fantasies as so little is usually known about his birth parents. Adolescent fantasies seem to be of two extremes, either the birth mother was an actress and beautiful woman of the world, or she was a lowly street walker. It is unfortunate that adopted persons, down-grading themselves, usually assume the latter. From early childhood they have picked up social attitudes which perceive parents of illegitimate children as low class Burgess 1976 p92.

### **Answer to fantasy is facts**

Continued secrecy of origins may be in the worst interests of the child and adoptive parent, resulting in unnecessary prolonged suffering to both. In extreme cases, the child could continue to focus all positive feelings on the fantasied 'good' natural parents and all the negative feelings on the adoptive parents, resulting in rejection of the values and prohibitions of the adoptive parents. The main reason for persistent adopted person related fantasies is the lack of factual material on their own background. If all background material is suppressed then the adopted person is forced to fill in the gaps with imagination and fantasy. The greater the secrecy, the greater the fantasy. Fantasy may provide its own satisfaction for a time; when that is no longer so, or when it becomes an obsession, then more concrete steps may need to be taken to search out the facts of truth and reality.

**Adoption fantasy starts about age eight**

Having another real set of parents somewhere doesn't seem to register full force until a child reaches roughly the age of eight, the first point in an adopted persons life at which he may 'go underground' and begin to have fantasies about whom his other parent are. This is the time that children commonly begin imagining that the woman down the street could be their biological mother, or daydream about her whereabouts or about finding her someday. Gediman/Brown 1991 p55

**Daydreaming**

One last school issue that we commonly see for adopted children is daydreaming. Adoption is an archetypal theme. We find it in mythology, biblical stories, and fairy tales. It is a theme that occurs again and again in children's literature and film. When adopted children watch these movies or read these stories in school, they have a tendency to identify with them and to lose focus as they daydream. Daydreaming is a normal occurrence for people who are kept from knowing the truths of their lives and who are living with fantasy. It is a way to reframe things that are hard to understand and to compensate for things that are painful. For many school-aged adopted children, daydreaming is a very understandable and necessary strategy for doing the extra work of forming identity. Pavao 1998 p49

**Other parents not a fantasy**

In the case of adopted children, however, the idea of other parents is not a fantasy at all. For the adopted, the knowledge that there are living, breathing people out there-another mother and father is a basic and very real truth, and one that must be dealt with. What usually happens is that, in the absence of specific or detailed factual information, adopted persons turn to fantasy to conjure up these parents. Fantasy fills the informational void, and adopted persons are known to spend vast amounts of emotional energy exploring and living with their fantasy creations, not just in childhood but as adolescents and adults as well. The fantasy parents that most of us fleetingly encountered, then left behind, years ago, become a prominent part of the adopted persons psychological landscape, all the more powerful because there really is another, unknown set of parents somewhere.

It is probably impossible for those of us who are not adopted to fully appreciate what it means to know that the parents with whom you grew up, the people whose name you bear, are not your natural parents. The idea that we could just as easily have been someone else-a person with a different name, a different set of parents, in a home with different characteristics, different siblings, different traditions, is not an idea that most of us dwell upon because, in some fundamental way, we accept the fact that we are who we are. Gediman/Brown 1991 p44

Fantasy becomes an important preoccupation in trying to fill the secret gaps in reality. It may provide its own satisfaction for a time; when that is no longer so, or when it becomes an obsession, then more concrete steps need to be taken to search out the facts or truth and reality.

**Also see 'Fear of abandonment not a fantasy' p7**

**FICTION****Definition**

Fiction is "A supposition known to be at variance with fact, but conventionally accepted for some reason of practical convenience." Oxford English Dict Vol V p872

**Legal fiction**

Legal fiction is a device used to simplify the application of a statute. With adoption, legal fiction provides a simplistic solution to the transfer of parental rights from the birth parents to the adoptive parents, 'as if' the child was born to them in lawful wedlock. For most legal purposes the persons birth relatives cease to exist and are replaced by new adoptive relatives, 'as if' the adopted person had been born into the adoptive family. This produces a mixture of truth and fiction that is impossible to weld into a consistent whole. Welding concepts of truth and fiction together produces junction points of tension, inconsistency, and incongruences that are prone to fracture. On the one hand the legal fiction provides a simplistic model for adoptive relationships, on the other hand fiction becomes part of the adoption foundation and creates elements in conflict with truth and reality. While the legal fraternity know 'legal fiction' is but a legal device, the public and social workers often treat legal fiction as fact and reality. It becomes to be believed as 'the truth' rather than as 'the fiction' it is. This also is apparent in some Judicial comments and decisions that either through constraint of statute or misunderstanding of the nature of adoption have come to findings that uphold fiction rather than truth and reality.

**Legal fiction became general fiction**

The 'legal fiction' served a defined legal purpose, as a device to clarify the legal status of the adopted person and adoptive family relationships. The major difficulty arose when social workers and adoptive parents, ignoring the legal constraints used 'legal fiction' as both a device and justification for turning fiction into fact. The transformation of legal fiction into a general fiction is a delusion that became adoption policy and practice. "The original adoption law introduced a simple *legal* fiction, in which the idea of an adopted person becoming 'as if born to' the adopters was a legal concept only. But gradually this turned into a *general* fiction, involving a web of pretense and denial." Else 1991 p181

**Why use legal fiction?**

The purpose of the legal fiction is to try and ensure that the adopted child will have the same rights and privileges as if they were born of the adoptive parents. It's a way of transferring parenthood that would not otherwise be allowed under Common Law. It can also be a legal shortcut to avoid major re-drafts of important Statutes, thus providing minimum upset to established case law.

**Difficulties of legal fiction**

Fictional statements cause complications in personal relationships, courts and statutes: To maintain a fiction we have to create more fiction. The basic legal fiction of adoption, the 'as if' born to, generates six other fictions.

**Fictional relations in non relative adoptions—**

- *Adopted persons* are the natural child of their adoptive parents, when in fact they are not.
- *Adopted persons* have consanguineous blood relationship with adoptive parents, in fact they do not.
- For *adoptive parents* that the adopted child was naturally born to them, when in fact it was not.
- That *adoptive parents* have a consanguineous blood relationship with the adopted person when in fact they do not.
- For *birth parents* the fiction they never gave birth to the child, when in fact they did.
- For *birth relatives* the fiction they have no biological relationship with the adopted person, when in fact they do.

**□ Genealogical metamorphosis**

Legal pruning and grafting of family trees. In acute form when adopted by your grandmother she becomes your mother, your birthmother becomes your sister, your aunts and uncles become your siblings, your birth mother's other children that were your siblings now become nephews and nieces. Also known as *adoptio chameleonitis* a complication of *legalitis*, in Maori *whaka-papa pakaru*.

**False birth certificate**

Since 1915, when an adoption order is made, the birth entry of the adopted person is re-registered in the adoptive names, and the adoptive parents names replace those of the birth parents. A birth certificate certifies the date and place of birth, the birth names of the child, and the identity of the birth parent. Until 1962 the names of parents on the new birth entry certificate were listed as 'Adopting Parent', however under the Adoption Regulations Amendment No.1 1962/91 the words 'Adopting Parents' may be omitted from copies of the birth entry if the adopting parents so request on their Application to Adopt Form.1. While this was provided to avoid possible embarrassment, it creates a false impression that the named parents are in 'fact' birth parents, whereas they are 'fictional birth parents.' Some jurisdictions would regard such a birth certificate as false documentation, as the certification of the birth parents is false, and the 'birth name' certified may also be false. However, within New Zealand the re-birth entry certificate has full legal status by Statute.

**Fictional blood relationships**

For the purposes of determining marriage relationships, adoptive relationships become blood relationships. The adopted person, by adoption receives the 'fictional blood' of the adopting family, and is thus brought by fiction within the prohibited degrees of consanguinity.

**Conclusion**

It would be preferable that the Legislative/Judicial System did not have to resort to legal fiction concerning adoption. No amount of legal fiction can alter facts. However, due to the very nature of adoption, it seems inevitable that a degree of legal fiction must be used. My plea is that we need to be open about it, acknowledge the fiction and not compound it by creating more fiction, or conceal it from the parties concerned. KCG

**FORGIVENESS**

The victim who won't forgive will often live in psychological bondage to the victimizer, leading to a kind of paralysis. C S King. "

Carlini—One of the final steps of recovery is learning to forgive. Sometimes this is a hard step because the adopted person has to do it when they are ready and not before.

**Who do I forgive?**

**Self** Forgive themselves for acting out over the years.

**Birth mother** She may need a little compassion because she, too, has suffered...as a result of the separation. It is ironic to think the adoption agencies in the past told the birth mother she would not be bothered by the separation and would be able to go on with her life. This is not the way it happens, however. When the birth mothers began calling the agencies following the surrender of their babies, the agencies wanted nothing more to do with them. The mothers were told that they had made the decision to relinquish their babies and they must live with it. There was no such thing as post-adoption counselling.

**Adoptive parents** Some adopted persons may feel the need to forgive their adoptive parents for having put such high expectations on their lives. They probably wanted their adoptive children to be the best they could be, but to the adopted person the message is, 'I wasn't ever good enough because I couldn't live up to their expectations.' Sometimes adoptive parents need to go through a recovery process themselves to understand what the primal wound does to adoptive children. They must realize that much of the trauma the adopted person feels is out of his control. There is nothing they can do to heal themselves on their own. This must be done by the adopted person and the birth mother. When the adoptive parents tells them they should not have this or that feeling about being adopted, the feelings only get driven further into their subconscious and they begins to act out in other ways.

Some adoptive parents feel they were not good parents over the years because of the problems the adopted person had. In this case they cannot own a problem entirely that is not of their causing. In many cases they reacted to how the adopted person acted out and they would put more limitations on them, not realizing the problems had nothing to do with them or their attempts to discipline or direct the adopted persons life.

Another problem the adoptive parents may have in a reunion between the adopted person and the birth mother is the issue of their own infertility which caused them to grieve over their failure to have any biological children of their own. I believe this is one of the reasons adoptive parents may have such an ownership problem with adopted persons. They feel the adopted person may choose to leave them if the birth mother enters the picture.

**Let resentments go**

When discussing forgiveness, we are not talking about a mushy, sentimental process, but rather a heartfelt effort to

## FORGIVENESS

try to let go of the old resentments and anger harboured inside the adopted person and all others involved. Letting go of this resentment and anger allows the final flow of the frozen emotional energy from the subconscious. Once this forgiveness is acknowledged as being real, the adopted person is filled with a positive healing energy that propels them onward to a happier future.

### Accepting the past

Forgiveness is the beginning of acceptance of the past. It frees the adopted person from the crippling emotional wounds of the relinquishment and allows them to let go of anger, guilt and shame from the past so it will no longer contaminate their future. This blocked emotional energy can be transformed into empowering energy, allowing them to live in the present and create a new functional life-style.

### Giving up old tapes

Resentment causes them to replay old tapes over and over in their mind, giving the past memories more power to destroy the present and future. Forgiveness, in this sense, gives them permission to let go of past disappointments while dreaming new dreams of the future. When they delve into who they truly are, they realize they are a multifaceted person, so much more than just a victimized remnant of a past injustice...Once they can forgive themselves and others involved, they can let go of the locked-up emotions attached to their adoption and are able to let go of the painful parts of their old identity. This allows them to use their new attitudes and insights to mould themselves in a new image.. In forgiving themselves and others, they allow themselves to relinquish the side of their identity which was causing them pain and creating resentment towards others. They are now able to function outside of the victim stage.

### Takes time

Learning to forgive does not happen quickly. It may take much longer for one adopted person than it does for another. Forgiveness is simply the end product of the healing process. They are not asked to forget how being adopted affected them over their lifetime. Rather, there is a lesson to be learned in what happened and it can never be undone. It did change their life forever. Now is the time to take all the inner negative energy and turn it into positive healing energy. Many do this by reaching out to help other adopted persons or birth parents who are experiencing the same pain. In helping someone else, we help ourselves.

### Love released

Towards the end of the recovery process as the adopted person lets go of all their blocked emotional energy from the subconscious and allows themselves to go through the forgiveness process, a real sense of love and acceptance emerge within. These feelings may be so powerful, they are uncertain as to how they should use them. This is the manifestation of unconditional love of one's self in spite of the past. This love extends to others who they felt hurt them in the past. They know they are at the end of the healing process when this happens. Carlini 1997 pp127-132

### Closing the wound

*Trauma of finding out one's adoptive status as an adult.* In any transgression there comes a time when we must decide what to do with the anger, resentment, and bitterness that consumes us. To consider forgiveness can seem almost inconceivable. Don't we have a right to consider some offences unforgivable?

As much as we may deny it, a lack of forgiveness may signal that something more is going on besides our rightful and understandable refusal to forget what has been done to us. There are several reasons why an adopted adult may actively or unknowingly avoid forgiveness.

### Why we choose not to forgive-

our parents for the secret they kept from us because our unforgiving can be used to punish them. Conspicuous absence at special family gatherings, avoiding phone calls, forgetting special occasions, all are passive ways to pay back our parents for the 'crime' they committed.

*We may choose not to forgive* our parents because by denying forgiveness, we allow ourselves to feel power over them, a power that was originally denied us.

*We have been victims of lies, deceptions, and even reality.* Once the secret is out, we may sense a feeling of power over those who previously owned it.

*We may choose not to forgive* our parents because it may seem we condone what they did, letting them off the hook.

*We can choose to stay angry and distant* due to the incredible sense of betrayal. Doing so assures us the walls will stay up; the distance will be maintained. We can continue to inflict pain as a reminder of wrongdoing.

*We may choose not to forgive* our parents because forgiveness is difficult work. It requires us to walk on a road paved by uncertainty and to face personal issues of our own honesty and intimacy all without any guarantee of mutual receptivity.

*Extending an open hand of forgiveness* places us in an extremely vulnerable situation. Seemingly irreparable damage may have been done through word and actions motivated by hurt and betrayal. Our work then becomes to evaluate if taking the risk by admitting our own wrongdoing is worth it. Schooler 1995 pp116-7

### Stories of forgiveness

Other adults who have made this difficult journey through forgiveness have discovered powerful, healing principles. D.W 'Walking around angry at my parents squanders my precious energy, confuses my emotions, and depletes my physical health. To forgive is to clear a space for change to occur. Plants need to be pruned so that light can filter through the remaining leaves and reach the soil where new life is struggling to grow. Forgiveness does not happen by reading a book or by doing any one thing. Any wound, any rip in the fabric of a relationship takes time to heal. And it takes work. Festered wounds need to be opened and drained, cleaned out and exposed to fresh air and light. I've learned to accept that the journey toward forgiveness begins in pain. And I've been able to see that these uncomfortable feelings do not last forever.' Schooler 1995 p118

## GHOST KINGDOM

### Hereditary ghost

The impact on the child is to erase their natural background, strip them of their heritage, and deprive them of their 'genetic ego'. As one adopted person put it, 'I felt airy, floating, disembodied. I had no roots, only a legally contrived identity'. Adopted persons can end up in a mysterious void of the unknown, wrapped in secrecy, legal fiction and legalised ignorance. "The trauma and severing an individual from their racial antecedents lies at the core of what is peculiar to the psychology of the adopted child" *Clother Mental Hygiene* No 27 (1943) p222

Cutting off the adopted persons genetic roots became an obsession with the social work and legal profession in the 1950's and 60's. It is now hard to rationalise and impossible to justify the obsessional wanton destruction of the adopted persons past identity, contempt of human rights and humiliations incurred. All claimed to be done in the *best interests of the child*. The destructive effects of this warped ideology and practice continues to echo through the lives of most adopted persons life.

### Ghost mothers and fathers

Mothers and fathers, the bodies and lives from which the children came, are ghostlike, having no substance, no faces, no names, no personally delivered history and most important of all for some children, can offer no explanation of the parental absence. Assumptions in and about this silence are made. Silence engenders whispering. Like the whispered message passed from ear to ear which is transformed, amplified or reduced on its way, what passes for information or explanation bears little resemblance to the reality of its source. Despite this unreality, what is believed to be real is very real in its consequences. Kate Inglis 1984 p13 'Living Mistakes- Mothers who consented to Adoption' George Allen & Unwin Sydney NSW

### Adopted persons ghosts from the past

During the debate on Adult Adoption Information Bill, the Leader of the National Opposition, and ex Minister of Justice referred to searching adult adopted persons as ghosts from the past. "Women who live in real fear of an approach by ghosts from the past." Hon J McLay Nat. *NZPD* Vol.457 21/9/1984 p435

### Ghosts of adoption and exorcism

"In my book *Journey of the Adopted Self*, I speak not of adoption games but of adoption ghosts. In many ways this book is a ghost story, for it tells of the ghosts that haunt the dark crevices of the unconscious and trail each member of the adoption triangle parents and child alike wherever they go. Unless one is aware of these ghosts, one will never be able to understand or to help the child who is adopted, the parents who adopt, or the parents who give up a child to adoption." Lifton 1994 p11

### Who are these ghosts?

*The adopted child* is always accompanied by the ghost of the child he/she might have been had he/she stayed with their birth mother and by the ghost of the fantasy child his adoptive parents might have had. He is also accompanied

by the ghost of the birth mother; from whom he has never completely disconnected, and the ghost of the birth father; hidden behind her.

*The adoptive mother and father* are accompanied by the ghost of the perfect biological child they might have had, who walks beside the adopted child who is taking its place.

*The birth mother* (and father; to a lesser extent) is accompanied by a retinue of ghosts. The ghost of the baby she gave up. The ghost of her lost lover; whom she connects with the baby. The ghost of the mother she might have been. And the ghosts of the baby's adoptive parents.

All of these ghosts are members of the extended adoptive family, which includes the birth family. We are dealing with exorcism here; with placating hungry ghosts; with making the unconscious conscious. We will see how adopted persons cope with these ghosts as they struggle to put together an authentic adopted self. Lifton 1994 p11

### The Ghost Kingdom

Lifton—Carl Jung said that among all possible ghosts that haunt us, the spirits of the parents possess the greatest significance. Having been banished from the adopted child's everyday world by the closed adoption system, the birth parents become little more than 'Hereditary ghosts,' the Finnish psychiatrist Max Frisk labeled them. I call the spectral place in which these ghosts reside as the Ghost Kingdom. It is an awesome sphere, located only in the adopted persons psychic reality.

❑ The Forbidden Self, and occasionally even the Artificial Self, slips into the Ghost Kingdom to rendezvous with the lost mother and the lost baby, who never had a chance to grow into the child it should have been. One man described it as 'a forbidden world, like a hole-wonderful, terrifying, ghostly that you could fall into completely.' Once there, it is not necessarily a peaceable kingdom, for the adopted person is free to express not only love but anger at being, as one woman put it, 'cast out into the world with strangers.'

❑ Like children of Holocaust survivors who lead double lives, one in the present-day experience and one in the 'time tunnel' of an imposed identity with the dead children they replace, adopted persons live their everyday experience in their 'pretend' family and another in the 'time tunnel' of the Ghost Kingdom they share with the idealized and denigrated birth parents. If we can grasp the unreality of the realm wherein adopted persons perceive their most real selves to reside, we will understand the adopted person's own sense of unreality and how, at any age, conscious thoughts of reunion with the birth mother back in the womb, which the Ghost Kingdom represents, can bring with them terrifying images of disintegration into nothingness...

❑ Adopted persons may go in and out of the Ghost Kingdom as they go back and forth between the Artificial Self and the Forbidden Self at different periods of their lives. For example, they may be compliant as children and then, in an adolescent struggle for authenticity, rebel against the adoptive parents, whom they see as inauthentic and a barrier between them and their authentic self..." Lifton 1994 pp57-59

## GRIEF

Grief is a natural reaction to experiencing a loss. Grieving is a healing process that takes courage and vulnerability. Loss and grief are core issues in adoption. Russell 1996 p41 “We are healed of suffering only by experiencing it to the full”. Marcel Proust.

### Definition

Etymologically, the word mourning means ‘to remember’ and stems from the same root as memory. In mourning we are held in the memory of what has been lost or abandoned until we have found a replacement for it. Mourning occurs whether we have ever experienced actual death or not. Mourning and depression are the other names of abandonment. Verrier 1993 p39

### Grieving in adoption

Grieving in adoption is different in some distinct ways from mourning the death of someone who has died. When someone dies, there is a definite ending that allows grieving to begin. In adoption, there is no death, no ending. In adoption, a state of limbo exists that is similar to the dynamics of mourning someone who is missing in action. Not knowing where the person is or if they are alive blocks the grieving process. It is difficult to mourn someone who is alive but unavailable... In adoption, loss and grieving issues can occur and recur at any time. Sometimes people are able to grieve at the time of adoption. For others, the time of search reactivates feelings of helplessness and loss. Some triad members describe reunion as bittersweet, because it brings up previous sad feelings along with the joy of reunion. Regardless of when a triad member feels the feelings of grief, it is important to honor them. Feelings don't always know the difference between past and present. Acknowledging and expressing feelings allows the grieving process to proceed and healing to take place. Russell 1996 pp46-48

### Every loss in adoption must be grieved

The losses in adoption, however, are difficult to mourn in a society where adoption is seen as a problem-solving event filled with joy. There are no rituals to bury the unborn children; no rites to mark off the loss of role of caretaking parents; no ceremonies for lost dreams or unknown families. Grief washes over triad members lives, particularly at times of subsequent loss or developmental transitions.

Triad members can be assisted at any point in the adoption experience by learning about and discussion the five stages of grief, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance (Kubler-Ross 1969).

Adopted persons in their youth find it difficult to grieve their losses, although they are in many instances aware of them, even as young children. Youngsters removed from abusive homes are expected to feel only relief and gratitude, not loss and grief. Adults block children's expressions of pain or attempt to divert them. In addition, due to developmental unfolding of cognitive processes, adopted persons do not fully appreciate the total impact of their losses into their adolescence or, for many, into adulthood.

This delayed grief may lead to depression or acting out through substance abuse or aggressive behaviours.

Birth parents may undergo an initial, brief, intense period of grief at the time of the loss of the child, but are encouraged by well-meaning friends and family to move on in their lives and to believe that their child is better off. The grief, however, does not vanish, and in fact, it has been reported that birth mothers may deny the experience for up to ten years (Campbell 1979).

Adoptive parents' grief over the inability to bear children is also blocked by family and friends who encourage the couple to adopt, as if children are interchangeable. The grief of the adoptive parents continues as the child grows up since the adopted person can never fully meet the fantasies and expectations of the adoptive parents. Silverstein/Kaplan

### Adoption created through loss

Without loss there is no adoption. Birth parents lose the child. Adopted persons lose their birth parents. Adoptive parents lose the child that should have been born to them, also loss of fertility. To come to terms with loss requires grieving. Until recently adoption policy has ignored loss and grief. Adoptive parents are expected to be happy; adopted persons are expected to be grateful; and birth parents are expected to forget and get out. The grieving is further complicated by the fact that there is no end to these losses. The reality of the adopted persons unresolved grief for their birth parents has been largely ignored by professionals. Becoming disconnected from one's ancestry is perhaps the loneliest experience known. It is like floating in time and space without an anchor. Small 1987 pp33-41,46.

### Grief issues for adopted persons

The reality of the adopted persons unresolved grief for their birth parents has been largely ignored by professionals. But I have found grief work very much alive in adoption support groups, and within my own experience. I have found underlying some key adopted person tensions is unresolved grief. I believe the high degree of frustration often experienced in getting adopted persons to fully work through key issues such as rejection, anger, suppression of feelings, denial, and identity conflicts, is often the failure to recognise the underlying grief. Many a time an adopted person working with a counselor or group, will be on the verge of crying, but at the same time banging their heads against a brick wall. I found that probing the underlying grief normally brings the brick wall crashing down in a flood of tears. In many cases counseling of adopted persons fails to reach the inner core of healing because of the suppressed grief residing therein. KCG

### Need to mourn

The infant's memory of the biological mother has not been understood by most social workers or adoptive parents. Little has been written about the consequences which might ensue as a result of the original separation from the biological mother. It has been assumed that any deprivation which might have occurred could be overcome by the adoptive parents. Many adoptive parents are still operating from

## GRIEF

the same ignorance... 'What does a tiny baby know?'. That an adopted child would grieve has not been adequately addressed in the literature. Yet for a child, absence and death may amount to the same thing, and the *memory of the loss of the original mother may be imprinted in his psyche and cells*. Although the baby cannot communicate this memory to the adoptive mother, it is best to assume that the baby is in a state of grief. The need to attach should not cloud one's understanding of this. The loss is real and the need for mourning acute. Verrier 1993 p39

### Unacknowledged grief

The child's experience of the loss of the biological mother may be the precipitating factor which disposes adopted persons to emotional disturbance. In the relationship between mother and infant, after all, it is the mother's role to prevent the occurrence of traumatic events which might hinder normal psychological development. The birth-mother's failure to prevent, and, in fact, inadvertently to cause, this traumatic state may set the stage for the child's future failures to successfully integrate events pertaining to separation and loss. Because few adoptive parents realize that their baby is experiencing loss, they do nothing to acknowledge that loss or empathize with it. Yet it is possible that much of that which constitutes pathology in adopted children, such as depression, anxiety, and oppositional disorder, could be interpreted as an attempt to deal with that loss. Verrier 1993 p40

### Impact of unconscious memories

For those children adopted during the first two or three years of life, whose conscious memories do not include that initial separation, the ability to deal with subsequent losses may be greatly hindered. In any case, the inability of the baby to deal with their loss, the tendency of the child to fantasize about the birthmother, and the compulsion for many adult adopted persons to reconnect with the biological mother are normal responses to the severing of that first connection and should not be seen as pathological. Verrier 1993 p40

### Psychosomatic response to loss

Many adopted persons spontaneously mentioned having some kind of chronic illness as children, which often persisted into adulthood. The symptoms mentioned included stomach aches, chronic headaches or migraines, allergies or asthma, chronic fatigue, immune deficiencies, eczema or hives, tics, and stuttering...The most reported chronic somatic or physical disorder was stomach aches.

If a person is conscious of the nature of a dangerous situation, they react with fear and their gastric activity shuts down. They can respond to the danger by either fighting or fleeing. But if a person, like the adopted person, has no conscious memory of the source of that fear (the fear of abandonment), they may experience that fear as free-floating anxiety in which gastric activity works overtime. The resulting pain or illness is different from hypochondria, in which the symptoms are imagined. These illnesses are real, but the cause is psychological, rather than organic. Verrier 1993 p43

## Stages of Grief

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross identified five stages of the normal grieving process; Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance. These five stages can be worked through in any order. Some stages may be revisited, but typically people pass through all the five stages in their processing of grief. Russell 1996 p42

Carlini identified seven stages for the normal grieving process of adopted persons; Shock, Denial, Anger, Remorse, Survival, Recover and Integration. Mental health professionals have long known that when we experience a major loss, we pass through seven stages of grief. Not everyone experiences them in the same way; nor do they start and end the same. Without realizing it most adopted persons also go through these stages of grief and may be in one of them. Although some show no expression of adoption related grief, for many others the pain is present and disturbing. Many may remain in the denial stage for years. Carlini 1997 p32

### Shock

The first stage of grief, is entered when the adopted person is initially told they are adopted. Children adopted as infants do not have a frame of reference as to what it is like not to be adopted. Consequently, before the proper grieving can begin, they must develop an internal mental picture of what it is they lost at the time of adoption. The concept is gathered through thoughts, fantasies and mental images about the birth parents and their own past. This information is usually provided by the adoptive parents when they feel he/she is at an age to cope with the information. As the adoptive parents were not always told the true story nor the whole story about the birth mother, they can impart to the child only what they themselves were told. When a mental image emerges in the adopted persons mind, the first stage of grieving, shock, is set in motion. Carlini 1997 p33

### Denial

The denial stage occurs when the adopted person tries to block out any painful thoughts about being adopted. They do so by making statements such as 'Being adopted doesn't bother me.' When they make such statements, they are trying to convince themselves that being adopted does not make them different, nor that it troubles them. However, inwardly, they are undergoing many conflicting thoughts and feelings. *Denial is the shock absorber of the soul*. It is the protective reaction to loss, pain and change. It protects us against feelings too powerful to handle at the moment. Carlini 1997 p34

The incident or feelings are kept out of one's awareness. Denial is protective in that it helps people to function when the truth or clarity would be too much to handle. Staying in denial, however, has negative consequences. To ignore important issues and feelings is like having an elephant in the living room that no one talks about. Everyone walks around it and pretends it isn't there even though it's in the way of everything. Russell 1996 p43

## GRIEF

### Anger

During the anger stage of grieving, adopted persons may demonstrate emotional disturbances and behavioral problems. My research- 45% of those surveyed behaved aggressively over the years. Their aggressive actions were a means to express the anger they felt towards the birth mother, the adoptive parents or the adoption system which prevented them tracing their biological roots. Many intentionally sabotaged their own lives by being argumentative, having sexual encounters, fighting with adoptive parents or running away...Others became socially withdrawn and alienated. Some used mind altering substances to numb the emotional pain. Carlini 1997 p34

The second stage of grieving is anger. Anger is the feeling that a situation is unfair and should not have happened. It is common in the anger stage to look for someone to blame other than oneself. Anger can also be very motivating and inspire one to take action. The anger stage can help people start taking better care of themselves or decide to make changes in their life. Many worthwhile organizations have grown out of the energy that anger can produce. Russell 1996 p44

### Bargaining

Involves trying to find ways to undo the situation by searching for trade-offs. Being in the stage of bargaining means the person is no longer in denial. There is a real awareness of the loss, bargaining is an attempt to control a situation that feels out of control. Russell 1996 p44

### Remorse

Arises through the sadness of not knowing the history of your biological roots. The adopted person often longs for the unknown birth mother to fill the space that seems so empty. Tears must be allowed to flow at this stage. They free up more positive energy to alleviate the inner pain. Preventing relief from this pain can leave the adopted person 'frozen' in it. Carlini 1997 p35

### Depression

There is a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness about the situation. These feelings may come and go or seem to be constantly present. Depression is the stage that most people associate with the grieving process. Sometimes physical symptoms such as lack of energy, a change in eating patterns, and wanting to sleep a lot can accompany the emotional signs of depression. Some people experience mood changes, inability to concentrate, a feeling of tiredness, a lack of interest in usual activities, and feelings of intense sadness. It is important to honor this phase of grieving even though it can be a difficult one to experience. Going through the depression will help this stage pass. Trying to avoid the depression means that it will most likely return at a later date. Russell 1996 p45

### Acceptance

Acceptance means feeling that the situation is resolved to some extent. It is no longer the main focus. There is room for other activities and interests and a balance has been achieved. The goal of acceptance in adoption is not to forget the person or that an adoption has taken place. That would bring one back to the stage of denial. The goal of

acceptance is to honor and integrate the people and experience of adoption. Russell 1996 p46

### Survival

When an adopted person reaches the survival stage of grief, they have probably used many coping skills and ego defenses to hide their feelings. They have learned how to deny, adapt, pretend and numb out... Each person is born with a biological blueprint, predisposing them to certain personality traits. As they grow older, adopted persons sense their personality differences from their adoptive family... They struggle to be like the other family members so they will be totally accepted...When all else fails, they numb out and turn to fantasizing about their biological family. Carlini 1997 p36

### Recovery

The adopted person is searching to discover how they really feel about having been adopted. They are ready to examine and work through those feelings to resolve their inner turmoil. Carlini 1997 p37

### Integration

The adopted person begins to take on new perspectives for their life. They are able to integrate the two sides of their personality into one. In this process they form the basis for a new belief system which can now become a strong foundation on which to change their life, their attitudes, and their behaviors. Carlini 1997 p37

### Stages of infant grief

The severing of connection initiates a grieving process for both mother and child. Babies who are separated from their mothers demonstrate several stages of grief, which correspond to those seen in adults but are more difficult to discern. Verrier 1993 p40

### Protest

The initial response is one of protest and an urgent effort to recover the lost mother. Verrier 1993 p40

### Despair

Although there is still a longing for the lost mother, the hope of being reunited with her diminishes. The child stops crying and, instead, becomes withdrawn, depressed, and detached. If, after the loss, the child is put into the consistent care of another mother-figure, they will be aloof and distant with her for some time, but will eventually attach to her. There is still a difference, however, between the attachment the child will make to the adoptive mother and that with the first mother. John Bowlby, puts it this way: 'Provided there is one particular mother-figure to whom he can relate and who mothers him lovingly he will in time take to her and treat her almost as though she were his mother.' That 'almost' is the feeling expressed by some adoptive mothers, who feel as if they had accepted the infant as their child, but that the child had not accepted them as mother. The aloofness or lack of response to affection is often felt by the mother as rejection, yet it is the result of an important defensive process in the child as part of mourning. He is defending against vulnerability and further loss. Verrier 1993 p41 For detailed study See 'Grief' 'NZ Adoption 1840-1996 p238-238F KCG Also See 'LOSS' pp40-41

## GUILT SHAME & BLAME

The sense of deserving rejection leads triad members to experience tremendous guilt and shame. They commonly believe that there is something intrinsically wrong with them or their deeds that caused the losses to occur. Most triad members have internalised, romantic images of the family which remain unfulfilled because there is no positive, realistic view of the adoptive family in our society.

For many triad members, the shame of being involved in adoption per se exists passively, often without recognition. The shame of an unplanned pregnancy, or the crisis of infertility, or the shame of having been given up remains unspoken, often as an unconscious motivator.

Adopted persons suggest that something about their very being caused the adoption. The self accusation is intensified by the secrecy often present in past and present adoption practices. These factors combine to lead the adopted person to conclude that the feelings of guilt and shame are indeed valid.

Adoptive parents, when they are diagnosed as infertile, frequently believe that they must have committed a grave sin to have received such a harsh sentence. They are ashamed of themselves, of their defective bodies, of their inability to bear children.

Birth parents feel tremendous guilt and shame for having been intimate and sexual; for the very act of conception, they find themselves guilty. Silverstein/Kaplan

### Feelings of guilt and shame

Guilt and shame in the adopted person stem from the original abandonment and loss. This excessive internalized shame often manifests itself by obsessive control and perfectionism. p28. A person feels guilt because he did something wrong. A person feels shame because they are something wrong...To overcome this sense of shame and guilt, the adopted person must...accept that their life had simply produced a different set of circumstances to which they alone must give reality... Taking power and responsibility for one's own life leads to being proud of who you are. When a sense of owning one's self emerges, along with unconditional love for one's self, feelings of shame and guilt disappear. Carlini 1997 p86

### Guilt and shame

Guilt is not a feeling, but a judgment against ourselves. Guilt comes in two varieties—

#### Justifiable guilt

Is what one experiences when one has harmed another person or engaged in unethical conduct. It is information that what we did was wrong. When that happens we can make amends and try to avoid repeating the offense. Appropriate guilt is governed by our conscience and makes us accountable for our choices and actions. We can regain a sense of balance by admitting our guilt and making restitution. We can then forgive ourselves and be forgiven by others. There is a sense of integration and closure. Verrier 1993 p191

### Neurotic guilt

Is guilt about something over which we had no control. It leads to blame, not accountability. Instead of leading to reconciliation and integration, it leads to inner conflict and confusion. It cannot be resolved, because either it has no cause in the present or it is a cover-up for other feelings such as sorrow or anger. Verrier 1993 p191

### Shame different from guilt.

We feel guilty for what we did or imagined that we did; we feel shameful for who we are. It is the difference between doing and being. Shame serves no useful purpose, because it cannot be integrated. It tells us that we are not worthy. It lowers our self-esteem and sabotages our sense of Self. This is the judgment or belief that many adopted persons have about themselves because they were given up for adoption. They couldn't have done anything too terrible, since they were so small, so that means that they must have been terrible. They need to remember to ask themselves: How terrible can a baby really be?

If a birthmother feels shame, it is probably from some early belief about herself, not because of the relinquishment. Relinquishment is an act, which might lead to guilt. Guilt is one of the things which many adopted persons say gets in the way of their relationships with their birthmothers after reunion. An adopted person can never really talk to his birthmother about his true feelings, because that brings up his mother's guilt, and then he has to take care of her. Sometimes her guilt is a mask for intense feelings, such as anger or sorrow. It disguises her lack of control over something that happened to her. Having a semblance of control, even if it means experiencing guilt, sometimes seems preferable to feeling as if she had no control, or experiencing the painful truth of her situation. Verrier 1993 p191

### Healing guilt and shame

In order to be healed from the paralyzing effects of guilt, we must first ascertain whether it is an appropriate adult response to a hurtful deed, or if it is a neurotic means by which we deny truth, avoid responsibility, or mask a more painful feeling. We will have to determine whether what we are experiencing is guilt or shame. Then we will be able to resolve the conflict and promote healing. *The healing for guilt is forgiveness; the healing for shame is acceptance.* Verrier 1993 p192

### Guilt and shame for adopted persons

Actually, while guilt is often predominant for both birth and adoptive mothers, it is probably shame which is felt most by adopted persons. What is the difference between them? The easiest way to understand this is to think of the difference between doing and being. One may feel guilty for what one has done or caused, but shame for who one is. Shame is connected to an adopted persons belief that he or she is unlovable: He is ashamed of who he is.

### Guilt may be appropriate

In fact it is often helpful in one's holding to one's moral code. If one hurts someone, for instance, it is appropriate to feel guilty about it and hopefully refrain from doing it again. Guilt is inappropriate, however, when the person

## GUILT SHAME & BLAME

feeling guilty has had no real control over whatever happened: children feeling guilty about their parents' divorce, for example. Verrier 1993 p94

### Shame at being a reject

"Shame is a completely useless feeling, because it means that a person is ashamed of the very core of their being. Adopted persons are quite familiar with this feeling. It is the feeling of being the 'bad baby,' the baby who wasn't good enough to keep. The adoptive parents' assurance that he/she was chosen, that he/she is special, that they truly love and want him/her is to no avail. Jeannette put it this way, 'Oh yeah, my adoptive parents said that they loved me, but let's face it, who can really love a reject?' Part of this feeling of shame has to do with the feeling of incompleteness which follows the premature separation from the birthmother. Something is missing. There is a feeling that they are disabled or handicapped. They are not whole or wholesome. They are defective, impaired, fragmented. Often the search for the mother is an attempt to heal this defect, mend the wound, perfect the imperfect." Verrier 1993 p94

### Healing rests with the adopted person

There is no way for others to convince adopted persons that they are wonderful, lovable, beautiful people...The only sure way for adopted persons to rid themselves of shame is for them to work it through for themselves. It is not enough for adopted persons to gain acceptance from others; ultimately they must learn to love and accept themselves. Verrier 1993 p95

### Needing to Blame

People typically blame others when they feel helpless, out of control, and scared. Blaming is an important part of moving through the feelings that arise in adoption. Blaming can be a way of dealing with the anger that is part of the grieving process. Sometimes other triad members are the targets of blame until the person is able to take on the responsibility of his or her own feelings.

The structure of adoption creates a fertile atmosphere for blaming. Continuing to blame leads to unresolved anger that builds and grows and isolates people. It is important to move through blaming to a place of understanding and responsibility. Taking responsibility involves courage, awareness, and the ability to tolerate uncomfortable feelings within one's self. Russell 1996 p59

### Shame and defectives

Shame is the uncomfortable or painful feeling that we experience when we realize that a part of us is defective, bad, incomplete, rotten, phoney, inadequate or a failure. In contrast to guilt, where we feel bad from doing something wrong, we feel shame from being something wrong or bad. Thus guilt seems to be correctable or forgivable, whereas there seems to be no way out of shame.

Shame is universal to being human. There is a powerful shame aspect to adoption. If we do not work through it, by expressing and sharing it with safe and supportive people and then let go of it, shame tends to accumulate and burden us more and more, until we even become its victim.

### Source of shame in adopted persons

"It is a very heavy feeling, this pervasive sense of shame. It is the ongoing premise that one is fundamentally bad, inadequate, defective, unworthy, or not fully valid as a human being. The feeling of shame is not about what we did or did not do. It is about our very selves. It is about who we are. Shame tells us we are unworthy, horribly unworthy. 'Shame is without parallel- a sickness of the soul.'

Adoption exposes a person to this invisible sense of shame. Why? Because the most conspicuous way for a parent to create shame within a child is to turn his back upon him, to fail to take responsibility for him, according to Lewis Smedes...Adoption, by its mode of creation, constructs this perception within a child that translates into shame.

Another source of shame for many adopted adults is the feeling that they never were what their adoptive parents had hoped for. They never measured up to the child their parents could not conceive. This left them with the awesome pain of not only never 'being' that dreamed-for child, but never 'doing' the right thing.

Guilt for the adopted person is rooted not only in a sense of never doing the right thing-never measuring up within the adoptive home-but in feeling that even as a small child she or he caused the breakup of the relationship within the birth family. Schooler 1995 p19

### Overcoming feelings of shame

They are fluid feelings that never stay in their own place quite the way our labels want them too. One feels guilty for something he has done, and he feels shame for being the type of person who would have done it. As an adult, facing feelings of shame can be a freeing experience. Smedes suggests three discoveries a person can make about himself-

□ 'I am someone to whom someone made an unconditional commitment from the beginning.

□ I am someone whose parents consider me worthy of the love they give.

□ I have the power to own myself. I take responsibility for my life, I am proud to be who I am, and I have joy in being myself" Lewis Smedes *Shame and Grace: Healing the Shame We Don't Deserve* Harper Row 1993 p71 cf Schooler.p20

### Shame

Is the great unknown human emotion, it's about hiding, blushing, scurrying away...Shame is the uncomfortable or painful feeling that we experience when we realize that a part of us is defective, bad, incomplete, rotten, phoney, inadequate or a failure. In contrast to guilt where we feel bad from doing something wrong, we feel shame from being something wrong or bad. Thus guilt seems to be correctable or forgivable, whereas there seems to be no way out of shame. We all have shame. Shame is universal to being human. If we do not work through it and then let go of it, shame tends to accumulate and burden us more and more, until we come its victim. In addition to feeling defective or inadequate, shame makes us believe that others can see through us, through our facade, into our defectiveness. C Whitfield "The Child Within" 1989 p44

## IDENTITY

### 'Who am I?'

Self-identity is the essence or core being of a person. Who I perceive is the real Me. Our Self-identity supplies the drive and coordination to live, grow, achieve, love and have relationships. Self-identity is a key factor in self-esteem and wholeness.

Adopted persons face a more complex task in their search for self. The ability to cope fully with different life situations or enter relationships with others is largely dependent on the strength and quality of our self-identity. Adopted persons often have a Swiss cheese identity- there are holes in it.

### Centre of personality

The concept of the self is central to the notion of personality. Typically, a sense of self requires an element of self-reflection, a consciousness that can't exist without words or symbols. A self-concept comes when a person can almost step out of their body and look at them self to form an image. However, some aspects of the self begin in infancy, long before a child is capable of this symbolic self-reflection. Brodzinsky et al

### Self includes several components

*Physical self*, includes awareness and perceptions of one's own body: how it looks, feels, sounds, smells, tastes.

*Psychological self*, includes notions of our own intangible qualities, including what we call our personalities: our view of our intelligence, our capacity for empathy, our ability to control impulses, our generosity or lack.

*Social self*, includes our awareness of ourselves in relation to others and our view of how others see us. Includes whether we feel liked, think we are attractive, whether we believe others think us to be kind, friendly.

**Self esteem** The overriding, evaluative component of the self that integrates the other three. This represents our judgements about whether aspects of ourselves are good or bad, likeable or dislikable, valuable or not. Self-esteem plays a major role in patterns of psychological adjustment. To feel good about yourself fosters healthy development, to feel bad about yourself - especially about a component of yourself that your value, tends to undermine psychological well-being. Brodzinsky et al

### Search for self universal ongoing

"For adopted persons and non-adopted persons alike, an understanding of the self is one of the primary tasks of psychological development. Our sense of who we are is influenced by every experience we have, it's changed each time our life circumstances change. And it's not just major life events - birth, death, marriage, and adoption that have an effect on our sense of self. The accumulation of small events that we often take for granted, every compliment, every rejection, every accomplishment, every failure contributes to our self-perception."

cf Brodzinsky-Schechter-Henig *Being Adopted: The Life Long Search for Self* 1992 Ch.1. N.Y. Doubleday

### All adopted persons have a divided self

It is an inevitable consequence of the adoption process. The split between genetic reality and adoptive reality. Birth parents provided every gene in their body, genetic personality traits and the first nine months of nurturing. Adoptive parents then take over the full nurturing role. The adoption process has continuing life long consequences. Resilient adopted persons come to terms with the reality of their dual origins and divided self. They seek and obtain the truth of their origins, reconcile their duality and affirm their true self-identity. KCG

### Complete break legacy

A major component in creating the adopted person's divided self was the complete break ideology that became an obsession in legal and social work professionals in the 1940s to 1980s. It is now hard to rationalise and impossible to justify the destruction of the adopted persons past identity. The destructive effects continue to echo throughout the lives of many adopted persons.

**Complete break adoption** *Exclusive adoption*. 1940s-1980s An impenetrable wall of secrecy was built between the Original and Adoptive Self. The adopted persons identity is with the adoptive family *as if* born to them. The birth family is *as if* dead to them.

**Adult Adoption Information Act** 1985 enabled adult adopted persons and their birth parents access to identifying information. Reunions helped many adopted persons reintegrate their Self-Identity.

**Open adoption** *Inclusive adoption*. 1985> All parties remain in some degree of contact. Adopted persons still have to work thru their dual identity but an open inclusive adoption circle helps the process. Various forms of open adoption have now become the preferred option.

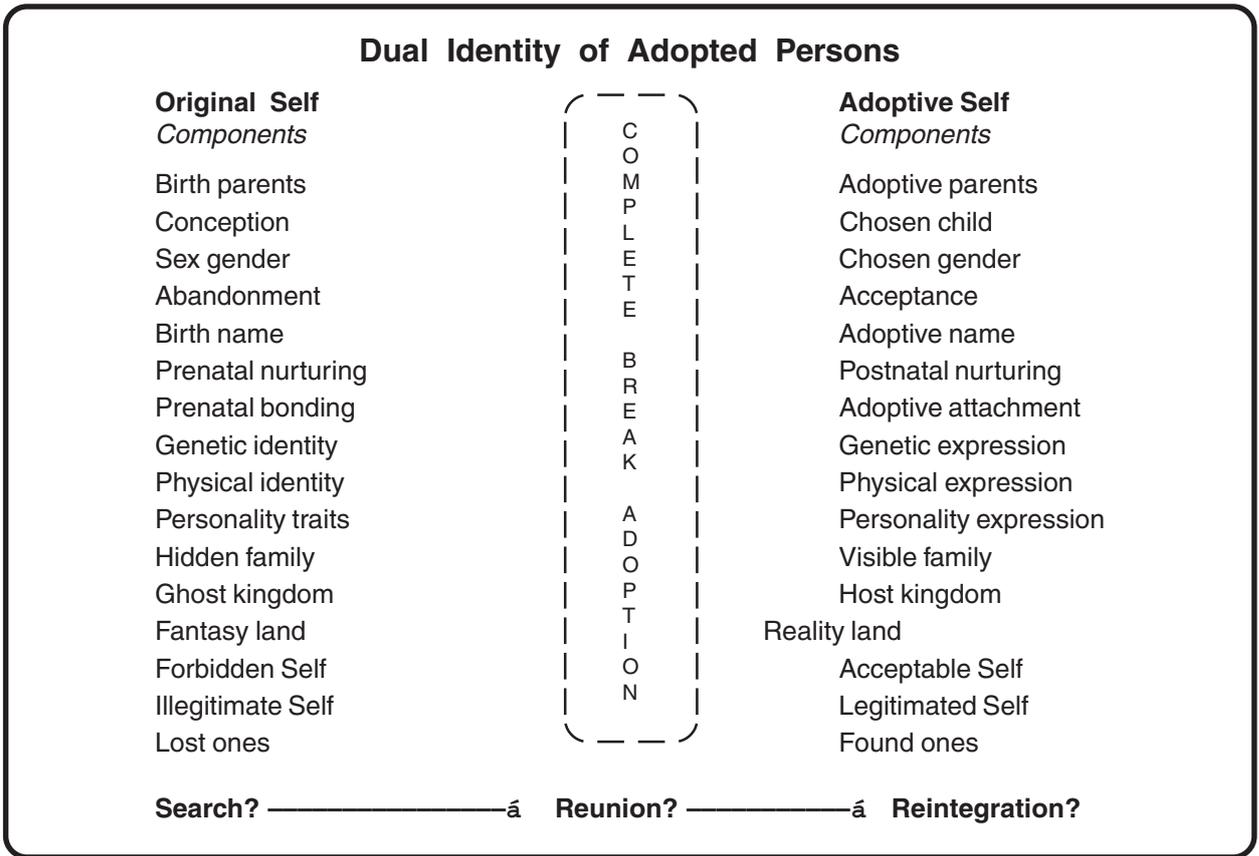
### When does Self begin?

Prenatal? At birth? or only when we can talk and reflect? There are three hypotheses—

❑ **Baby merged with mother** For some months after birth, the infant remains *psychologically merged* with the mother. The infant, in the first year, gradually begins to experience themselves as being separate from their mother rather than as an extension of her. cf Verrier p28

❑ **Dual unity with mother** At birth the Self core being of the infant is not yet separate from the mother but psychologically contained within her. The relationship is *dual unity*, the mother not only acts as the child's Self, but actually is that Self. An uninterrupted continuum of being is necessary for the infant to experience a rightness or wholeness of Self from which to begin their separation process. cf Verrier p29

❑ **Separate Self** The infant has a sense of separateness from conception. The Self emerges. Between 2 and 6 months, senses a core Self as a separate, physical unit, followed by a subjective Self. At 7 to 15 months it adds a capacity for psychological intimacy to that of physical intimacy. cf Lifton p29. There is truth in each option, the pragmatic solution a working combination of all three.



**The Original Self**

The Self that might have been had it not been separated from the birth parents. Some components are listed above. The original self remains alive within the adopted person. Some components are visible but much is hidden, denied, suppressed or forbidden. All components continue to influence the conscious or subconscious life of the adopted person throughout their life.

**Repression of original self**

For persons adopted under the complete break system much of their Original Self was hidden, denied, suppressed or forbidden. There was no choice, it was enforced on them by order of the court and social policy.

*The result was—*

Much of the Original Self went underground for vitality and authenticity, harboring a jumble of fantasies about the birth parents and the life that might have been. It maintains its identity and freedom by being transcendent, unembodied, can never be grasped, pinpointed, trapped, or possessed.

Much of the original self is hidden so it cannot be flushed out and destroyed. It refuses to disavow the reality that it has other parents somewhere or to abandon what it feels to be its true, or potentially true Self.

Breakthroughs. While most adopted persons try to please their parents, at some point the frustration, sadness, and anger of being cut off from the reality of the past becomes too much for them and they can't pretend any more- aspects the original self breaks through in protest. cf Lifton 1994 p56

**Abandonment of original self**

There is no more consequential step than abandoning the original self. The child forced to give up the original self cannot develop feelings of belonging. There is instead a feeling of basic anxiety, of being isolated and helpless. Adopted children often try to shut out the subject of adoption. This mean that they must separate one part of their self from the rest of the self-a pattern known as dissociation, disavowal, numbing, or splitting. Clinicians are agreed that children cannot form a healthy sense of self if they must disavow reality, yet this is what adopted children are asked to do. They are too young to articulate what is going on, but adult adopted persons, looking back in sorrow as much as in anger, understand what they did to survive. cf Lifton 1994 p51

**Premature Self development**

The trauma of the lost mother may trigger in the baby premature ego development for Self survival. No matter how much loving care they receive the experience of abandonment keeps them ever vigilant. They equate Self-sufficiency with Self-survival.

**The survival bind**

Having to live in two worlds at once, inner and outer, drives a child to I seek compromise positions in an attempt to hold on to both worlds. Adopted children try to straddle the two worlds for a while. They ask questions over and over in an attempt to make some sense of what has happened to them. They may even think that a mistake has been made and that the 'first' mother will come back for them. cf Lifton 1994 p49

## IDENTITY

### The Adoptive Self

A person adopted into a closed adoption system is shaped by its myths, secrets, taboos and denials from first conscious memory and even before. Denied their *Original self* and placed in a new family they adapt by developing an *Adopted self*.

#### **Exclusive Adopted Self** *Closed adoption denial model*

The Self is built upon the adoptive components. The original Self is denied, suppressed and excluded. It is consistent with complete break adoption ideology, whereby the adopted persons identity should become *as if* born to the adoptive parents. Adoptive parents were assured this would happen if they were 'good' parents. However, it denied reality and created an incomplete artificial Self. Some manifestations of the Exclusive Adoptive Self—

An **Artificially** created *as if* Self living *as if* born to the adoptive family. Structures its psychic reality to match the adoptive family.

**Compliant** Does what the family expects and fits in at any cost. Conforms and performs to other peoples perceptions and expectations. They cannot say 'Accept me for what I am and not what you want me to be'.

**Avoids confrontation** Senses what's acceptable and what's not, and will do anything to avoid confrontation.

**Feelings** Some feelings are suppressed or confused. Strong, authentic, spontaneous feelings require a resonance with the whole Self.

**Denial** May claim adoption makes no difference to them. May stop asking any questions about adoption or origins.

**Perfect child** May behave like the perfect child but feel empty within. May look real to others but does not feel real, having suppressed important parts of themselves.

**Inner void** Having abandoned their need to know their origins for the sake of their adoptive parents, they are left with a void in the centre of their being.

**Protective walls** are built around the Adoptive Self and fortified with denial. However, major life crises can create waves of reality that break through the walls and disintegrate an artificial Self.

**Reverse role model** Some adopted persons do not fit in and may rebel. They may reject their family role model and adopt an opposite role model. If they feel rejected they may identify with the rejected, join them, and live out some of the worst fears of their adoptive family.

#### **Inclusive Adopted Self** *Open adoption reality model*

The advent of open adoption has encouraged the development of an *Inclusive Adopted Self*. The adopted person is encouraged to include both the adoptive and original components. This model accepts the important contribution from both sides of the divided Self and attempts to reconcile and integrate them into a whole person. Open adoption is not a panacea for identity resolution but can alleviate some of the negative effects of closed adoption.

### Self Identity Structure

**Physical** Who do I look like? Adopted persons look in a mirror with no one to compare, not knowing where the face that stares back comes from.

**Genetic** Inherited genes determine our complete physical being and significant parts of our personality. Genetic identity can only be found in our birth ancestors.

**Sexual** From adolescence, sexual maturity in adopted persons stirs up questions and fantasies about the mystery of their own conception and birth.

**Medical** Many medical conditions are genetic. Genetic history can be of very important in diagnosis and treatment. Ignorance can have fatal consequences.

**Social** Adoption is a social arrangement, not a natural process. Adopted persons experience minority status and discriminatory laws re birth social identity.

**Cultural** Cross-cultural adopted persons exposed to their birth culture experience strong resonance as they discover where part of themselves belongs.

**Psychic/religious** Adopted persons often span conflicting religious beliefs and have a psychic sensitivity to the ghosts of the past and the what might have been.

#### **Dual identity- two worlds**

**Two people** Adopted persons may feel they are two different people. May feel like one person on the inside and another on the outside, one hidden and the other visible.

**Two sets of parents** Adopted persons must integrate two sets of parents within their self-identity structure. They may model themselves on the only parents they know, but cannot obliterate the reality of their birth parents.

**Two mothers** Adoptive persons normally have two real mothers, one conceived them and brought them into the world, the other nurtured them and brought them up.

**Two fathers** Adoptive persons normally have two real fathers, one responsible for their conception and the other responsible in bringing them up.

**Two names** Adopted persons have birth names conferred by their birth parents and adoptive names conferred by their adoptive parents.

**Two birth certificates** Adopted persons have an original birth certificate with birth family names and an adoptive birth certificate with adoptive family names.

**Two family trees** Adopted persons have two family trees, genetic and adoptive. They perch ambivalent in both because they know they can never fully belong in either.

**Two cultures** Transracial adopted persons, need to understand, accept and relate to both their birth and adoptive cultures. Search for identity is a Bi-cultural journey.

**Two clans** The adopted persons full extended family includes a whole *birth clan* of father, mother, siblings, grandparents etc plus their whole *adopted clan*. Both clans have their own culture, traditions, values and history.

## Dualities of adoption

Adoption is filled with dualities. Adopted persons are chosen while being rejected. Birth parents walk away from their children because they love them. Adoptive parents believe that adoption is positive while they mourn the possibility of biological children. The emotional feelings and issues in adoption are ever present and constantly reveal themselves. Resolving the dualities of adoption would be impossible. The best goal in dealing with these dualities is to acknowledge them and integrate them into one's life. Russell 1996 p61

### Effects of impaired self identity

**Confusion** Identity confusion makes it more difficult to form and sustain close relationships.

**Anxiety** Being unable to orient yourself in your own existence creates anxiety, insecurity and hyper-vigilance.

**Detachment** Being cut off from your origins creates feelings of detachment, alienation, or not belonging anywhere or with anyone.

**Lostness** Some adopted persons feel they are an orphan on a voyage to nowhere, rootless, and restless.

**Emotions** If some components of Self are suppressed, the person can become emotionally frozen.

### Effects of dual identity

**Alienation** If parts of the Self are denied or suppressed we become more dysfunctional and alienate Self.

**Isolation** A person forced to suppress or deny parts of Self finds it difficult to develop a sense of belonging.

**Diffusion** Dual identity diffusion, makes commitment to a particular identity, or set of moral values difficult.

**Dissociation** Separation of parts of Self can develop an independent existence and create multiple personalities.

**Disavowal** There can be no healthy sense of Self if you must disavow reality, yet this is what we are asked to do.

**Splitting** The tension of holding two self identities may become so great that they split apart.

**Ambivalence** Dual identity with dual value systems and life-styles creates ambivalence in decision making.

**Numbing** When conflicts build up within the divided Self adopted persons may drive feelings underground and numb out for protection - switch off to those around them.

**Being and not being** For some purposes the adopted person is the child of the adoptive parents, and for others the child of birth parents. Can never fully belong to either.

**Abandonment** Already abandoned by the birth mother, the adopted child may feel no choice but to abandon her, but in so doing, abandons part of their real Self.

### Luck of the Draw

Many factors influence how much *splitting* adopted children do and how well they cope. If they have the luck of the draw, they will find themselves placed with parents of similar temperament, talents, and physical characteristics-

parents who are empathic to their needs and not only keep the communications lines open but go out and get the answers to their child's questions...Without the luck of the draw, they may be placed in homes where there is alcohol addiction, emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, divorce, or mental instability.

Adoptive parents are not immune to the vices and pitfalls that claim other parents. How well adopted persons overcome the traumas inherent in adoption and the additional ones they encounter in their families will be determined by their genetic susceptibility to stress- some children have more than others- and their ability to find an empathic teacher, friend, or mentor to give them emotional support. Lifton 1994 p60

### Re-integration of Self

The adopted persons task of integrating their Self requires- That the original self be recovered, accepted and integrated to achieve wholeness of Self-identity.

### Search

The ultimate act of testing reality. A journey toward your unknown parents and your unknown self. Every search has a life of its own, but also something happens to the searcher. Slowly, and painfully, we learn a great deal about yourself.

### Reunion

The reunion between an adopted person and birth parents is an extraordinary experience. A cement mixer of feelings is triggered. You may cry, laugh, be angry, loving, distance and shake all at the same time. The deep feelings and shaking are the surfacing of the deep subconscious issues in adoption.

"Thus the search and reunion constitutes the adopted persons attempt to repair a sense of loss, relieve the sense of disadvantage, consolidate identity issues, including body image and sexual identity, resolve cognitive dissonance, internalise their locus of control, and satisfy the most fundamental need to experience human connectedness, so as to 'close the circle' of their life." Jerome.

Reunion is the most effective way to demythologise the past, dispose of secrecy, fictions, fantasies and ghosts of adoption.

**Sources** - *Journey of the Adopted Self* Betty Jean Lifton. Basic Books USA 1994. *The Primal Wound* Nancy Newton Verrier. Gateway Press USA 1993. *Adoptee Trauma* H Carlini Morningside Saanichton BC Canada 1997

## Identity formation a life long process.

### Identity formation series of "I's"

Most of us don't achieve a uniform Identity with a capital I; instead we come to think of ourselves as different "i's" in different contexts. We might have an occupational identity, a religious identity, an identity having to do with interpersonal communication or basic values or other aspects of our lives...An individual must integrate these various aspects of the self with each other over different points in time. Brodzinsky et al pp102-3

### Teenage identity formation

Establishing one's identity is not something that happens only during a certain period in life. According to author and adoption therapist, Dr. Joyce Maguire Pavao, Identity issues are an ongoing process, they don't just start in adolescence. However the teen years are certainly the major developmental zone for identity formation. It's true that for every young person, they are trying to figure out who they are not and who they are. They are trying to play different roles, experiment with different looks, and figure out who they are along the way.

I think that for adopted persons, especially when there is little to no information about where they came from, there is an awareness that they don't really have the genetic information to do that kind of sorting out of their identity. They are basing it on their family of intimacy- their adoptive family, but that's not necessarily where their abilities, interests, and traits have come from. For some the struggle for identity brings about major behavioral changes...Settling one's identity is more difficult for an adopted teen. For most children the people around them are mirrors in which they measure themselves until the adolescent years. At that point they look in the mirror and see themselves. They become more and more aware of how different they are. I think it is a complicated process for adopted persons during the teen years. It is at this point they begin to realize they do not know another person in the world genetically related to them. Dr M Pavao cf Schooler 1995 pp176-177

### Resolving teenage identity crisis

Dr. James Marcia- Teenagers respond in four basic ways.

**Identity achievement** This person experiences a crisis and tries to resolve it by exploring alternative roles. The identity achiever asks herself, 'What do I believe in?', and then tries on different values and ideologies. After a period of time, she makes a commitment to a particular identity and a particular set of values...This usually occurs in very late adolescence or the early twenties.

#### Moratorium

This person asks "What do I believe in?" but for various reasons puts off making a commitment to any particular path. Remaining in moratorium, is not a permanent solution, since remaining is inherently destabilizing and uncomfortable. Eventually this person moves on to identity achievement or identity diffusion.

#### Identity foreclosure

This person looks as if she has achieved a solid identity because make a commitment to a set of values or a role in life. However, this decision occurs before the individual has really had a chance to experience a "crisis" or other alternatives. Often it is done in an effort to please other family members. An example of identity foreclosure is the individual who goes into the family business because it is expected.

#### Identity diffusion

This person not only avoids confronting the identity "crisis" but is unable to make a commitment to any particular route, career or set of values. Identity diffusion happens

when a teen lacks either a support system that would allow them to ask troubling questions or a parent figure sufficiently appealing to identify with. The child moves through adolescence unsure of what they want, unwilling to confront the options, unable to identify with a nurturing figure because none is available.

**Source** Dr. James Marcia cf Schooler 1995 pp166-7

### True self / False self

Many adopted persons report having difficulty knowing who they really are. They feel that they have formed themselves around the people who had expectations of them, and have tried to follow some unstated rules about who they should be and how they should behave. The fear of rejection and disapproval can force adopted persons to create a false self that is the public face and persona they show to others. The true self is the authentic personality. Adopted persons may have difficulty knowing their true self and may feel more comfortable being the familiar false self. Russell 1996 p72

### Identity issues

It is obvious that identity will be an issue for adopted persons. If you don't know where you come from or who you are biologically related to, it is difficult to know who you are. Adoptive parents are an important part of an adopted person's identity but they are not the whole picture. Biological beginnings determine a great deal about of who a person is. Russell 1996 p72

### Lifelong impact of adoption

Adoption is more than a single event in time marked by the signing of the adoption decree; it has lifelong consequences for all triad members. Even though the legal aspects of adoption are time-limited, the emotional aspects of adoption continue throughout each triad member's life. It is difficult, if not impossible, to shield one's self from the lifelong impact of adoption. Becoming aware of the emotional issues of adoption and embracing them enables people to work through their feelings, express them, and resolve them to the best of their ability...

*Adoption is a second choice* for all the triad members. People do not expect to grow up, get married, and adopt a child. They expect to grow up, get married, and have their own biological children. Likewise, a person does not expect to grow up, get pregnant, and give their child to strangers to raise. It is also expected that families will retain their kinship ties and grow up knowing their biological relatives.

Adoption as a second choice does not necessarily mean that adoption is less than or not as good as non-adoption choices. Taking an alternative path can sometimes lead to amazing experiences and growth that would not have been possible if the original road were taken. pp33-4

It is said that for every adoption that takes place, *fifteen people are affected*. Not only are the primary triad members affected, but so are the people related to them. This includes the birth and adoptive grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, and sisters of the birth and adoptive parents, and any siblings of the adopted person. p21

**Source** Marlou Russell Adoption Wisdom 1996 pp33-4

## INTIMACY

**Intimacy** is not so much a matter of what or how much is shared as it is *the degree of mutual need-satisfaction within the relationship*. Clinebell

It takes knowing who you are to know who you can be with another. So, we either get dependent, mushy and enmeshed and then feel rejected, or we do the opposite and stay in our marginal unattached stance. After all, we fit in two families, or more, while, at the same time, we fit in neither of these families completely. We are excellent bystanders: we can see things from any angle. We make great therapists, great detectives, great friends and family members although we can be hard to live with as we sort out our divided loyalties and losses. Pavao 1998p90

### Factors that impede intimacy

The multiple, ongoing losses in adoption, coupled with feelings of rejection, shame, and grief as well as an incomplete sense of self, may impede the development of intimacy for triad members. One maladaptive way to avoid possible re-enactment of previous losses is to avoid closeness and commitment. Adoptive parents report that their adopted children seem to hold back a part of themselves in the relationship. Adoptive mothers indicate, for example, that even as an infant, the adopted person was "not cuddly". Many adopted persons as teens state that they truly have never felt close to anyone. Some youngsters declare a lifetime emptiness related to a longing for the birth mother they may have never seen.

Due to these multiple losses for both adopted persons and adoptive parents, there may also have been difficulties in early bonding and attachment. For children adopted at older ages, multiple disruptions in attachment and/or abuse may interfere with relationships in the new family. The adopted persons intimacy issues are particularly evident in relationships with members of the opposite sex and revolve around questions about their conception, biological and genetic concerns, and sexuality.

The adoptive parents' couple relationship may have been irreparably harmed by the intrusive nature of medical procedures and the scape-goating and blame that may have been part of the diagnosis of infertility. These residual effects may become the hallmark of the later relationship. Birth parents may come to equate sex, intimacy, and pregnancy with pain leading them to avoid additional loss of shunning intimate relationships. Further, birth parents may question their ability to parent a child successfully. In many instances, the birth parents fear subsequent children. Silverstein/Kaplan

### Difficulty with intimacy

When it comes to thoughts of intimacy, we must all learn how to think in terms of 'we', not 'me'. One of the reasons many adopted persons have difficulty with intimacy is that they need to be in charge their lives and develop a sense of self-worth before they can be part of a team. True love usually requires commitment by both parties. Here again, to commit means to be vulnerable. If the adopted person works out of the fear of rejection, impaired trust,

control...these are obstacles to be overcome before a commitment to change can be made. For example, they may believe that if someone loves them, that person will surely abandon him. As a result they have a strong desire to run, rejecting the other person before he or she has the opportunity to reject them. For some adopted persons, it may be better to go through recovery before entering into a long term relationship. In this way they can get rid of the emotional baggage first, preventing it from interfering with a healthy relationship. Once all the hurt is gone, so much more room exists for love and full commitment. Carlini 1997 p88

### Difficulty giving and receiving love

Giving and receiving love are issues related to boundaries. To love or be loved requires that a person loosen their boundaries. Charles Whitfield *Boundaries And Relationships* feels that we all have a well of love within us at the core of our being. However, before we can reach through to this love, we have to discover who we really are. We have to discover our True Self as we drop the layers that make up the False Self. Carlini 1997 p31

### The impostor: fear of intimacy

A person has to have a good sense of self to be secure enough to get close to another without the threat of being unmasked as a fraud. Adopted persons who have spent their lives covering over their real feelings often avoid intimacy for fear of being discovered for the impostors they know they are. Let down your guard, they think, and everyone will see that under the confident self you present to the world, there is really a weak and frightened child. Better to keep your distance to avoid being abandoned again. Lifton 1994 p115

### Impostor identity

Adopted persons take on the role of the impostor early in life: from the moment they try in earnest to live as if they are a natural member of the family in which they find themselves. Some part of them is acutely aware that they are play acting pretending to be someone they know they are not, while not knowing who they are, 'I spent my whole life trying to act like real people do,' said one woman. And another: 'I've always felt I was given the wrong part in the wrong play. It was a script written for someone else.' Ben remembers feeling like an impostor while standing at a grave with his mother's relatives: 'I was watching them and thinking: 'Who are these people? I don't look like them. I don't belong with them. I was living a lie. And I was playing my part so well, I felt like a heel. I don't think anyone suspected, but deep down I felt I didn't deserve to be loved, respected, or given anything. Because I was really an orphan.'

Feeling the impostor can affect an adopted persons professional accomplishments, as well as their ability to achieve intimacy. No matter how high they climb in their field, they still have the feeling that they put something over on others. Hank remembers feeling like an impostor when he received his professional certification, and wonders if his plunge into alcohol, which lost him everything, might not have been his way of proving that he didn't deserve the accreditation he had. Lifton 1994 p115.

**Seeking mother in lover**

Adopted persons often try to make older or more mature people into idealized parents. I have noticed that young females adopted persons frequently seek out mother figures in women who may be teachers or counselors, and later seek maternal, nurturing men in marriage...

Male adopted persons may seek out the lost mother in their lovers or wives, often choosing older, maternal women or safe, dependent women who won't leave them. The most essential quality in a loved one for both men and women is that he or she be abandonment-proof. But the problem with sacrificing romance for safety is that one may get stuck in a boring relationship in which the spouse becomes another parent figure to be rebelled against. As one woman in the process of divorce said: 'I'm now ready to have a husband rather than a father.' Lifton 1994 p112

**Love in the Ghost Kingdom**

Adopted persons who cannot find a satisfying relationship with the opposite sex often retreat to the Ghost Kingdom, where their fantasies may prove more safe and rewarding than their experiences in the so-called real world. Arthur, a writer who married and divorced twice before settling on a farm with three dogs, speaks of fantasy relationships as perhaps the most defining experience in his personal world. 'I fall in love with birth mother substitutes, who, of course, never live up to my ideal,' he says. 'In my mind there seems to exist some fairy-tale realm that defines my private world. I search there, I love there, I grieve there. Without it, my experience is routine, drab, obligatory. And, looking back, my life has always been this way. Lifton 1994 p113

We can see such fantasy women as the elusive siren some adopted men pursue: the mother goddess. The pattern often is to idealize and then denigrate a woman, to cast her off as they were once cast off, and move on to the next one. 'Loving them and leaving them' may be the ultimate revenge for having been left so early. Some adopted men speak of being angry and aggressive toward women at the end of a relationship, without understanding the source of their rage. Lifton 1994 p113

We can see that cumulative adoption trauma, like other traumas, plays havoc with memory. Many adopted persons report that large chunks of their childhood got repressed along with everything else. And many...act out those disavowed feelings with an aggression that alienates the very people with whom they want a relationship. Lifton 1994 pp113-114

**Primal grief reaction**

A sense of loss expressed by most adopted persons often seems to manifest in sadness and depression. This might be interpreted as an unconscious yearning for the lost love object (the first mother?) or in a feeling of incompleteness (the lost part of the Self?). The age at which a child is relinquished might have something to do with which of the two predominates. In any case, the result appears to be a loss of a sense of goodness of self and mistrust of the permanency of future relationships with significant others. Verrier 1993 p47

**Trust and intimacy**

The issues of trust and intimacy are closely related to those of abandonment and rejection. There is such a fluid movement among these issues that it is difficult to separate them. The adopted persons lack of trust in the permanency of relationships brings about a distrust of closeness or intimacy and a need for distancing. At the same time there is a yearning for the very thing which is feared. Verrier 1993 p88

**Distrust of the feminine**

As it has been shown in the often tumultuous relationship between the adopted person and the adoptive mother, women are often seen as abandoners, unworthy of trust. This belief extends to other women as well.

Although the '*one best friend*' of most adopted persons is usually of the same sex as themselves, the rest of their friends and acquaintances tend to be, for both sexes, boys or men. There is a general feeling of not trusting girls or women, of not being accepted by them, or of feeling generally uncomfortable around them. Verrier 1993 p89

**Difficulties in separating**

Many adopted persons find it difficult to attach or allow closeness in relationships because of the fear that each new relationship, like the very first relationship, will not last.

Separating seems to be an even greater problem than attaching. Once a relationship is established many adopted persons do not want to separate, even when the relationship proves unsatisfactory. Verrier 1993 p90

**Distrusting the self**

Distrust is evident, not only in the permanency of relationships, but in the goodness of self...This lack of self-esteem or self-worth is intricately intertwined with the lack of trust and fear of intimacy described by many of the adopted persons. Verrier 1993 p90

**Loyalty**

Regardless of the issues of rejection, trust, and intimacy which emanate from the original relinquishment, and even in spite of the eventual feelings of rage which may arise, there seems to be a sense of loyalty stemming from the profound connection between biological mother and child.

B. J. Lifton, who has written extensively about adoption, once told me she feels that the difficulty in bonding with the adoptive mother is not so much a matter of trust as it is a matter of loyalty to that first mother. While I disagreed with her at first, I now believe that both of the issues of trust and loyalty are present in the dilemma for the child. Verrier 1993 p91

**Divided loyalty**

Verrier—On the personal level, once I was able to give up the idea that I was going to be the mother, that I could take the place of the biological mother, there was a kind of relaxation in my daughter's attitude towards me. I never really expressed this to her in words, but there was a way in which I must have conveyed the idea to her that she no longer had to defend that place in her heart against intrusion from me...The loyalty toward the birth-mother is only

one part of the picture. There is at the same time a sense of loyalty to the adoptive parents, which often enters into the decision about whether or not to search.” Verrier 1993 p91

### Loneliness

Adolescence is always a lonely time for the adopted person no matter how many friends they may have. A feeling of emptiness remains within. This is the period in their life when they go through an identity crisis, unsure just who they are as yet. As their ability to think in the abstract increases, the future becomes a worrisome unknown. For most young people thoughts of the future bring on feelings of absence. In the adopted person, the feeling is intensified and confusing. As one expressed it, ‘How can I think about the future when I have so much unfinished business from the past?’ p30.

The sense of...part of me is missing, there is a void inside of me that needs to be filled.. Part of the puzzle is missing. Their feelings of loneliness and emptiness can be described as an emotional connection that is temporarily disconnected.. It is difficult for those outside the adoption triangle to understand the trauma of being separated from someone who is a part of you. Carlini 1997 p95

### Fear of homelessness

Many adopted persons carry through life a sense of dislocation, a sense of being the outsider, a sense of orphanhood. The *adoption papers are their passport*, but their true home is lost to them. They have been in exile ever since being cut off from their origins, and they fear they will end up in exile. Having experienced total loss once, they fear they could experience it again. They can never be certain of what a secure home is. Lifton 1994 p95

### Adopted persons as transients

If it is true that homelessness is an ‘archetypal state of transiency,’ adopted persons have always been transients. They have a sense of being on the road even when they have a place to return to at night. They don’t have the same relationship to things that other people have. As children, they may have stolen money to buy their friends’ love with presents. That’s all they wanted money for. Material possessions slip through their fingers. They are not destined for authentic heirlooms that will connect them to their ancestors. The disconnection they have experienced has made them devalue the things that others hoard and treasure. Lifton 1994 p95

### Homelessness is abandonment

with a different spelling. Even as they appear to be tucked safely into their adoptive homes, adopted persons fear that homelessness lies in wait like a grave at the end of the road. One woman remembers crying whenever her parents drove past the cemetery where they had a plot. She feared they would die and leave her homeless again. Another, a divorced lawyer with no children, fears that when her adoptive father dies, she will be totally alone. The adoption tie, which saved her as a baby, will be cut with his death, and she will find herself falling through dark space into the void again. Lifton 1994 p124

### Yearning for connection

‘Adopted persons are like mythic heroes, orphaned, motherless, sent out into the world alone,’ says Walter, an artist who, at thirty-three, doesn’t call any one place home. ‘And people can sense that. They’re always saying to me, ‘You’re new around these parts, aren’t you?’. It seems that an adopted person’s disconnectedness forms a distinct aura around them that people notice but cannot recognize. It is the aura of the abandoned mythic hero, whose primal loss and supernatural powers the adopted person still identifies with. The adopted person holds on to their mythic side as a protective shield against the terrible aloneness they feel. A defense, perhaps, but one that has become an integral part of his psychic reality and unreality.

‘Adopted persons are glaziers of the cosmic mystery,’ an adopted man says. ‘They are prophets. Not everyone given the assignment of prophecy completes the assignment, but if you are successful you have something to tell for the journey. This is the problem life presented you. You have the opportunity to tell others about it.’ Lifton 1994p123

### Loss of parents

It seems that something unnatural happens to children when they lose their parents, no matter how they lose them or how quickly after that they are adopted. They become something different, both wonderful and fearsome. They are accorded a special status. Things that we are attracted to, but fear, we endow with special powers. Perhaps this is the fascination that all cultures have with adopted children. They live out everyone’s fantasy of abandonment.

To placate the fates, we make them divine. But who wants to be divine at the cost of abandonment and disconnection? Adopted persons would trade their mythic connection to divinity for a connection to the human condition that has been denied them. And so, some set out on the first stage of the hero’s journey, back through time, to that point, to that place, to that home that was never a home, where they were once connected. Lifton 1994 p124

### Relationships

Relationships can be a struggle for adopted persons. Some adopted persons keep trying to connect with people and have relationships of varying degrees of closeness. Other adopted persons stay within their comfort zone of closeness and prefer to spend time alone. Relationships can also be a struggle for the significant others in an adopted person’s life. Adopted persons can *test* people by pushing them away and seeing if they come back, thereby proving that they truly love the adopted person. Perhaps’ the adopted person is trying to master an old experience of being rejected by the birth mother by being the rejecting one in current relationships. Russell 1996 p71

### Being alone

Some adopted persons describe being alone as a safe place for them. When they are alone, they feel there are no expectations or demands on them. For adopted persons who feel they have to act or be a certain way to receive love or approval, being alone can feel like a safe haven where they can truly be themselves. Russell 1996 p71

## LOSS

For the adopted person, the experience of loss is usually felt in the context of the search for self. The adopted person may be a chosen person, but they are also a displaced person.

### **Adoption is created through loss**

Without loss there would be no adoption. Loss, then, is the hub of the wheel. All birth parents, adoptive parents, and adopted persons share in having experienced at least one major, life-altering loss *before* becoming involved in adoption. In adoption, in order to gain anything, one must first lose a family, a child, a dream. It is these losses and the way they are accepted and, hopefully, resolved which set the tone for the life-long process of adoption.

Adoption is a fundamental, life-altering event. It transposes people from one location in the human mosaic into totally new configuration. Adoptive parents, whether through infertility, failed pregnancy, stillbirth, or the death of a child have suffered one of life's greatest blows prior to adopting. They have lost their dream child. No matter how well resolved the loss of bearing a child appears to be, it continues to affect the adoptive family as a variety of points throughout the family's cycle (Berman and Bufferd 1986). This fact is particularly evident during the adopted persons adolescence when the issues of burgeoning sexuality and impending emancipation may rekindle the loss issue. Birth parents lose, perhaps forever, the child to whom they are genetically connected. Subsequently, they undergo multiple losses associated with the loss of role, the loss of contact, and perhaps the loss of the other birth parent, which reshape the entire course of their lives.

Adopted persons suffer their first loss at the initial separation from the birth family. Awareness of their adopted status is inevitable. Even if the loss is beyond conscious awareness, recognition, or vocabulary, it affects the adopted person on a very profound level. Any subsequent loss, or the perceived threat of separation, becomes more formidable for adopted persons than their non-adopted peers.

The losses in adoption and the role they play in all triad members lives have largely been ignored. The grief process in adoption, so necessary for healthy functioning, is further complicated by the fact that there is no end to the losses, no closure to the loss experience. Loss in adoption is not a single occurrence. There is the initial, identifiable loss and innumerable secondary sub-losses. Loss becomes an evolving process, creating a theme of loss in both the individual's and family's development. Those losses affect all subsequent development.

Loss is always a part of triad members' lives. A loss in adoption is never totally forgotten. It remains either in conscious awareness or is pushed into the unconscious, only to be reawakened by later loss. It is crucial for triad members, their significant others, and the professional with whom they interface, to recognise these losses and the effect loss has on their lives. Silverstein/Kaplan

### **Effect of loss on adopted persons**

For children adopted late, the loss can be traumatic and overt, placing great stress on the child. But for children adopted at birth, there is still loss involved. It is less traumatic, less overt, but it can shape the child's entire personality. Adopted persons who are placed in the first days or weeks of life grieve not only for the parents they never knew, but for the other aspects of themselves that have been lost through adoption: the loss of origins, of a completed sense of self, of genealogical continuity. Adopted persons might feel a loss too of their sense of stability in their relationship with their *adoptive* parents, if one set of parents can relinquish them, they might think, then why can't another?

The loss for early placed adopted persons, though, is generally not acute or traumatic, nor is it usually consciously experienced until the age of five or so. It emerges gradually, as the child's cognitive understanding of adoption begins to unfold. And it can lead to subtle behavioural changes in childhood that seem at first glance to have nothing whatever to do with loss and grieving. Brodzinsky

### **Loss?**

Loss is a pervasive issue. We deal with it in many different ways. Some of us are pack rats and keep every shred of everything. We collect old things, "useless" things, because this is what society has often thought of us. Our rooms are cluttered and piled high with things that we can't lose, because we're trying to calm our feelings about the people that we've lost. Some of us go to the other extreme and keep nothing. We give things away. People misdiagnose some of us as having attention deficit disorder but, actually, we all have a problem with distraction because it feels like something is missing. Pavao 1998 p91

### **Adopted person grieving for lost family**

"As the school-age child begins to understand the logical implications of adoption, he starts to feel a sense of loss for the parents, and the family, he never knew. Even if he was adopted as an infant, even if he never met his birth mother and has no recollection of her, he still experiences... a sense of loss, he still grieves...The idea that children adopted in the first days of life *who never knew their birth parents* are still capable of grieving for them has been difficult for many people to accept...How can a youngster grieve for someone he never knew?... The answer is really quite simple. Unlike the later-placed child, the youngster who was placed as an infant, and who has never known his birth family, cannot grieve for his loss until he develops an internal mental representation of what it is he has lost. This can take the form of thoughts, mental images, and fantasies about his birth parents and his past. Once the internal representation develops, at around age six or seven, the basis of grieving is in place. At this point, the child is not grieving for a *known* birth parent, but for the representation or fantasy of a birth parent...They usually stop their grief through confusion, occasional sadness, social withdrawal, or periodic outbursts of frustration and anger...children suffer other losses...but adoption is by far the most complicated loss." Brodzinsky at el 1992 pp71-74

**Loss affects whole adoption circle**

Everyone in the adoption triad deals with the issue of loss, because the experience of loss is the fundamental ground upon which the event of adoption is built. For the birthmother, it is the loss of her baby; for the adoptive parents, the loss of the ability to reproduce. For the adopted person, there is a separation from and loss of the first mother, a separation which one author calls the “primal abandonment” that accompanies every adopted person into the adoptive home (and possibly throughout life).

Even if an adoptive mother is there waiting immediately after birth, the substitution of one for the other cannot erase the experience of losing the mother to whom the infant was so intimately connected before birth. Gediman & Brown 1991 p3

**Consequences of loss and repressed grief**

With loss comes grief. Grief and its companion, mourning, work their way into the adoption culture as well. But often the grief is repressed, as when new birthmothers are assured that any sadness they feel will ultimately disappear—the routine message that was delivered a generation ago. Sometimes, a birthmother’s repressed grief becomes twisted, manifesting itself not as grief but as some other feeling or behavior, such as anger or depression. But when the grief remains unresolved, it can be activated by reunion, setting off the mourning that should have taken place years earlier. Similarly, if adoptive parents never come to terms with whatever sense of loss they felt at their inability to have (biological) children, reunion can activate the unresolved grief and mourning in them as well. Gediman & Brown 1991 p3

**Grandparent losses**

For many birth grandparents adoption means that they are losing their **first** grandchild and will not have the pleasure of watching him or her grow up. Other family members affected are brothers and sisters of both the birth parents and the adoptive parents. Aunts, uncles, cousins, and others may also feel the effects of adoption, especially if adoption has been considered a “family secret.”

**Phantom children**

Phantom children can be very loud and present in people’s lives. It is virtually impossible to forget having a child or having difficulty conceiving a child. Acknowledging these facts and experiences allows healing to take place. Respecting these losses honors the people and souls who have had such impact on one’s life regardless of the amount of actual contact. To ignore or deny these losses can lead to trying to replace the lost person or halting the necessary grieving process. Russell 1996 p22

**Losses of whole triad**

Schooler—Adoption is the only relationship in life that by its very existence creates loss for everyone involved. ‘Without loss, there would be no adoption. Loss is the hub of the wheel’. Those within the adoption triad—birth parents, adoptive parents, and adopted child—have experienced at least one life-changing loss.

*For many adoptive parents* that loss is created by infertility. A portion of those losses include loss of a biological child, loss of dreams for a family as planned, loss of status as biological parents, and loss of providing grand- parents with a biological child.

*For the birth parents*, that loss includes the lifelong relationship with their birth child and all the other painful issues attached to that.

*For the adopted child*, the list is a long one. “The adopted person experiences many losses over a lifetime: loss of birth parents, loss of a biological connection to the adoptive parents, the loss of status as a normal member of society with one father and one mother the loss of birth family ties, loss of cultural heritage, loss of siblings, loss of genetic information’. Brodzinsky. For all affected by adoption, ‘it is these losses and the way they are accepted and hopefully resolved that set the tone for the lifelong process of adoption.’ Rozia & Silverstein. For some the loss feels like an amputation that leaves them vulnerable to future losses. Schooler 1995 p16

**Consequences of failure to resolve loss**

If we fail to resolve loss in a healthy manner, it could have the following consequences:

- We will impair our ability to recognize and comfort others in pain.
- We will injure our ability to feel and remember as our practice of blocking out bad times extends to difficulty in remembering good times as well.
- We will force ourselves into self-protection that will keep others at arms length.
- We will project our own fears and beliefs into our present moments.
- We will construct walls of rage that lock the needy part of ourselves inside away from anyone—including God—who can heal and restore us.
- Unresolved loss extends to every aspect of our physical, emotional, and spiritual being. David Damico *Faces of Rage* pp109-110 cf Schooler 1995 p16

**Journey of loss resolution**

When we allow ourselves to experience pain, hope begins to enter. It reminds us of the loss, which always hurts. But the reminder of the loss helps us clear a path through the pain to a new shore. When we get there we will be different—so will our world. Hope brings us to acceptance. Never ignoring or erasing the loss or pain, hope teaches us to respond to and honor loss. It brings dignity to pain. It makes us strong, more authentic, and more understanding of others whose losses mirror ours. David Damico *Faces of Rage* pp109-110

**Losses of a displaced persons**

Adopted person may have been chosen, but they always remain a displaced person. They have been *taken*, and *moved*, and *transplanted*, and given *new* names and *new* identities. KCG

**Also See GRIEF pp27-29**

## MARRIAGE

### Adopted persons as parents

Lifton recalls her own experience as a parent— ‘It was not mere chance that made me imagine adopting before I could imagine giving birth. The secrecy around an adopted persons birth makes the subject seem taboo; and since pregnancy puts an adopted woman in touch with the very mysteries that she has tried to block out, it is threatening to venture into this forbidden turf. Besides, if you don’t feel real, how can you do anything as real as give birth to a real child?’ Lifton 1994 p117

### Adopted persons fears

If you don’t know whose genes you carry, how do you know what you will pass on to your child?...

One reason adopted persons fear they will not be good parents is because they were not parented by the woman who gave birth to them. They also worries about the adoptive mother: Will she feel bad seeing her child pregnant when she may never have been pregnant herself? Lifton 1994 p117

### Double bind

The adopted person as a parent is in a double bind: one has fierce intensity (this is my only blood relative) and great insecurity (someone else could raise the child better than I can). Having been over protected by their adoptive parents and dis-empowered by society, adopted persons know more about being the eternal child than about being a mother or father. They may be more comfortable in the role of child than as a parental figure with their child. Lifton 1994 p118

### First blood relation

No one romanticizes blood relationships more than a person who has never known them. When you finally hold your first blood relative, you cannot help asking the inevitable question: ‘How could any woman give up her child?’ It is as if you are holding your abandoned self in your arms. While you nurture your baby, you have a chance to nurture your own baby within. All of the missing connection one felt with one’s adoptive parents, all of the fantasies one has about the blood tie, one places onto this child, much like a survivor parent might place on the child who is born after the Holocaust the burden of making up for those who died in it.

Adopted persons, who do not know what disaster they have survived, look to their children to make up for all the blood relatives who are lost to them and to give meaning to their lives. Lifton 1994 p118

### Authority and self-esteem

Becoming a parent raises issues of authority and self-esteem, the very issues that adopted persons have been struggling with. They want to be a friend to their child, to be liked, but having been deprived of authority as children themselves, they have a hard time being authoritative. Afraid of alienating their children, they may be too permissive with them. They cannot bear anger; for they have

repressed their own. They want everything and everyone to be happy, just as their parents wanted them to be. Adopted persons are often amazed to find themselves parenting much like their adoptive parents, who also experienced loss, questions of authenticity, and doubts about their parenting ability. Their insecurity may make them overly protective and possessive, as so many adoptive parents are, and their feat of separation may make them violate boundaries, just as their parents did. Lifton 1994 p119

### Insecurity and distancing

Paradoxically, their insecurities can cause adopted persons to distance themselves from their children. One woman admitted that she felt she was raising her husband’s two children rather than her own, that she was just a caregiver, not a mother. Another, who also turned the children over to their father, believes that she had an inability to feel, as if some part of her were split off and she was not totally present. Now she realizes that her unresolved adoption issues kept her from bonding with her children. Lifton 1994 p119

### Sensitive to insecurity

On the positive side, the adopted person as parent, being exquisitely sensitive to the insecurities of a young child, tries to give her children the sense of rootedness she did not have (not through the failing of the adoptive parents, but because of the existential condition of being adopted). Without being aware of it, the adopted person gives inordinate stress to the blood tie, so much so that my ten-year-old son, shrewd about so many other things, thought that there was something special about being related to me by blood. Lifton 1994 p119

### Some decide not to have children

There are some adopted persons, like Lee, who decide not to have children. ‘I really had no choice,’ she says. ‘I felt I would be a terrible mother. I had no history. As I see it, a child who has no mother can mother no child.’ Lee can say this while acknowledging that her adoptive mother was every bit a mother: ‘But there was this absent, ambiguous mother I couldn’t ask about. It was like I developed a dual personality: I had a mother and grew up, but inside me was the frozen child who didn’t know who her mother was. It was that frozen child who made the decision not to have children.’ Lifton 1994 p120

### Abortion

Even though adopted persons know that they could have been an abortion, some choose abortion over having a baby. Something holds them back from becoming a mother. One woman said: ‘I was one of those adopted persons who never progressed from being an ‘adopted child.’ I was stuck there in my child at the deepest level.’ Another, who was told her mother had died in childbirth, has had twelve abortions. She never wanted children because, as she explains: ‘I was never born myself. I was afraid of dying in childbirth like she supposedly did.’ Lifton 1994 p120

Also See ‘INTIMACY’ p37-39

## MYTHS

**Myth** 'A belief given uncritical acceptance to support traditional practices' *Webster's Dictionary*. Adoption in the Western world is a social institution fraught with myths and misunderstandings. Two major myths are: ☐ Adoption is a time limited process.

☐ Having children by adoption is no different from having children by birth.

### Five myths of adoption

1 The birthmother obviously does not care about her child or she would not have given him away.

2 Secrecy in every phase of the adoption process is necessary to protect all parties.

3 Both the birthmother and birthfather will forget about their unwanted child.

4 If the adopted person really loved his adoptive family, he would not have to search for his birth parents.

5 There is no difference in adoptive and non-adoptive families

### Adoption Myths

The information gathered helps to dispel a number of the prevalent myths about adoption and adopted people.

☐ A large majority had wanted to know more about their origins for some time. The introduction of the Act did not trigger their interest.

☐ Adopted people of *all* ages wanted to know more about their origins. Wanting to know is not something that increases or lessens with age.

☐ For most people, finding out more was not enough, they needed to meet and get to know their birth relatives.

☐ Adopted people who made the initial contact themselves got more positive results than mediators. Adopted people are very capable of making successful contact and do not need mediators to do it for them.

☐ Many adopted people did not tell their adoptive parents they were searching or meeting birth relatives as, although they were clear that they had the right to search, they did not want to hurt or upset them. This is not underhand behaviour or a symptom of a poor relationship, it is more likely a sign of the adoptive parents' anxiety and fear.

☐ There was little change in existing relationships between adopted people and their adoptive parents. Meeting birth relatives does not threaten the adoptive relationship which is most likely to remain the same.

☐ A significant number of adoptive parents have been in contact with their adopted son or daughter's birth relatives, and many have established ongoing relationships. Adoptive and birth parents do not have to be in a conflict situation. It is instead a unique opportunity for both.

☐ Adopted people can successfully integrate two or more families into their lives. Finding their birth relatives does not mean they relinquish their adoptive ones.

☐ Only one person regretted searching. Regardless of what they learn, almost all adopted people do not regret searching.

☐ The willingness of adopted people to see the birth parents' right to privacy as being more important than their own right to information, as well as their unwillingness to hurt their adoptive parents was apparent. This shows that adopted people are not selfish and inconsiderate.

Because adopted people and their birth relatives have been invisible in our society for so long, widely held beliefs have developed which speak on their behalf, and which attempt to protect the adoptive relationship. The challenge for all people involved in adoption is to listen to those directly affected by adoption. If people are aware that there are many widely held beliefs that are myths, they can then begin to question. The second challenge is to alter their practice accordingly. Jill Kennard Thesis. Victoria University. 1991 pp124-128

### Adoption is laced with myths

Gediman/Brown— Like other subjects being newly aired in public, adoption is a subject laced with myths. Rose-colored tints go along with the mythology and with society's inclination to romanticize adoption. The real experiences of birthmothers indicate that there is a variety of reality and that the shading goes from pale to deep.

### Six basic adoption Myths

1 The distress birthmothers feel at relinquishment will go away. They will be able to go on with their lives as though nothing ever happened. They will forget about the child. They will not feel guilty.

2 Adoption workers will honor the mother's wishes regarding the kind of family (e.g., religion, education) in which the child is placed. A 'good' home will be found. An appropriate match will be made.

3 Adopted persons will feel no ties to their birthmothers or to other birth relatives. The separation will be complete. There will be no feeling of connection. There will be no feeling of loss.

4 The predictable questions which adopted children will ask about their origins or about the circumstances of their adoption can be answered satisfactorily by the adoptive parents. Only a little information will be required.

5 Adopted persons will get everything they need for healthy human development from the loving adoptive homes in which they are raised. Growing up adopted will be no different from growing up non-adopted. When adolescence comes, it will be no more difficult for adoptive parents than for biological parents. In the final analysis, the adopted person will be better off having been raised by the adoptive parents.

6 Adopted persons who seek their birthparents are indulging a curiosity. It can only hurt adoptive parents.

What the common myths add up to is that adopted persons and birthmothers have no reason to find one another, much less to continue in a relationship once initial contact has been made. The evidence says something quite different. Only in rare cases did we learn that things had indeed

turned out, both for mother and child, pretty much the way the birthmothers had hoped and predicted years before. What usually happened instead is that the ensuing life of one or the other, or both, was affected in some negative fashion. Gediman/Brown 1991 pp33-34

#### **Demystify adoptive family**

While no amount of openness can take away the child's trauma of being separated from his mother; or save the child from the trauma of learning she was not born into the adoptive family, we can remove the secrecy that compounds those two traumas. We can begin to demystify the adoptive family and to see it with much of the strengths and weaknesses of other families. The conservatives argue for the myth of the happy adoptive family that has no problems because love conquers all. But we will see that something more is expected of the adopted family: an excess of happiness that is meant to make up for the excess of loss that everyone in the triad experiences, and an excess of denial to cover that loss. Exposing the myths of the adoptive family while still holding on to the very real need and love that parents and child have for each other has been the challenge facing me. Lifton 1994 p9

**Acknowledge of difference** An adoptive family should not try to be what it is not, a biological family. This is not to say that an adoptive family is less than a biological family. It is just different. The differences need to be acknowledged and addressed for the adoptive family to function more smoothly. Unless its unique aspects are understood, adoption will continue to be a round peg being forced into a square hole. Russell 1996 p50

#### **Myths re consents**

A very commonly shared belief about adoption is that mothers freely choose to relinquish their children. Indeed, the legal instrument of relinquishment, the signed consent document, must be signed voluntarily and without known duress; duress, if known about, would render it illegal. The voluntary nature of relinquishment is seen to be an aspect of the woman's desire or need to have her child cared for by others. The reality of that desire has never been tested. The basis of that need has never been investigated. It would seem that if a mother is thought of at all when her instrumentality in adoption is past, she is either thought of as in some way profoundly unmotherly and untroubled by her action, or able to resolve the consequences satisfactorily without any social acknowledgment of assistance. Whatever the view and whatever the reality, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary such beliefs proliferate or, by their nature, require no further thought. Kate Inglis 1984 p15

#### **BM myth of putting it behind you**

Living with false beliefs is always dangerous, but when the birthmothers we interviewed were sold the Myth of putting it behind you- they got a particularly bad bargain. In some cases it wasn't until many years later that the women discovered that the assurances which had been presented were false; for some, it happened almost immediately after the relinquishment. Contrary to what they had been advised, most discovered sooner or later that the fact of being a mother did not disappear with the surrender of

the child. The maternal attachment was not severed, and the decision to give up their child typically resulted in pervasive, life-affecting, often unhappy results of one kind or another. Gediman/Brown 1991 p34

#### **Pandora's box myth**

There are many adoptions where the adopting parents did not wish to know the identity of the natural parent(s) and vice versa. There could be all kinds of problems caused by such knowledge. All parties realise that such knowledge is a veritable 'Pandora's Box' of trouble and embarrassment. 1976 Gilland SM Auckland MC *Re and Application by B* refusing an adopted persons request for access to their Court adoption records. 14MCD 198-201

The Pandora Box concept has its origins in Greek Mythology of the 8th century BC. "Pandora...was endowed by the gods with all the graces, and treacherously presented with a box in which was confined all the evils that could trouble mankind. As the gods had anticipated, Pandora opened the box, allowing the evils to escape. Pandora's box was thus a source of extensive and unforeseen troubles or problems. College Dictionary.

#### **Myth adopted persons psycho-ceramics**

Do these 'mixed up', people with 'deep psychological problems' exist and if so, are they such a threat to their birth families that counselling must be compulsory because of them?...There is little indication in the questionnaires returned in this study of 'mixed up' people with 'deep psychological problems', only of people who have waited years to learn a little more about who they are, and are proceeding in a caring and considerate manner. It seems likely that we have legislated to guard against a myth, a myth that is so pervasive in our society that many adopted people have also been conditioned to believe it. Kennard 1991 pp117-8.

#### **Demythologising adoption**

From 1955-1985 the closed secret nature of adoption, and legal fiction and pretence encouraged myths to grow and flourish.

- The myths were sustained by secrecy that prevented any critical analysis.
- The adoption myths became so pervasive in our society that many adopted persons, birth and adoptive parents believed them.
- It was asserted that only a small number of adopted persons, the misfits, would ever want to know their origins.
- Most birthmothers would have forgotten the past and would not want old wounds reopened.
- Birth mothers needed to be protected from adopted persons.
- Lifting secrecy would increase abortion.
- Opening adoption would break up adoptive families.
- Adoptive parents would lose their child.

The acceptance of untruths did much harm by creating false hope, false stereotypes and a potentially destructive zealotry that denied the truth.

## NUMBING

Some adopted persons describe feeling as if they are in a daze or numbed out. This numbing can be seen as a defense against dealing with difficult information and feelings. Many adopted persons would be too overwhelmed by the reality of their situation if they experienced total clarity. Instead, living with fogginess feels comforting and protective. To have clarity is a challenge for many people. For adopted persons, certain feelings may be too intense to confront. Russell 1996 p75.

### **Another state of consciousness**

In the case of constriction or numbing, the adopted person is in another state of consciousness, where they can't be hurt by painful memories. This state is characterized by emotional detachment, indifference, complacency, and passivity. This is the state adopted persons are in when everyone thinks they are daydreaming. It is almost as if they are in a trance. Teachers complain about this state in school children. Schoolwork is difficult, because it often involves memory-something the adopted person is trying to keep at bay. Verrier 1993 p72

### **Intrusion and constriction**

Adopted persons vacillate between intrusion and constriction, with one or the other being their normal way of operating in the world, and the other insinuating itself into their behavior from time to time. This leaves them feeling paralyzed, unable to integrate the trauma and to get on with their life. There is also an existential dilemma, whereby they are unable to make sense of either natural or divine order: Mothers are not supposed to leave their babies. God should not let it happen. No rationalization changes that basic knowing. Verrier 1993 p72

### **Numb out**

Mothers who have said that they have never had any trouble with their children will nevertheless admit that the children do not show much emotion in the face of loss. Because the loss of a grandparent or a beloved pet can trigger memories of the first loss, children are often numbed by this and express very little, if any, affect. Their feelings go underground; they, '*Numb out.*' This is often interpreted by the parents or others as the child's being callous or unfeeling, when they are actually warding off devastation. To feel this devastation, to re-experience the original loss is too painful, so the child denies the impact of the loss as a defense against psychological deterioration. Verrier 1993 p75

Adopted children often try to shut out the subject of adoption. They separate one part of themselves from the rest of the self a pattern known as dissociation, disavowal, numbing, or splitting. Clinicians are agreed that children cannot form a healthy sense of self if they must disavow reality, yet this is what adopted children are asked to do. They are too young to articulate what is going on inside them, but adult adopted persons, looking back in sorrow as much as in anger, understand what they did to survive.

## REJECTION

### **Rejection defined**

The word reject means 'to repel, to repudiate, to throw back or throw out as useless or substandard'. A large shadow looming over the lives of many adopted persons is the feeling of being rejected. Rehearsing rejection and abandonment, for some, becomes a way of managing the pain. Rejection must rank as one of life's most anguishing experiences. Especially in the vulnerable years of adolescence into early adulthood, feelings of rejection on the part of the adopted person can override the positive and nurturing love given to them by their adoptive parents. Their perceptions of rejection can spill over to affect the building of healthy relationships. Some develop patterns of pursuing acceptance but then back away when emotional intimacy gets too close...As adopted persons get in touch with feelings of loss, rejection, and abandonment, other sensitivities may emerge that touch deep chords of self-worth. Schooler 1995 p17

### **Whole Triad experiences rejection**

Feelings of loss are exacerbated by keen feelings of rejection. One way individuals seek to cope with a loss is to personalise it. Triad members attempt to decipher what they did or did not do that led to the loss. Triad members become sensitive to the slightest hint of rejection, causing them either to avoid situations where they might be rejected or to provoke rejection in order to validate their earlier negative self-perceptions.

*Adopted persons* seldom are able to view their placement into adoption by the birth parents as anything other than total rejection. Adopted persons even at young ages grasp the concept that to be "chosen" means first that one was "un-chosen", reinforcing adopted persons' lowered self-concept. Society promulgates the idea that the "good" adopted person is the one who is not curious and accepts adoptions without question. At the other extreme of the continuum is the "bad" adopted person who is constantly questioning, thereby creating feelings of rejection in the adoptive parents.

*Birth parents* frequently condemn themselves for being irresponsible, as does society. Adoptive parents may inadvertently create fantasies for the adopted person about the birth family which reinforces these feelings of rejection. For example, adoptive parents may block an adolescent adopted person's interest in search for birth parents by stating that the birth parents may have married and had other children. The implication is clear that the birth parents would consider contact with the adopted person an unwelcome intrusion.

*Adoptive parents* may sense that their bodies have rejected them if they are infertile. This impression may lead the infertile couple, for example, to feel betrayed or rejected by God. When they come to adoption, the adopters, possibly unconsciously, anticipate the birth parents' rejection and criticism of their parenting. Adoptive parents struggle with issues of entitlement, wondering if perhaps they

were never meant to be parents, especially to this child. The adopting family, then, may watch for the adopted person to reject them, interpreting many benign, childish actions as rejection. To avoid that ultimate rejection, some adoptive parents expel or bin adolescent adopted persons prior to the accomplishment of appropriate emancipation tasks. Silverstein/Kaplan

### **Fear of rejection**

Fear of rejection may cause the adopted person to be hypervigilant to the point of fearing intimate relationships. During interviews, many spoke of ending relationships as soon as the other person began to need them. The fear of rejection is so strong, they will reject before they can be rejected. Carlini 1997 p27.

The fear of rejection stems from the initial separation from the birth mother that caused the primal wound. This results in the feeling of having an innate flaw which carries through to adulthood. It manifests itself over the years through the adopted persons fear of further relationships. My research revealed that many found it difficult for them to be in relationships. They felt it was acceptable for them to need some-one; but, as soon as this person needed them in return, they had the urge to end the relationship and usually did. Some reported having had many superficial relationships over the years which lacked any kind of intimacy or commitment. Carlini 1997 p83

### **Rejecting others before they reject you**

This fear of rejection sometimes sets up a counterphobic reaction of rejecting others before one is rejected-sabotaging relationships. In other words, instead of the Golden Rule of 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,' the rule of these adopted persons is 'Do unto others first that which you fear they are going to do to you'. This is often what happens in the relationship with the adoptive mother, where she is tested over and over again to see if she is going to reject the child. The constant anxiety caused by the expectation of her eventual rejection and the child's need to let her know how it feels creates a cycle of rejective behavior between mother and child, which is destructive to their self-esteem and to their relationship...It is not just the adoptive mother who experiences this testing behavior...This testing-out or rejecting behavior is often an enigma for the friends and partners of adopted persons. Verrier 1993 p86

### **Rejection and work**

One of the problems often expressed to me by parents of adolescent adopted persons is their reluctance to get jobs, which is perceived by the parents as laziness. I believe that there is more to it than that. When asked to talk about why they find it so difficult to look for work, adopted persons will often say that they might not get the job. In other words, they might be rejected by the interviewer or boss, who for one reason or another wants another person for that job. Now while many people would just go to the next interview and keep pursuing it until a job was found, the adopted person will often feel paralyzed by that initial rejection. It is felt, not just as a failure to have the necessary skills or training for the job, but as a rejection of his basic

person. He was not good enough for the job. He was a failure. This makes going out and facing the next interview seem like a monumental task. Verrier 1993 p87

### **Sensitivity to criticism**

The fear that they are unworthy makes adopted persons so very sensitive to criticism or the slightest hint of rejection that many people feel at a loss to know how to keep from triggering it. It interferes with relationships, jobs, and school, and often brings about the very outcome which the adopted person fears. Verrier 1993 p87

### **False self to avoid rejection**

If someone rejects the outside you, that's not so bad, because it isn't really you; but if you let someone know who you really are inside and they reject you, that's really rejection! The false self is the adopted persons method of adjusting to their environment in order to protect themselves from further abandonment and rejection. Verrier 1993 pp34-35

### **Natural fear**

Fear can be an ally as a response to a dangerous situation. Justifiable or appropriate fear is that which appears when a real danger exists. We react to that fear by either fighting or fleeing. It gets the adrenaline going and helps us challenge whatever is endangering us, or to run from it. Verrier 1993 p189

### **Neurotic fear**

Paralyzes us and hampers our life's work and our relationships. We may feel like fighting or fleeing, but can never act on either because there is no identifiable danger. In many cases, especially in the case of primal wounding, the danger is long past, or as Heidegger said, 'The dreadful has already happened.' Yet we keep reacting to stimuli which recreate the feelings that we had long ago. We have not integrated the original trauma, so the feelings keep getting triggered. We may not be able to stop the triggers, but we can learn to respond differently to those triggers. Verrier 1993 p190

### **Neurotic fear of what might happen**

There is no immediate danger, only potential danger. In order to maintain this type of fear, we use rationalizations to invent possible objects for that fear. Adopted persons will say, 'I can't allow myself to get close to anyone, because I might be rejected.' Richo gives three ways in which rationalizations maintain fear:—

- The reason is meant to keep us in control by protecting us from surprises. This control backfires by vitiating our own resilience, a prerequisite for the integration of fear.
- The reason blockades access to adult solutions. We are so attached to a long-held belief that we lose perspective and mobility for change.
- The reason directly maintains the inertia of fear since we go on fearing what we refuse to confront.

Richo goes on to say, The irony in all three of these is that what is meant to protect us from fear only protects the fear itself. Rationalization is the sentry that guards not us but the fear in us! Verrier 1993 p190

**Both chosen and rejected**

Adopted persons in the past were often told the “chosen child story” by their adoptive parents. This story was told to adopted children to help them feel more comfortable with the facts of their adoption. The chosen child story tells the child that their adoptive parents chose them out of many different babies who were available. It was meant to make the child feel special. Usually at some point in the adopted persons life there is the realization that *being chosen has a flip side*. To be chosen by the adoptive parents also means that the birth parents chose not to keep the adopted person. For many adopted persons, this can feel like rejection. Not only is this duality difficult for the adopted person to understand, it is also difficult for the adoptive parent to explain. Russell 1996 p62

**Feeling unwanted**

Many adopted persons describe a feeling of being unwanted. It is easy to see where this feeling comes from because adopted persons have the reality of having been let go. This feeling is separate from the love and caring that an adoptive family will provide. It is also separate from the loving feelings a birth parent may have had for their child. Feeling unwanted is an underlying feeling that will come and go at various times in an adopted persons life. It may arise when they realizes that being chosen also means being rejected or when an adopted person thinks about the relinquishment. Russell 1996 p69

**Self-understanding of rejection**

In an attempt to come to an understanding of the issue of abandonment and rejection, some questions an adopted person can ask to sort through the pain—

- How has rejection played a role in my life in response to loss?
- Have I become a people-pleaser to feel accepted? or am I an extremely angry, rejecting person?
- Have I caused significant others to reject me over time because of those initial losses in adoption?
- What will I now do with this perception of rejection? As adopted persons get in touch with feelings of loss, rejection, and abandonment, other sensitivities may emerge that touch deep chords of self-worth. Sharon Kaplan -Roszia of Schooler 1995 p18

**Abandonment and Rejection**

Adopted persons are familiar with the feelings of abandonment and rejection. For some adopted persons, these issues are constantly present and prevent adopted persons from becoming involved in relationships. For others the fear of abandonment and rejection is never far away and can interfere with getting close to people. Some adopted persons protect themselves from the threat of rejection and abandonment by rejecting others before they can be rejected. Because every relationship has the potential for rejection and abandonment, adopted persons must make a conscious effort to allow themselves to get close to people and allow intimacy. It takes time and trust for an adopted person to believe that the other person will still be there and not leave. Russell 1996 p69

**Pervasive rejection fears**

The basic rejection elements in adoption—The adopted person was not brought up by their natural parents, they were given away. Adoptive parents fear their child may reject them in favour of the birth parents. Birthparents fear rejection by the adopted person because they gave them away. Adopted persons fear rejection was the cause of their adoption. A fear of being abandoned or rejected is a common fear of adopted persons, no matter what their age. A fear of rejection is natural and normal, but adopted persons are much more prone. Anything that can be interpreted as rejection will be! Some set themselves up for rejection. Some reject the life-style of their adoptive families in a radical search to find their self-identity. Some join the rejected. Adopted persons often feel they are different and don't belong so rejection is a normal expectation. KCG

**Rejection**

One way people deal with loss, said Sharon Kaplan, is to figure out what they did wrong to cause the loss so that they can keep from having other losses. In doing this, people may conclude they suffered losses because they were unworthy of having whatever was lost. As a result, they feel they were rejected.

“Most triad members, (birthparents, adoptive parents and adopted persons) fear rejection, and do everything they can to prevent it,” Kaplan said. They become “absolute people pleasers” to counter their feelings of worthlessness, or reject others before they are again rejected.

Adopted persons often feel they were placed for adoption because they were worthless or defective. “They personalize their placement for adoption as rejection,” Kaplan said. “To be chosen, they must first be rejected.” Some may take responsibility for being rejected, believing they did something to cause it. Children adopted from other countries may feel rejected not only by their birthparents, but by their race, religion, or culture. ‘Right to Know Who You Are’ KCG 1991 p2:1

**Fear of rejection and getting hurt**

Rejection fears are a very powerful inhibiting force in adoption interaction. The adoptive parents fear their child may reject them in favor of a birth parent. The birth parents fear rejection by the adopted person—they will never forgive them for giving them away. The adopted person fears rejection is the cause of their adoption, and now fears he may be rejected again. ‘Right to Know Who You Are’ KCG 1991 Ch11/p32

**Adopted person may have been chosen, but they always remain a displaced person.** They have been *taken*, and *moved*, and *transplanted*, and given *new* names and *new* identities. KCG

**Also see SEARCH REJECTION pp83-44**

## REUNION

A reunion is the continuation of a previous relationship. Intimate strangers come together again with few memories and a deep bond. There is nothing quite like the reunion experience. It is a dream come true and a time that becomes etched in one's mind. A reunion involves getting to know someone so familiar and yet unknown. Russell 1996 p137

### **Changes life forever**

The search and reunion experience changes life forever. Once an adopted person searches, no matter the outcome, they are never the same. Once an adopted person finds a birth family member, whatever type of relationship develops, they are never the same. The reunion experience has a far broader impact than just on the two persons involved, for it reaches far beyond them. It has implications for the adopted person, the birth parents, the adoptive parents, birth siblings, adoptive siblings, spouses, children, and others.

Once the reunion begins, it impacts multiple family systems and changes the lives of many people and many relationships-forever. That's why it's crucial to understand the dynamics that are a part of the reunion. For this reason, asking adoption professionals and adult adopted persons to answer commonly asked questions will provide an extra measure of insight for those heading into the reunion event with birth parents or birth siblings. Schooler 1995 p182

### **Preparation**

If possible both parties need to explore their expectations about the reunion relationship *before* it happens. Expect anything and be prepared for everything. Many past and present emotions arise for those involved in a reunion relationship. Russell 1996 p139

### **Adjusting**

There is a lot of adjusting that needs to take place in reunion relationships. People go in search of one person but can be surprised to find that many other people are also involved. It can take some time to integrate new relatives into one's life. Sometimes people require time to adjust to who they are and to the roles they occupy. A birth mother may feel ready to be a mother to her son, but she may need more time to incorporate the role of being a grandmother too. Russell 1996 p141

### **Some adopted persons wait to be found**

There are adopted person who say they will never search, but would not object to being found by their birth mother-it would mean she cared enough to look for them. *They remain in a psychological holding pattern*, passively leaving it up to fate to decide what happens. There are other adopted persons who feel threatened by the idea of being found- it would take away their control over an issue they do not feel ready to deal with. p212 Lifton 1994

### **Searching versus being found**

Typically, the person who searches is more ready for a reunion than the person who is found. Searchers have had

time to think about their actions and feel their emotions, whereas the person being found may need time to catch up in their thoughts and feelings. Russell 1996 p141

### **Fear being found**

How adopted persons respond to being found can depend upon whether they are living on their own, their sense of guilt toward their adoptive parents, and how much they have disavowed their feelings about being adopted. 'Had my mother found me before I had therapy, I would have turned her away,' Robin says. 'I would have been loyal to my adoptive mother and felt too guilty to have a relationship with my birth mother.' p215 Lifton 1994

### **Non-searchers fear being found**

Unlike the adopted person who evolves psychologically in the process of searching and is ready for reunion, the adopted person who is found by the birth mother is still in a deep sleep and may not be there to be found. One woman described being flooded with a range of feelings 'from intense fear, anxiety, and dislocation, to an incredible curiosity.' Under all of this is the adopted persons fear of not only being found but of being found out: when her mother recognizes her for the impostor she really is, her mother will reject her once again.

Found adopted persons may need to retreat for a while, either to marshal their psychological defenses against possible annihilation that would follow such a rejection or to restructure them in a way that could include this alternate reality. They may leave the birth mother waiting weeks, months, even years, for their response. They need to feel they are in control of themselves and of whatever happens. p216 Lifton 1994

### **Reunion emotions**

Reuniting is like welcoming home a long lost but never forgotten friend...Many emotions can rush to the surface. Some will be expected, some will be surprising. To many, reunion is a lifelong dream that can be intoxicating, exhilarating, and unbelievable. To those who want to be found, a reunion is to be savored, held, and cherished. It is almost impossible to describe the range of feelings that can occur when a mother and her child reunite. Perhaps it is similar to the connection that happens when a mother gives birth. Russell 1996 p138

### **Search emotions flow into reunion**

The emotions of the search flow into those of reunion like a river into the sea. One contacts the birth mother and crosses over, but one does not instantly feel born or transformed. One is still subject to the same old tumultuous mood swings, the same old doubts and fears...

Once across, one enters an alternate reality-the world that might have had one not left one's original self behind and continued on without it... One is faced with making sense of the bewildering array of new characters that materialize. The old reality no longer holds. It is, as one adopted person described it, like being in a white space in which the adoptive family and the birth family cancel each other out. One's identity is obliterated. Nothing will ever be the same again. Lifton 1994 p147

**Difficult for adopted and birthmother**

It is difficult for the most loving of adopted persons and birth mothers to make their way back to each other. The separation, unresolved grief, and secrecy have traumatized them both. And the closed adoption system has made them taboo to each other. No matter how positive the reunion, there is a psychological price paid by both parties in the process. Lifton 1994 p147

**Range of reunions**

“I have come across reunions that have ended after one meeting and others that are still holding fast, despite ups and downs, after ten years or more. They run the gamut from the adopted person being welcomed ‘home’ by the birth mother and her family to the rare cases where the adopted person is denied any contact. In the majority of reunions, mother and child reconnect for a short period until it becomes clear that they will deepen the relationship, maintain a cordial friendship, or disconnect. I have seen adoptive families and birth families blend into an extended family for the sake of the adopted person, just as I have seen the two families orbit separately around the adopted person, without ever interacting. But in all of these scenarios, even the seemingly negative ones, the adopted person feels a sense of grounding and renewal.” Lifton 1994 p147

**Going Away Again**

There are ebbs and tides in reunion relationships. Respecting the other person while dealing with one’s own feelings is no small task. Many people in reunion relationships fear that the other person will leave. If the reunion relationship falters or ends, it feels as if the other person has gone away again. Russell 1996 p142

**Walking on eggshells**

Many people in reunion describe a sense of unsureness in the relationship. They feel they must walk on eggshells to preserve the fragile bond. Some worry about whether they will say the right thing or hurt the other person’s feelings. Russell 1996 p142

**Communication skills**

Some people who enter a reunion relationship already know effective communication skills. Some people are so overcome by the emotions of a reunion that they forget any communication skills they know. A reunion relationship can offer people an opportunity to learn and apply important communication skills that can be used in all relationships.

**Using “I” statements**

This is a basic and effective form of communication. Saying “I feel—when you do—” is direct and explanatory. Using “I” statements means being responsible for your own feelings and expressing them. Using “you” statements make people feel blamed and defensive, which will create tension and misunderstandings.

**Acknowledge feeling**

Acknowledging the other person’s feelings without trying to stop their feelings or fix them is another communication skill that is necessary in reunion relationships. No one

can take away another person’s pain. However, we can let a person know that we are sorry they feel the way that they do and ask if there is anything we can do to help.

**Checking in**

Checking in with the other person in a reunion relationship is crucial. Many fears and anxieties can be relieved by dealing with them directly. Asking direct questions and giving honest responses allows a relationship to grow and prosper. Usually both people in a relationship can feel if there is tension. The fair and loving thing to do is ask the other person how they are feeling about the relationship and to tell them how you are feeling. Russell 1996 p14

**Adopted person response**

Although the adopted persons adult psyche is bound up with the lost mother as profoundly as the fetus’s archaic psyche was bound up with her in utero, the mother is perceived as both goddess and witch, representing both life and death. The adopted person cannot embrace one without confronting the other. *Mother and child cannot help but react to the psychological fallout of their traumas.* ‘All my anguish is because of you’ is an unspoken message that lies between them. Lifton 1994 p148

**Stages of reunion**

Reuniting, as it is called, is still so relatively new that it will be a long time before we can chart all of its fevers. Yet already we can see that there are stages of reunion just as there are stages of the search.

**Honeymoon period—infancy stage**

During the first meeting with the birth mother; the adopted person may feel ‘numb’ or in an ‘intoxicated trance.’ This is understandable when we remember the dual nature of what is going on: the adopted person is both the adult meeting the mother in the Land of Now and the baby meeting the mother in the Land of Was. It is a primal moment in which one is re-experiencing the Big Bang of one’s birth. There is one’s original mother shining with all the brilliance of a supernova before it is destined to fade. For that wondrous moment one is one’s original self-pure, authentic, and real...

The birth mother is also usually regressed by the time of reunion. Once again she is the young woman whose body was with child—a child whose reappearance may fill her with such physical longing that her breasts begin to hurt. There is a freshness to the perceptions of both mother and child during this initial coming together; a euphoria that some liken to a honeymoon period. Yet there is a primal undercurrent to these heightened feelings. The relationship has a tentative quality. Lifton 1994 p148

It can be similar to the falling-in-love period at the beginning of romantic relationships when everything seems magical and wonderful. Russell 1996 p139

**Chaos revisited**

Soon after reunion, or later in a delayed reaction, adopted persons experience a resurgence of the emotional chaos they had during the search. Once again all the unleashed emotions come crashing through their defenses. Especially grief and anger. Lifton 1994 p154

**Grief**

Whatever the nature of the reunion with the birth mother, the adopted person inevitably feels grief for the years they have lost together. Just watching her mother interact in her family with the children she raised can fill the adopted person with anguish for what might have been. There is grief for having been let go, for feeling that one is outside the immediate circle, for not feeling the immediate connection one expected, and for still feeling alone. There is so much grief that one often feels like Alice swimming in a Sea of Tears, the very ocean of tears that has been dammed up inside until now. But scary as it is that, having started, one will never be able to stop, weeping brings rewards as well as relief. It can create 'a river around the boat that carries your soul-life,' according to the Jungian analyst Clarissa Pinkola Estes. 'Tears lift your boat off the rocks, off dry ground, carrying it down river to someplace new, someplace better.' Lifton 1994 pp154-5

**Anger**

While grieving one can also be overwhelmed with free-floating anger...Some adopted persons want to shout: "Where were you when I needed you? How could you have dumped me?" Even though adopted persons understand that the woman who gave birth to them was unable to raise them and did the best she could by arranging an adoption, a part of them will never understand. Whatever the mother's story, she was too young, she was too poor, her parents made her do it, her social worker pressured her, adopted persons know that the mother was not strong enough to hold on. She let go. *Not only she, but the whole clan let go.* They let go. Sometimes the adopted persons anger finds other targets: the adoption system for holding their identity hostage, the social workers for treating them condescendingly when they asked for identifying information, the adoptive parents for colluding in the closed system, and even themselves for passively going along with the secrecy. Lifton 1994 p155

**Male difficulty with anger**

Some adopted persons, especially young men, have difficulty letting go of their anger: it may build rather than recede over the years. Unlike female adopted persons, who understand how one can get pregnant at the wrong time, males tend to take a more judgmental attitude that their mother didn't care enough to keep them. Lifton 1994 p218

**Bastard**

The word *bastard* is still alive and well. Even adopted persons who were never called 'bastard' are familiar with its dark resonance. The knowledge of having arrived illegitimately into the world is buried deep in the adopted persons unconscious, waiting to be tapped. Hence the stigma of the illegitimate in whom father and mother are left coupling forever so the child appears, as it were, impaired, conclusive proof of the social fear that love outlasts lovers, and is eternal. We bastards know it. Lifton 1994 p175

**The bastard moment**

One knows one has experienced the Bastard Moment when 'illegitimacy' becomes a painful feeling instead of an ab-

stract concept. When the euphemisms of adoption are torn away and one is confronted with the shameful social reality of one's birth. When one is not certain one is entitled to exist. These moments are made even more incomprehensible when a birth mother both denies her child's existence and yet wants her present at special occasions. Some adopted persons experience the Bastard Moment for the first time when the birth mother does not introduce them to the rest of her family, or treats them like a bastard in keeping their relationship a secret from her other children. Adopted persons have grown up on the legitimate side of the tracks, so to speak, but such moments throw them back into the shadow world of their shameful origins. Lifton 1994 p177

**Adopted person demeaned**

"One can experience the Bastard Moment even when one's mother has died. I thought of this when I received a tearful phone call from Jean, who, after twenty years of searching, found that her mother was deceased. Her mother's seventy-five-year-old brother invited her to visit him in another state, but said he would not introduce her to his friends as his unmarried sister's daughter. 'My sister's past was private and should be respected,' he told Jean when she protested that honesty was an important part of her life. He couldn't understand that Jean felt demeaned as a person by the very idea of being introduced as someone she wasn't." Lifton 1994 p178

**Reclaiming lost emotions**

We must remember that no matter how painful these waves of grief and anger are, they are part of the ongoing process of mourning that comes with reclaiming one's lost emotions and integrating them into the self. Adopted persons find it hard to believe at the time, but the chaos carries healing in its wake. Lifton 1994 p155

**Reclaiming lost experiences**

We are reminded at each stage of reunion that adopted persons are not having a rational experience, but are being carried away by non-rational passions. Primitive feelings and needs storm the defenses, and more often than not are in charge. Regressed adopted persons want to relive that early period with the fantasy mother before the separation, and then to progress slowly like a growing child to the place in the life cycle where they are now. But the mother may not be emotionally available or may not want to linger too long in that early traumatic space. It is too painful. She may want to return quickly to the life she has so painstakingly put together, where she has other things to do than to reparent an adult child. Lifton 1994 p157

**Growing up fast**

At some point adopted persons have to accept their birth mother's limitations and take some responsibility for reparenting themselves. This often means growing up fast forward, sometimes jumping directly from the terrible twos to the terrible sixteens, which resemble each other in their pushing/pulling...It is often hard to move fast forward without the help of a spouse, friends, a support group, or a therapist. One may need a combination of all of them. Lifton 1994 p158

**Clinging to birthmother**

“Even when the birth mother is fully available at first, it is hard for adopted persons to get all the physical and emotional nurturance they seek. Ideally, the mother would encourage adopted persons to regress for as many months or years as they might need to regain their trust. During that time, she would in effect reparent them, holding and indulging their baby selves on demand and making herself available by phone or mail whenever summoned by the toddler or adolescent self. Unfortunately, it is usually impossible to expect that a birth mother can stop her life to give unconditional love and attention to her adult child, who is in constant fear that she will disappear again...

Adopted persons who cannot have the continual touching and holding of a preverbal relationship with the mother will seek to claim her in other ways, such as trying to possess every bit of information about her life during their nine months together and after. But no matter how much the birth mother reveals about the past, adopted persons are often insatiable—as if there is something the mother is withholding, something essential for their well-being. As if they are addicted to searching for ways to break down the mother’s resistance. As if they need one more drop of milk to slake their thirst. Lifton 1994 p159

**Denial**

It is not unusual for birth parents who marry after giving up their child to try to behave as if the birth never happened, much in the manner of Holocaust survivors who try to shed the traumatic past. The grief, pain, guilt, and shame are too great to hear. No matter what their joy, birth parents cannot help but feel exposed and even resentful toward the lost child for coming back with the discarded entrails of the past. Unfortunately, the child cannot return empty-handed. Lifton 1994 p160

**Fantasy meets reality**

A lack of information can provide fertile ground for fantasy. Many reunions occur when the adopted person is an adult and has had many years to create fantasies time.

Those who enter a reunion relationship will bring with them their personal fantasies about the other person and about what the reunion relationship will be like. A reunion can go better than expected or leave much to be desired. It is important to allow the reality to replace the fantasy. Russell 1996 p140

**Demolishing BM fantasy**

We could say that the reclaimed birth mother has risen as if from the dead, for her absence had made her as if dead to the child. Still, her reappearance in the adopted persons life does not necessarily undo the loss that was created by her absence. The phantom mother has been flushed out and then fleshed out, yet this actual birth mother with whom one has had no prior relationship cannot fulfill the promise of the fantasy mother. Lifton 1994 p162

**Regression**

It is not uncommon for people in reunion to regress back to the time of the relinquishment. The birth parent can again feel confused, young, and unsure of what to do. The adopted person can feel like a helpless infant. Both parties

can feel as if they have lost touch with their adult self. The reunion will bring up issues of parenting and needs. Regression can make it difficult to distinguish between current needs and past needs that didn’t get met. Russell 1996 p140

**The ‘let down’**

To witness the let down that many adopted persons experience after reunions of any kind is to realize the critical importance of fantasy in the early structuring of the self. When this structure is shaken or toppled, the whole self is threatened. The adopted persons survival strategies were built on that fantasy mother. To dismantle the fantasy is to dismantle the self. It is yet another paradoxical situation: one set out to find the missing mother in order to find the missing part of the self, but *in the process one loses the fantasies that were a vital part of the self*. One is faced with a loss of dimensions that parallel the original loss, for the fantasies were the link not only to the ‘mother-self’ but to the magical, omnipotent part of the self that made one unique. At some point adopted persons realize that they cannot fully be their birth mother’s child any more than they were fully their adoptive mother’s child.” Lifton 1994 p162

**Emotional overload**

“Emotions become overwhelming at some point in most reunions. Whether this happens early or late, adopted persons feel they have no choice but to withdraw for a while, to take time out to regroup their psychic forces. This decision for time out is not always a conscious one. In ‘Lost and Found’ I wrote about the emotional turmoil many adopted persons, including myself, experienced after reunion, a reaction that can be accompanied by immobilizing depression for varying lengths of time. I was so overwhelmed with anxiety and guilt after meeting my mother that I fell through the trapdoor of the self, down to what felt like rock bottom. It must have been the place where my infant self had landed after being dropped. For the next two months, I withdrew from everything around me, staying very still, until I could regain the psychic energy to climb back up into the outside world again. Lifton 1994 p165

**Breaking-down to reemerge**

“Now I know that the self has to undergo a certain amount of break-down in order to reemerge in its new shape. It is equivalent to the spiritual death and rebirth experience. For many years I did not feel strong enough to contact my mother. During that time I was unconsciously realigning the structures of my old self. By the time I felt safe enough to return to her, it was too late. She could not risk being hurt again. We spoke by phone many times after that, but we were never able to find the way back to each other...Adopted persons may also feel the need to pull back if an adoptive parent is applying pressure for them to end the relationship with the birth mother; or if the birth mother is applying pressure to intensify the relationship before the adopted person is ready.” Lifton 1994 p165

## Stages of resolution

### 1 Refableizing the birthmother

Lifton—There comes a time in reunion when adopted persons accept that they will never have the fantasy mother whose breasts flow eternally with milk and honey. They do not give her up completely, any more than they give up their sense of uniqueness, but rather they retreat from the Here and Now back to the Ghost Kingdom with as much of her intact as they can manage. Refableizing the birth mother is a way of holding on to what they need. Lifton 1994 p166

### 2 Connection—Disconnection—Reconnection

The desire for connection drives adopted persons to search, but even after a satisfying reunion, they may at times feel the desire to disconnect for a while. As we have seen, it is not easy for either party in reunion to hold on to a relationship that occasionally packs the voltage of an exposed electrical wire...

An adopted person may end the relationship when the mother persists in keeping the adopted persons existence a secret from the rest of her family, or blows hot and cold, depending on her mood... Adopted persons may also break off with the birth mother if she becomes too emotionally demanding, and uses the relationship to work through her own needs. In such situations there may be a role reversal, with the adopted person expected to hold the birth mother's pain and to supply the unconditional love that the birth mother never had from her own mother. Lifton 1994 p167

### 3 Spouse resentment

It is not unusual for an adopted person to break off the relationship if the spouse resents the emotions being spent on the birth mother...In such cases, the adopted person retreats back into the Artificial Self, splitting off the birth mother once again in order to avoid the emotional turmoil that including her in their life would cause. In situations where the spouse welcomes the birth mother into the new family, it is possible for her to become a part of the adopted persons life and even a grandmother to his child. Lifton 1994 p168

### 4 Reconnecting siblings and grandparents

When the relationship with their birth parents breaks down, it is not uncommon for adopted persons to get emotional sustenance from their half or full siblings, with whom they form close friendships. They may also develop a strong bond with birth grandparents. Lifton 1994 p171

### 5 In limbo

Some adopted persons find themselves in limbo, an arid stretch where the relationship seems permanently on hold. They are neither in reunion nor not in reunion. They are as if stuck in the birth canal. Limbo is a place where things can go either way. Ambivalence rules. Your mother puts off meeting with you, but holds out some possibility for the future. Or your mother refuses to meet you, but does not block your relationship with her parents and extended family. Or you manage to meet your siblings without your mother knowing. Or your mother sends out mixed signals, affectionate one time and hostile another; so that you

do not know where you stand with her. Sometimes adopted persons fear that they will spend their lives in limbo. Sometimes they do. But sometimes things take a turn for the better just when they have given up hope. Lifton 1994 p172

### 6 Shuffling the stages

“Not all reunions develop in the same way. Some begin with intensity and then peter out, while others that start slowly may get stronger through the years. Many factors can influence this process, especially geographical distance and the emotional availability of mother and adult child. One learns that a reunion keeps shifting over time. Just when you think you have seized it, it changes shape and transforms into something else.

Some adopted persons are able to grow up fast forward on their own, while others need to merge with the birth mother for a year or two in order to be able to separate later. It's the birth mother's task to help the adopted person 'push off' from her when she is ready-to let go, as all mothers have to do when it's time for their children to separate. The weaning requires, as one birth mother put it, 'a delicate balance.'

We have looked at some of the stages and complexities in the reunion process when the adopted person crosses over from one reality to another. We've seen how time becomes collapsed in reunion, so that mother and child have to re-live in a few months or a few years a life cycle that should take twenty to thirty years. Nonadoptive parents and their children test their emotions and work out their grievances as they go along, but adopted persons and birth parents, with no history to fall back on, have to begin from the beginning.” Lifton 1994 p171-174

### Navigating the reunion relationship

This takes time, patience and practice. There are ups and downs, times of feeling close and distant, and moments of clarity and misunderstanding. The relationship will have a life of its own and will need nurturing. Reunion relationships can be stormy, calm, and everything in between. The bond between parent and child creates a base on which to build a lasting relationship. Sometimes this bond feels tenuous and held together by a thread, while other times it can feel indestructible. Reunion relationships take energy and a commitment to work through the rough times. Russell 1996 p144

### Post-reunion feelings

Reunions bring up the past and force people to confront their current feelings. Adoption is not an easy experience. Reunion relationships can reflect the issues and feelings that have not been fully processed. Things change after a reunion. Many people feel a sense of serenity in knowing the truth and having information that wasn't available before. Many in reunion feel that they can now attend to other things in their life. Russell 1996 p145

### Reunion realities

A reunion does not change the reality that an adoption took place. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of a reunion is the realization that the past cannot be replaced with the present. The adopted person has still lost growing up in the birth family, and the birth parent has still lost seeing

their son or daughter grow up. A reunion relationship may not go as well as expected. Everyone going in to a reunion has personal expectations about the outcome. It is important to remember that there will always be a relationship, even if there is no contact at the present time. Russell 1996 p147

#### **Beyond the Triad**

Connecting with a person close to the birth parent or adopted person can sometimes feel safer and less intense. The importance of these secondary relationships should not be overlooked as they can add greatly to the success of the primary reunion relationship. One of the joys of reunion relationships is being able to meet and get to know many people in a variety of ways. Those beyond the triad have also been affected by the adoption and may want to have a relationship. Russell 1996 p148

#### **Closing the reunion relationship**

Some people do not want to continue a reunion relationship. For them, meeting the person and getting information is all they were looking for. This can be difficult if the other party in the reunion does want an ongoing relationship. Some people are just not emotionally available for a reunion relationship. It can be painful to give up a lifelong dream of having the relationship you've always wanted. As in any relationship, one can only control one's own actions and behaviors. Emotionally releasing the other person and closing the relationship is an option some will need to consider. Russell 1996 p148

#### **Reunions demolish adopted person fantasy**

To witness the let down that many adopted persons experience after reunions of any kind is to realize the critical importance of fantasy in the early structuring of the self. When this structure is shaken or toppled, the whole self is threatened. Their survival strategies were built on that fantasy mother. To dismantle the fantasy is to dismantle the self. It is yet another paradoxical situation: one set out to find the missing mother in order to find the missing part of the self, but in the process one loses the fantasies that were a vital part of the self. One is faced with a loss of dimensions that parallel the original loss, for the fantasies were the link not only to the 'motherself' but to the magical, omnipotent part of the self that made one unique. At some point adopted persons realize that they cannot fully be their birth mother's child any more than they were fully their adoptive mother's child. Lifton 1994 pp62

#### **Almost all applicants seek reunion**

Counsellors and social workers were asked what, if anything, applicants report that they intend to do after receiving their birth certificates. The overwhelming response was that they intended to make contact with their birthmother and find family members. Very few stated they wished to have the information only, but some intended to wait to give themselves time. This confirms the findings of Kennard (1991) which show that only 6% of adopted people had not made contact three years after receiving their original birth certificates." Iwanek 1991

## ADOPTIVE PARENTS REUNION ISSUES

#### **Adoption triangle tensions**

The triangle isn't necessarily a good image for adoption participants to internalize because the idea of a triangle almost automatically conveys overtones of rivalry and competition which are better left outside adoption proceedings. Like it or not, though, the tension and conflict inherent in any triangle situation appears in adoption and reunion also because the nature of threes is to shift into various two-against-one configurations. One of these configurations consists of the birthmother and adopted person as a pair and the adoptive parents as the odd one out; the second consists of the adoptive parents and the adopted person as pair, with the birthmother in the outside position; in the third, the two sets of parents are paired and their mutual child stands alone. Somewhere along the way in post-reunion, everyone gets a turn at being the outsider. Gediman/Brown 1991 p219

#### **Impact on the adoptive family**

Some adoptive parents are thrilled when their child makes contact with his or her birth parents, but others feel personally offended by their child's search. It would be virtually impossible, for adoptive parents to have no feelings about their child having a reunion relationship. Some adoptive parents will choose to be a part of the reunion, while others will choose to stay at a distance.

Search and reunion can feel threatening to adoptive parents. A reunion can bring up the adoptive parent's worst fear that the adopted person will want to be with the birth parents instead of the adoptive parents. Adoptive parents can fear being replaced by someone who wasn't there to do all the work of raising the child. The time of search and reunion can also be an opportunity for the adoptive family to come together around a topic that is important to all family members. Embracing the inevitable that an adopted person has two families - can lead to closer relationships for everyone. Russell 1996 p146

Where are the adoptive parents in all this? While the adopted person was growing up, the birth parents were the invisible parents in their lives, but during search and reunion it often seems that the adoptive parents become the invisible ones. But visible or not, on stage or in the wings, the adoptive parents are always there in the adopted persons psyche, and have an influence on the reunion process. Lifton 1994 p241

#### **Adoptive parents threatened**

Faced with an enduring post-reunion, many parents in traditional closed adoptions have feelings of fear, worry, or anger. While it's true that some grew into accepting the desirability of their children's reconnecting with birth origins, the possibility of a post-reunion between birth-mother and child is something on which they didn't dwell. When the prospect of an 'ever after' relationship with the birthmother rears its head, it's not unusual for adoptive parents who have been supportive of search to withhold

their blessing. They become threatened, at least temporarily. It's not just that their adoption procedure was guaranteed "search-proof" and that they may regard reunion as legally wrong and morally unjust from the perspective of contracts of what is 'fair.' Less obvious is that many of the feelings that come forth hark back to the time they decided to adopt, usually because they were unable to have biological children. Gediman/Brown 1991 p227

#### **Threatened by search**

The adopted persons search can be very threatening to adoptive parents because it violates the unspoken rules of the closed adoption system on which their parent-child relationship has been based. There are no rituals for such a momentous event in their child's life, such as there are for baptism, bar mitzvah, graduation, or marriage. No one knows how to react when it happens. The adoptive parents are suddenly asked to accept an alternate reality to the one in which they adopted; secrecy is to be replaced by openness. Lifton 1994 pp241

#### **AP adversarial thoughts re BM**

Some adoptive parents' adversarial thoughts about the birthmother stopped while their children were growing up. These parents came to believe that it would be in their child's best interest to know his origins, even if it entailed search and reunion. They were supportive of a child's expressed desire to search, even willing to help if they could, but the impetus had to come from the child. Many held back information and support until they were certain it was being sought. Since children often think about their adoption without verbalizing their thoughts, the consequences of such restraint can be ironic. An adopted person in her forties, for example, found out that her eighty-year old adoptive mother had been burdened for years with information she was eager to hand over: Gediman/Brown 1991 p220

#### **Some adoptive parents don't think of the BM**

Some adoptive mothers go through the child-rearing years giving little conscious thought to the woman who bore their child. But once they admit to themselves that they are curious about the original mother, it's no better for them to be weaving fantasies about her than it was for the adopted person to have been doing the same. Gediman/Brown 1991 p223

#### **Some friend of APs may object to reunion**

Some outsiders presume that the adoptive family is less strong than the non-adoptive family, and, for this reason, disapprove when their friends' adopted children become involved in search and reunion. Adoptive parents also occasionally find that in helping their children search, some of their personal friendships are threatened, as if the neighbors fear that a blow is being struck against the foundations of the family unit generally. Gediman/Brown 1991 p231

#### **Denial exposed**

In searching for those once-invisible parents, the adopted person exposes the denial by which everyone has lived, as if in a gentleman's agreement. As everything is stripped away, the adoptive parents are catapulted back to their previous state of infertility and childlessness. It is a desolate

time for them, even for those who gave birth to other children after adopting, as they are confronted with their earlier feelings of grief and loss around their infertility. No one, not the doctor, the lawyer, or the social worker warned them that their children might need to seek out their origins. They tried to be good parents, and they thought that their adopted children were happy with them. Lifton 1994 pp241-242

#### **Infertility a key issue**

The key issue to understanding the psychology of adoptive parents is the effect infertility has on every aspect of their lives, though it has been denied and repressed from consciousness. Infertility is a loss and should be mourned, but many adopters in these reunions were not encouraged to mourn the child they would never have. In such cases feelings of loss tend to remain unresolved, and reunion revives them. Gediman/Brown 1991 p228

#### **Fear of losing the child**

When their reality slips like a rug out from under them, most adoptive parents are overwhelmed with fear of loss. They risk losing not only the child but the reality of their family and the continuity of their clan. They feel betrayed. The chosen baby, as one adopted person put it, 'has fallen from grace.' The parents may ask, 'How can you do this to us?'...They may remind their child, 'We're your real parents and don't you ever forget it.' Some react with anger that covers over their fear and anguish. Still, I have noticed that no matter how distraught adoptive parents may be by the revelation of their adult child's search and ultimate reunion, they are usually able to retreat to some safety zone of their own. The eventual realization that their child has not disappeared from their lives, and still acts like their child, reassures them that blood is not necessarily thicker than water. They can still feel they are the 'real' parents, if not the 'exclusive' ones.

Some adoptive parents fall back on the old habit of denial that served them so well in the past, and try to go on with life as usual. They may behave as if the reunion never happened and never ask about the birth mother. Like ostriches with their heads in the sand, they want to believe that if they do not see or hear about her, she does not exist. They don't understand, as a male adopted person put it, that the purpose of searching is 'to gain knowledge, not to lose or exchange people like melons after qualitative comparison.' Lifton 1994 p242

#### **Fear of losing the adopted person**

In addition to reviving the loss of biological parenthood, reunion also threatens to be the actualization of a lifelong fear: the fear that the adopted child will someday return to, or be taken back by, the birthparents. Related to this, reunion can also stimulate adoptive parents' doubts about their legitimacy as parents, a concern that some harbored all along. Not having been biological parents, some feel themselves imposters, mistrusting that their parenting experience has been just as real and just as valid. Adoptive parents are typically referred to as 'the psychological parents' in the adoption literature, but reunion undermines their security. Gediman/Brown 1991 p228

**New relationship a threat**

Even adoptive parents who encouraged the reunion in the beginning may become threatened when the adopted person becomes friendly with the birth mother or father. 'I thought she just needed to know some medical and family history,'. One adoptive mother said. 'I didn't think she was going to form a relationship with her birth parents.' They become doubly confused when the adopted person becomes sad and moody, not understanding why she seems unhappy now that she finally has what she thought she wanted. Lifton 1994 pp243

**Adoptive parents in disagreement**

Adoptive parents' reluctance to broach the subject of search and reunion may also be a result of disagreement about how the issue should be handled, with one parent being supportive of search and the other opposed. Adopted persons often report that one of their parents is significantly more comfortable or understanding than the other. As a group, adoptive parents are generally on the sidelines of the search. Gediman/Brown 1991 p220

**Some accept and join in**

Some adoptive parents find it safer to become part of the relationship than to fight it. One mother and father traveled with their daughter and her birth mother back to the town where their daughter was born, and they keep in contact with the birth mother. Others send holiday cards to the birth mother and her family, even if they have not met, and, if the adopted person approves, they may stop to introduce themselves when traveling near the birth mother's city. Lifton 1994 pp243

**Fear of losing parents**

Reunion is a two-edged sword. Just as adoptive parents fear losing their child, adopted persons fear losing their adoptive parents. They may not tell their parents about their reunion, because they feel guilty about what they have done and don't want to hurt them. They also have the underlying fear that their parents will disinherit them, or even abandon them, just as their birth parents did.

**Between two mothers**

Reunion could be described as a tale of two mothers. The birth mother originally relinquished her child to the adoptive mother, and now the adoptive mother feels that she is being asked to relinquish the child back to the original mother. Nancy Verrier writes from her perspective as an adoptive mother: It is not difficult to understand why many adoptive mothers are not overjoyed by the idea that their children want to search. After years of struggle and constant turmoil in the home, after the aching agony of witnessing their children relate more easily to everyone else's mothers than to them (it's safer!), they then see their children yearning to find that magical person with whom there is some undeniable, indefinable connection. It is mysterious, scary and makes many adoptive parents wonder why they subjected themselves to so much rejection and pain for this result.! Lifton 1994 pp243-244

**Littered with regrets**

The adoption system is littered with regrets. The adoptive mother regrets that her child is not biologically related,

and the birth mother regrets that she relinquished her child. The adoptive mother regrets that the birth mother has come back, and the birth mother regrets that she ever left. These two women, who have always been invisibly linked, try to cover up their feelings as they maneuver from their designated places on either side of the adopted person.

**Each mother threatened by the other**

Some adoptive mothers insist on meeting the birth mother, and some birth mothers insist on meeting the adoptive mother. The issue of status is at play here. The adoptive mother may feel a need to protect her role as mother, and the birth mother may feel a need to be acknowledged by the adoptive mother. Each needs the other to establish the authenticity of her slightly tarnished credentials, for, on some level, the adoptive mother does not feel she is entitled to claim the adopted person, just as the birth mother does not feel she is entitled to reclaim the adopted person. Each mother is threatened by the other. The adoptive mother worries that the birth mother will be critical of what she did or did not do for her child; the birth mother worries that the adoptive mother will be critical of her for giving up a child. There is a lot of primitive energy going on between these two women, not unlike the kind that passes between women who love the same man. Lifton 1994 pp244-245

**The two mothers: fights and rituals**

Most of the mothers in our sample who have met one another maintain some kind of continuing contact, but the style tends to be closer to tolerant acceptance or necessary civility than warm friendliness. Caught between being allies and competitors, they invent a relationship of sorts, but neither is quite sure what to do with the other. The birthmothers in these relationships feel that the adoptive parents' goodwill is an asset to be prized ("I felt I was in their life by invitation only" says one) so they take great pains to maintain it. The adoptive parents take pride and satisfaction from the knowledge that they're aiding their child, but if they had their choice, many would prefer that none of this had ever happened. The relationship is like an uneasy alliance, remaining in effect until someone upsets the delicate balance...The etiquette requires that each give the other her due, and the two women make various gestures to signal their desire for peaceful coexistence. "I have a great need for her to think I'm okay, that I'm not the bastard mother," one birthmother confides. Often, each is seeking affirmation from the other. Gediman/Brown 1991 p237-8

**Testing alternate reality**

"Adopted persons are always relieved to find that their adoptive mother and father have survived the news of their search and reunion, especially when they were sure it would 'kill' them. They need their parents to be there for them as they do their trapeze act of swinging out into the unknown as much as they did when they were little-if not more. They need their parents to accept their emotional ups and downs, their moods and crying spells, without taking them personally. They need the security of their adoptive bond to return to as they test the strength of their birth bond. Lifton 1994 p246

**First meetings often difficult**

When the birthmother presents herself in the flesh, not every adoptive mother is as ready or able to greet her. Judging from most of the accounts we heard, the first meeting between the two mothers has little reunion magic. The occasion is marked by discomfort and nervousness, and birthmothers often feel they have been jettisoned back to a sorry past. Even when the adoptive parents are gracious and welcoming, birthmothers tend to feel inferior, because these are the people who 'took care' of their 'mistake.' Gediman/Brown 1991 p224

**First meetings often superficial and formal**

Indeed, caution is the watchword on everyone's part, even if adopted persons and birthmothers are well-known to one another by the time the parents are introduced. These *early meetings often have a superficial or formal quality*. Mutual expressions of appreciation, gratitude, admiration and respect are predictable, along with symbolic gestures meant to convey a similar generosity of spirit. Adoptive parents frequently offer the birthmother pictures of the child growing up, a sign of goodwill and a way of assuring the birthmother she has a rightful interest. Adoptive parents may even take photographs of the birthmother or make a videotape of the gathering. Throughout, people are studying one another's looks and forming impressions about what kinds of individuals they are. Gediman/Brown 1991 p225

**Adoptive parents sidelined**

While it is important for adoptive parents to be part of the reunion process, however, it is also important for them to understand that the adopted person may have to make most, if not all, of the journey alone. It can be hard for adoptive mothers to stay on the sidelines. They want to go with the adopted person to meet the birth mother and are hurt if they are not included in the reunion plans. But just as the secrecy in the adoption system forced the adopted person to keep the birth mother split off in the Ghost Kingdom, so now it is hard for the adopted person to mend that split. Some adopted persons feel possessive about the phantom mother who lived in their secret fantasies, and worry that the adoptive mother, like the wicked stepmother in fairy tales, will somehow try to banish her once again. Adoptive mothers have to be strong enough to understand that this is a phase the adopted person may go through in the reunion process...

Adopted persons often go from struggling over who is the real mother to which is the real family. Some feel a need to dive into that alternate reality to find answers. This may mean disappearing into the birth mother or birth father's life, as if trying it on for size, as they experiment with what might have been. It may take months, or even years, before they can find a secure place between the realities that is theirs. Lifton 1994 p246

**First meeting of two mothers not easy**

The first in-person meeting between birth and adoptive parents is not easy, but those who confront their counterpart can achieve insights, and resolution, that were before inaccessible. Writing to reassure her son's adoptive mother, one birthmother put it this way: 'Birthmothers are a bit

like shadows. But take them out into the daylight and they're just another woman in the supermarket wondering what's for supper.' Gediman/Brown 1991 p222

**A mother's gift**

Some adopted persons see an adoptive mother who initiates or takes over her child's search as invading her child's boundaries and taking away their autonomy. But, in some cases, the adoptive mother is giving her child a gift by sanctioning what until then has been taboo. There are adopted persons who would never dare to venture into that forbidden area of the self without the adoptive mother's guidance. Some would never risk the journey alone. Lifton p247

**Reunion etiquette**

There should be a 'proper etiquette' book to help with difficult situations that come up after reunion.

**Weddings** Major crises can arise regarding protocols and the place of the two mothers. Weddings can also be an opportunity for adoptive parents and birth parents to meet for the first time in a festive way.

**Grandchildren** An unexpected time of tension that can test everyone's generosity of spirit is the arrival of a grandchild. One adoptive mother informed a birth mother; even before her daughter was pregnant: 'The grandchild is mine.' The birth mother responded: 'I signed away my child, but not my grandchildren.' Even when the relationship between the two mothers has been going well, the arrival of a grandchild can ruffle it. Lifton 1994 p249

**Mother's Day** *There are moments during reunion when adopted persons would gladly have the word mother dropped from the English language.* Many adopted persons call their birth mother by her first name, but they may refer to her as 'my mother.' Adoptive mothers don't want to share the rank of 'mother' with that 'other mother' on most days, but especially on Mother's Day. Birth mothers try to be sensitive on the issue for the sake of the adopted person, but, in private, they assert that they are also the mother. Mother's Day can become a torment for everyone, as adopted persons fret over whether they are expected to send the birth mother a card; the birth mother frets over whether she will receive one and whether she should send one; and the adoptive mother frets over whether the birth mother is going to get one...some resolve the Mother's Day problem by not sending either of them a card." Lifton 1994 p250

**Reclaiming the adoptive parents**

We can see how complex it is for everyone when the seemingly immutable closed adoption system, which has shaped and distorted everyone's reality, collapses under its own weight. One has to search for new psychic quarters and, in the meantime, may try to camp out in the ruins of the old. The niceties of civility may be sacrificed for the certainties of survival, as adoptive parents try to hold on to an adopted person who may be equally disoriented.

One of the many paradoxes in search and reunion is that adopted persons often find their adoptive parents when they find their birth parents. Once the barrier of secrecy has been lifted, they are able to see their adoptive parents

in a new way. They can share their feelings with them and open up communication channels that had been clogged by secrecy. Lifton 1994 pp252-253

#### **Fear of hurting adoptive parents**

Young adult adopted persons who still live with their parents or are financially dependent on them often resist meeting the birth mother for fear of hurting their adoptive parents. Even if the adoptive relationship was stormy, they may still have the need to cling to the adoptive parents, who are more of a ballast for the adopted self than the ghostly figure who has just materialized. It feels safer to put everything on hold for a while until they feel equipped to handle the situation. Lifton 1994 p218

#### **Adoptive parents fears**

Many adoptive parents understandably feel threatened by the prospect of 'their' child meeting the birthparents. Some fear they will lose their child (and possibly grandchildren) to this stranger, and others fear what they will find. Not only will the adopted person have fantasized about what the birthparents will be, but so too will the adoptive parents. Because many relinquishments took place due to the young age of the birthmother, the adoptive mother may be up to fifteen or twenty years older than the birthmother. That in itself is heavy competition. Maybe the adopted person will like the birthmother more. She is coming into the adopted person's life at a time when the adoptive parents have already played the role of the disciplinarian and rule maker. They may also fear that the birthmother is leading an 'undesirable' life, and that the adopted person will be disappointed. This argument, that the adopted persons should be protected from potentially disturbing facts about their background is not valid by the time the adopted person reaches adulthood. Every individual has a right to know about the earlier circumstances of their life. Kenworthy Thesis 1992

#### **Post-reunion a frightening unknown.**

Beyond issues of loss and legitimacy, reunion and post-reunion can stir up other powerful feelings and fears. Adoptive parents may be either consciously or subconsciously angry at the adopted person for being interested in the birthmother at all. They may worry that they've failed the child—otherwise why would he or she need to search. They may be afraid of admitting that they too are curious about the birthmother, lest their interest be interpreted as lack of love. They may worry that the adopted person will be rejected by the birthmother, or hurt by what is learned; or that the adopted person will disturb the birthmother's life. They may fret about whether the birthmother will be more attractive than they (she's likely to be ten or fifteen years younger). They don't know if a post-reunion relationship will be brief or prolonged, loving or fitful. Some worry about whether they'll lose the grandchildren they've got or the ones yet to come. Post-reunion is a frightening unknown. Gediman/Brown 1991 p228

#### **Research reassuring**

An adopted person who reassures his adoptive parents about the strength of his attachment and love can reduce the risk quotient considerably. Available research indicates

that the effect of reunion on the relationship between adopted persons and their adoptive parents is, almost always, either to improve it or to have no effect; only rarely does it become worse. Gediman/Brown 1991 p229

#### **Adoptive parents quest for security**

Many adoptive parents bolster their own security by staying informed and involved in reunion and post-reunion, which is why one search consultant advises her clients to include the adoptive parents in any search activity, especially if the son or daughter is still living at home. Some adoptive parents also try to include themselves in post-reunion interactions between the adopted person and the birth-mother because they feel pushed aside or shut out when the pair spend time alone. But other adoptive parents encounter the opposite dilemma: they become aware that the adopted person is shutting out the birthmother when good manners (the manners they have tried to instill) dictate treating her with greater kindness or consideration. Gediman/Brown 1991 p229

#### **Learning of the birthmothers pain**

Learning about or being reminded of a birthmother's pain in giving up a baby isn't easy or pleasant. Some adoptive parents will tune it out. Some get angry, retroactively, when they realize that there can be pain for everyone in the adoption process and that their child may feel rejected no matter how loving they've been. Some have problems dealing with the reality that their good fortune came via another's distress. Not being willing to have a relationship with the birthmother is sometimes a way of avoiding these difficult truths. Gediman/Brown 1991 p229

#### **Acknowledgment of difference**

Dr H David Kirk's writings were among the first to call attention to the fact that the adoptive family is different from the biological family in important ways, whether or not the differences are talked about. To acknowledge difference is to acknowledge what's true. "Perhaps the most important outcome of the search and reunion process," according to current clinicians "is that it can enable the entire adoptive family to 'let go of denial. An example of insistence on differences is the family who each year celebrated both their son's birthday and the day of his adoption, a practice which his birthmother was distressed to learn about. Gediman/Brown 1991 p230

#### **Adoption not necessarily better or worse**

Being adopted, or becoming parents through adoption, is not necessarily better or worse, but it is different... "Many adoptive parents turn away from adoption issues and don't want to believe that adoption is related to their children's problems. They think they can 'love away' the feelings of rejection or the questions with which their children live. But 'we do not replace one another,' she maintain. Life does not begin when a child is placed in our arms through adoption. Birthparents are extensions of our children" says Carol Gustavson an adoptive parent and she personally has always felt a 'shadow mother bond' with the birthmothers of her own, all of whom have had reunions. Gediman/Brown 1991 p231

**Adoptive parents have more difficult task**

Psychologist Patricia Baasel—Adoptive parents have a more difficult task than biological parents, she feels, for two reasons. *First*, because it's harder for the adoptive parent to understand the child (to get on the child's wavelength, as she puts it); *second*, because the child has 'additional burdens' himself by virtue of the adoption. Gediman/Brown 1991 p231

**Adoption reunions once a non issue**

In earlier decades the two families in adoption proceedings were advised that they had no need to know each other, advice which left an adversarial feeling in its wake. Adopters were told to proceed with only minimal information about the biological family. No one entertained the possibility of a cooperative spirit, much less a cooperative arrangement, to benefit the child. Gediman/Brown 1991 p219

**BIRTH MOTHER REUNION ISSUES****Not easy for birth mothers to search**

It is not easy for birth mothers to get up the courage to search; they have to get in touch with the feelings that they cut off at the time of surrender. They were told that if they loved the baby, they would give it up, that two parents were better than one. They were assured that they would forget and were encouraged to get on with their lives, as if they were *robots* and there were no such thing as the sacred mother-child bond.

Many describe numbing themselves and keeping their relinquishment a secret. Not a few were so traumatized that they had no more children. If they sought therapy for depression, the chances were that the loss of a child was not seen as a core issue of their unhappiness. Yet, through therapy or with the help of understanding friends or spouses, many were able to get in touch with their grief and anger and their need to know what happened to their children.' Lifton 1994 p212

**Birth mother search triggers**

As with adopted persons, it can be a life crisis that jolts a birth mother into another state of consciousness. Or it can be watching another mother reuniting with her child on TV that reconnects her to the loss of her child. Or she might come across a story in a magazine about adopted persons who want to know their heritage but are afraid that their birth mothers will reject them. Birth mothers also fear being rejected. They fear that the adopted person will be angry at being given up and refuse to see them; that they won't live up to the adopted persons expectations; that they will lose the adopted person for the second time. Yet, in spite of all their fears, some birth mothers are driven to seek out their children. Lifton 1994 p213

**Birth mothers who awaken to their grief**

They realize that they were not aware of what was happening when they let their child disappear into the dark underworld of the adoption system. It was as if they had turned away. They accuse social workers, their parents,

the adoptive parents, the closed system itself, of abducting their child. Because the lips of the record keepers are sealed, the child has vanished from the mother into the 'Land of the As If Dead'...Birth mothers sit at the place where the umbilicus was cut. A part of them remains there, even as another part goes on with the motions of life...' Lifton 1994 p213

**Birth mother's joy bittersweet**

Tempered by the realization that she can never fully have her child back. The adopted person has been nourished by the love and culture of the adoptive home, and some part of her will always belong to that world.

'When I saw my adult daughter acting so reserved with me, I knew I was not going to get my baby back,' said one birth mother, expressing what many feel. 'I felt a double grief that I would have to separate from this young woman as well as from the infant I never really had.' Lifton 1994 p214

**Birth mother's search confusion**

Some birth mothers may not be clear about what they are searching for. They may think that all they want is to know that the child is alive and well and to answer any questions they might have. They may say they hope to have a friendship with the child, but that they do not want to take the adoptive mother's place...

When she reunites with her adult child, however, a birth mother is startled to find that she has also reunited with the younger self she left behind with her baby, as well as with the grief that she had buried...

It is very difficult for adopted persons to respond to a birth mother when their adoptive parents are threatened. They move into a protective mode especially some boys, who have a hard time dealing with emotional conflict... Once she connects with the adopted person, a birth mother longs to hold her lost baby, to give it the hugs and kisses that were not possible before, to have an ongoing relationship-to be a mother. Lifton 1994 p215

**Birthmother response**

No matter who adopted persons find the 'All-loving mother'; who flings open the door; the 'Mother from hell', who bars the way; the 'Ambivalent mother'; who swings back and forth; the 'Mother who married Father'-they will learn that the mother who left them behind has done her own kind of splitting to survive. Her response will be influenced by how she dealt with the shame and humiliation of her pregnancy; the pain of losing the innocence of youth; her feelings about the father; and the trauma of giving up her child. It will also be influenced by how much denial she has done for emotional survival, the secrets she has kept, the guilt she has felt, and the new life she has made. Lifton 1994 p147

**The rejected self**

It can feel like death to an adopted person when the birth mother refuses a meeting, as if only she can sanction the reality of their life. 'It is not you the birth mother is rejecting, but her former self,' I tell adopted persons in counseling. This concept helps them understand the birth mother's behavior; but it does not take away the deep pain of rejec-

tion that the child within feels. For all adopted persons, whether or not they are pro-choice, harbor the knowledge that they could have been aborted. And adopted persons who are turned away by their birth mothers often feel as if they have absorbed the infanticidal fantasies of the woman who unwillingly carried them. *They were aborted after they were born rather than after they were conceived.* They may know that the unwanted offspring of married parents carry the same dark insight, but they still believe that they are not entitled to be alive because they did not come into the world in a legitimate way. Some prenatalists believe the unborn child is aware of the mother's emotional stress and ambivalence: that wanted fetuses will experience feelings of pleasure and well-being, and unwanted fetuses will experience fear of death" Lifon 1994 p181-182

#### **BM emotionally aborts child**

A mother who has aborted her child emotionally has buried the experience, and will not enter into a reunion of any kind. She has split off that defeated, humiliated part of herself and refuses to reconnect with it, which means she cannot reconnect with her child. She has also split off the woman who was in love with the birth father and the woman who would have mothered their child. She lives in the present and will not look back. As the Polish saying goes: she cut off her past like a fish's tail. She is protecting the self she has reconstructed over the years...It is devastating for adopted persons when the mother who has lived in their fantasies will not acknowledge their existence. The danger for adopted persons is that even though they have seized power by going on the search, they have given the natural mother unnatural power over them: the power to give them a proper birth or; if she chooses, to keep them unborn. Lifon 1994 p182

#### **Adopted person aborted from clan**

"A few weeks later; he received a letter from his mother explaining that her psychologist and minister had advised her not to see him again: it would upset her personally and be detrimental to her two young children. I recognized the psychiatrist and minister as keepers of the establishment's perceived truths-one representing mental health, the other moral certitude. *They were accomplices in keeping the adopted person aborted from the consciousness of his clan.* They saw him not as the returned lost baby but as the returned dead, who seek vengeance. Rather than understanding the healing she would undergo in having her lost child back-the chance to be forgiven and to forgive herself-they, like the Grand Inquisitors of old, advised her to abort him yet again." Lifon 1994 p185

#### **Does BM have right to shut adopted person out?**

Lack of recognition by one's birth mother feels like a death threat-the threat of annihilation-which the adopted person must muster all their psychic forces to survive.

"I am often asked whether I think a birth mother has the right to shut out the child she brought into the world. My answer: an unequivocal no. As for whether adopted persons have the right to meet with the birth mother at least once to hear their life story: an unequivocal yes. As one birth mother said, 'You can't relinquish all of the respon-

sibilities for parent-hood just by relinquishing the child.' Does the child have a right to demand a relationship with the birth mother after she gives him the information he needs? No, the child does not have the right to intrude on the life the birth mother has made for herself after relinquishing him. Does the birth mother have a right to be part of the adopted persons life? No, the birth mother does not have a right to anything that the adopted person is not ready or willing to give.

It cannot be stressed enough that the original intent of adoption was to serve the best interest of the child, and the original intent of the sealed record was to conceal the child's illegitimate birth from the public, not to cut him off from his heritage. When adopted persons, at any age, need to know their origins, those needs should supersede those of the other adults in the triad.

*No birth mother has the right to confidentiality from her child at the expense of her child's well-being.* As the family therapist Randolph Severson points out: All people who walk the face of the earth possess the inalienable right to know their history and to meet the man and woman from whom they drew breath. Yet, in reunion, we are faced with psychological rather than legal and moral dilemmas. Violent acts, such as having to give up a child unconditionally, can cause violent responses. The birth mother is as much a victim of the closed adoption system as is the adopted person, traumatized to such a degree that, even when it returns, she may not be able to recognize her own child." Lifon 1994 p189

#### **Reconciling two mothers**

The adopted child, who must grow up as if dead to his mother; has the need to believe that the woman who carried him in her body still carries him in her heart; just as he needs to believe that the woman who did not carry him in her body, but who cares for his daily needs, carries him in her heart. The task of adopted children is to reconcile these two mothers within them-the birth mother who made them motherless and the psychological mother who mothered them. Lifon 1994 p14

#### **Who is the real mother?**

The adoptive mother believes that she is the real mother because she is the one who got up in the middle of the night and was there for the child in sickness and health. The birth mother believes that she is the real mother because she went through nine months of sculpting the child within her body and labored to bring it forth into the world. They are both right. The adoptive mother who loves and cares for the child is the real mother. And the birth mother who never forgets her child is the real mother. They are both real, and yet, because the child will remain burdened by the mystery of mothers, they are both unreal-as is the child....

By denying that adopted persons have two real mothers, society denies them their reality. And so it should not surprise us that adopted persons do not feel real. They expend much psychic energy searching for the elusive real child within, only to find that child's identity hopelessly entangled in the reality and unreality of the two mothers.

Deep inside every adopted person there is a chalk circle where he or she is pulled this way and that by two competing mothers. By the one who is there and by the one who is absent. (The fathers are still shadowy figures in this terrain.) The adopted child lives in fear of being torn apart by these two mothers, by divided loyalties, which is another way of saying that the child lives in fear of fragmentation. Lifton 1994 pp17-18

### Triggers

Adoption issues can be triggered on a daily basis. Everyday conversations can touch a birth parent and cause adoption related feelings to come to the surface. Birth mothers do not get the public celebration that other mothers receive. It can be difficult for a birth mother to attend a baby shower or to shop for a baby gift when she feels that she didn't receive the same attention or acknowledgment. The birthday of a relinquished child can be a trigger time for a birth parent. It is an anniversary of a traumatic and sad event. It is not uncommon for birth parents to feel sad and depressed around their child's birthday. It is important for birth parents to take extra care of themselves during this time. Russell 1996 p96

### Where was she?

Some found adopted persons seem to melt like infants into their birth mother's arms, while others fend their mothers off. Some feel the miracle of her reappearance; others feel the anger they had repressed, especially when they realize she has gone on with her life without them. One young woman, whose adoptive parents were dead, waited two years before agreeing to meet her birth mother, who had married the birth father. Lifton 1994 p217

### When BM contacts young adopted child

There is a controversy in the adoption field over what is known as the 'minor search'- a situation where the birth mother, makes direct contact with a child who is under eighteen or gets in touch with the adoptive parents. Birth mothers who contact the adoptive parents first run the risk of receiving a letter from the family lawyer that the child has no interest in her now and that she should disappear or else. The threats are usually scare tactics to ward her off. What parents would want their child to learn they had put his mother in jail? Society has accepted that, despite sealed records, some birth mothers search for adult adopted persons, but younger children have been considered out of bounds. Yet even this may be changing. A key advantage to reunion when the child is young is that the adoptive parents can be involved and stay involved. They become part of the reunion scenario and integrate the experience along with their child over the years. With their parents behind them, preadolescent children can integrate the experience of meeting their birth parents better than adolescents, who seem to have a more difficult time navigating the slippery slopes into the Ghost Kingdom. Because of their need to separate from parents in adolescence and have increased autonomy, there is the danger that teenagers may try to resolve the confusing situation by splitting off the adoptive parents, just as they had previously split off the birth parents. Lifton 1994 p219

### Birth mother source of birthfather information

"The amount of information that a birthmother is willing or able to provide can vary greatly between individuals. Sometimes resentments may accrue towards the birthfather due to past events. The birthmother may also be embarrassed over her own past actions and be unwilling to admit to them. Alternatively, she may be curious, and hope to meet or reunite with her past partner. This can prove to be problematic for the adopted person who is attempting to trace his/her father, because the birthmother is the best, and sometimes only, source of information about him...However, the birth-mothers are likely to provide as much information as possible, when asked, despite their feelings towards the birthfather." Kenworthy Thesis 1992 p80

### Why Birthmothers seek Reunions

#### Birthmother Realities

Gediman/Brown-Living with false beliefs is always dangerous, but when the birthmothers we interviewed were sold the myth of putting it behind you- they got a particularly bad bargain. In some cases it wasn't until many years later that the women discovered that the assurances which had been presented were false; for some, it happened almost immediately after the relinquishment. Contrary to what they had been advised, most discovered sooner or later that the fact of being a mother did not disappear with the surrender of the child. The maternal attachment was not severed, and the decision to give up their child typically resulted in pervasive, life-affecting, often unhappy results of one kind or another. Gediman/Brown 1991 p34

**Most stressful unresolve event** The large majority of these women classify the experience of giving up their baby as the most stressful event of their lives.' Describing their feelings at the time of surrender, they recall feeling exhausted and beaten. It was "like a nightmare." Several focus on feeling angry or bitter; others talk about feeling frightened. Still others remember confusion or numbness. Many talk about feeling a lack of control. Several remind us that they felt they were doing the best thing or the only thing that was possible. Gediman/Brown 1991 p35

**Time did deminish the pain** The large majority also reveal that, as the years passed, they did not become comfortable with the decision; they continued to grope with unresolved feelings about it...Instead of being healed by time, the feelings of suffering usually remained, or even intensified, a condition that nobody seemed to recognize or heed until the mid 1970s. The first research studies were published...Found that the effects of relinquishment for the large majority of birth mothers were negative and long-lasting. Gediman/Brown 1991 p35

**Loss and failure to grieve** In addition to having suffered the loss itself, many birth-mothers failed to grieve. Neither alerted to the need nor allowed to give vent to their feelings when the hushed and hurried separation took place, many birthmothers carried their unexpressed grief across the years. Often, years later, they were afflicted by

severe depression or other psychological impairments even though they were unaware of the connection between the adoption and their symptoms. Many birth-mothers, were awakening from a deep sleep, and discover that they have been repressing grief, guilt or anger, for five, ten or fifteen years. Gediman/Brown 1991 p36

**Suffered Ailments** Others were hit by noticeable ailments quite soon after the relinquishment took place. Some found themselves indulging in what they recognized as self-destructive behavior or “a bizarre lifestyle,” but without understanding why. Some experienced suicidal periods. In support groups, revelations of drug and alcohol abuse, as well as indiscriminate sexual activity, soon after surrender are not uncommon.

Regardless of how the distress was manifested, a recurring theme among birthmothers is not having been able to figure out what was happening until they read or heard something about adoption. Gediman/Brown 1991 p36

**Counseling** Birthmothers often fail to mention their pregnancy and adoption history to professional counselors, either because they failed to recognize its relevance, or they repressed thinking about it, or it was just too shameful. A therapist may diagnose clinical depression, or post-traumatic stress syndrome. But it is only when the underlying causation is revealed that effective treatment can be given. Also, many birth-mothers translate society’s negative opinion into negative feelings about themselves. Gediman/Brown 1991 p37

#### **Forgiveness and abandonment**

Many could not forgive themselves for “abandoning” their babies, and some translated their wounds into a state of generalized inhibition, a fear of reaching out to the world and becoming an active participant. They remained ‘stuck’ in the psychological space they inhabited, functioning below their potential and unable to advance. Gediman/Brown 1991 p37

**Not knowing** what happened to the child she gave away is one of the most agonizing consequences of being a birthmother. It keeps the hurt alive. Is her child alive or dead? Is he well? Happy? What kind of life has he had? Where is he? The desire to know is extremely widespread, quite possibly universal, and does not disappear over the years. Countless birth- mothers find themselves looking, involuntarily, at every age- appropriate boy or girl they pass on the street. The enormous void of not knowing produces a perpetual, if not always conscious, search. Gediman/Brown 1991 p37

**What is the child thinking** It is also extremely common for the birthmother to worry about what the child must be thinking of her. Is she hated for not having kept him? Does he understand that she gave him up in the belief that he would enjoy a better life than she thought she could provide? She hopes the record is straight, but, she has no way of knowing. Gediman/Brown 1991 p38

**Effect on relationships** *Romantic relationships* are affected by the woman’s impaired ability to trust. *Child bearing* some quickly become pregnant again in an attempt to

replace the lost child, others consciously refrain out of loyalty to the child they relinquished. *Secondary infertility* is higher among women who have surrendered children to adoption. *Mothering* Giving up a baby can also cast a shadow on the kind of mothering a woman gives her subsequent children. Both over-protectiveness and emotional distancing are possible effects. Gediman/Brown 1991 p39

#### **Wanting to connect**

Given the multitude of unresolved feelings and problems that so many birthmothers share, the idea that they need or want to be protected from the unwanted “Intrusions” of the children they relinquished is clearly fallacious. They never asked for anonymity, many of them like to remind us. It came as a condition of the adoption. Gediman/Brown 1991 p40

**Need for information** Virtually every one of the birthmothers we interviewed declared, many emphatically, that she had wanted information about or contact with her child over the years, despite the conviction that she did not have the “right.” Gediman/Brown 1991 p40

#### **Process birth mothers go through**

Dr. Phyllis Silverman describes as the process birth-mothers must pass through in order to develop a better self-image and to resolve feelings of rage, bitterness and guilt. The birthmother must ‘build a coherent bridge between her past and her present.’ This includes examining ‘honestly and without accusation, of herself and others, just what her circumstances were at the time’ and also examining her feelings about adoption. Attempting to find out about the child is another step that forges a necessary link with the past. *Reunion is ‘the ultimate resolution of the birthmother’s grief, the final link in the chain between her past and future.’* Gediman/Brown 1991 p44

### **Birth Mother Advice**

Post-reunion unfolds like a marriage: you have to work at it. Basic survival training in “birthmotherhood” should include the following pieces of advice, according to the women who’ve been on the front lines:

*Get help: Join a support group;* see a professional who’s versed in adoption/reunion issues; find a “buddy” who’s been through it. Read whatever books and newsletters you can find. You’ll discover you’re not alone and you’re not crazy. Don’t wait until your reunion hits a snag; do it right away. And consider the possibility that your spouse might benefit from counseling too especially if the birth-father re-enters your life.

*Expect an emotional roller coaster ride,* from depression to ecstasy. Try to be in touch with all the contradictory feelings. Try to express them. It’s okay to feel whatever you feel. It’s okay to be angry.

*It’s not unusual to feel guilty* about relinquishment, or about what the adopted person didn’t get, but try to avoid self-flagellation. You can be sad without being guilty. You have it within your power to interpret the past in a way that will make you feel better or makes you feel worse.

*Take it slow, one day at a time.* Don't try to make up for years of separation or guilt, or deprivation or whatever all at once. Try not to overwhelm the other person. Take your fears one at a time too.

*Give the relationship time, be patient.* Even outside adoption, feelings of connection between parents and children need time to develop. Any relationship takes years to build.

*Be honest.* Adoption has been full of secrets. Be open and truthful. If you can't deal with something, say so. Don't lie about your feelings to please, or to avoid hurting him or her. Those lies will just cause trouble later.

*Give a lot, but set limits if you must.* You don't owe the adopted person everything he or she ever missed. Resist the impulse to spoil. Don't take on an uncalled-for role, i.e., mothering-if mothering is not what the adopted person wants.

*Be cautious, think before you act.* These are complicated relationships and powerful emotions. Behave with an eye toward continuing the relationship. Try not to be judgmental.

*Appreciate whatever you have in reunion.* Try to be content; don't push for more...Tough going or not, just about all the birthmothers we interviewed expect that they and their children will be part of each other's future forever.' Mainly, their vision of the future is 'more of the same' which means, for most, that the bond will grow stronger as time passes and as mutual history accumulates. Birthmothers in rockier relationships hope that the future will get easier. Gediman & Brown 1991 pp245-6

## BIRTH FATHER REUNION ISSUES

The search for the lost father runs through much of modern literature. The father may have disappeared for a myriad of reasons: divorce, illness, desertion, death. The child who grows up without the father who gave him life will feel abandoned and unprotected in the world. The poet Stanley Kunitz tells us that the son goes in search of the father to be reconciled in a healing embrace. In that act of love he restores his father's lost pride and manhood. Perhaps he also finds himself. This could be said for the daughter too, but... 'the song of daughters is different from that of sons.' Little has been written about the birth father. Most adopted persons blot out all thought of that ghostly figure- as if they were born by immaculate conception- until after they find the birth mother. Then they discover that, deep in their psyche, the lost father waits to be summoned. Lifton 1994 p191

### Wide range of birthfather situations

He might have been an adolescent of sixteen or a man in his fifties. He might have been a thoughtless cad who abandoned a woman in trouble, or a frightened young innocent who did what he was told. It's possible that he never knew his girl-friend was pregnant. It's also possible that he was told and then consulted no further, stripped of influence by parents and social workers, and given his walking papers. In the unlikely event that he was not cast in the

role of villain and banished, it's possible too that he stood by the birthmother during her pregnancy, lending whatever support he could, including the offer of marriage. Gediman/Brown 1991 p165

### Father roles

Jung said the father encompasses the roles of creator; law-giver impregnator; and master. The adoptive father; who represents authority, power; and control, is not the impregnator; and may be perceived by the adopted person as asexual (infertile), henpecked (dominated, like the children, by his wife), and tied down (by the family), while the birth father; who lacks the adoptive father's virtues, is perceived as virile (he produced a child), macho (sexual), and a free spirit (he refused to be tied down). Lifton 1994 p192

### Birthfathers not in decision making

In short, although fathers have become more equal parenting partners with mothers in recent years, these adoptions took place when an unwanted pregnancy was mainly the woman's problem.' The unmarried fathers did not usually participate in the relinquishment decision and, if asked, generally agreed with it on practical grounds, seeing no other options. In the past, the general view was that the male had gotten the female "in trouble" (because men's sex drives were stronger, and women didn't know much about sex). All in all, a man's role in these events was not something he would be likely to look back upon today with pleasure or pride. Consequently, it's hard for birthmothers and adopted persons to guess what they can expect of these men twenty or more years later. Where are these men now, and how are they likely to react to a phone call out of the past? Gediman/Brown 1991 p165

### Birthfathers are in deeper closets

Birthfathers are in even deeper closets than birthmothers. Coming out of those closets to search for their children is comparatively rare, though the numbers have increased in the last few years as reunion generally has become more acceptable. At conferences and support group meetings where people gather to discuss reunion and post-reunion, the rooms are typically filled with women; men in these rooms are most likely to be adopted persons. The few birthfathers who show up are conspicuous by their presence. Other attendees often hope that these brave men will illuminate 'the birthfather perspective' and that they can help birthmothers and adopted persons approach birthfathers who reside in their histories, or simply understand them better. As adopted persons and birthmothers become less mysterious to each another, the enigmatic birthfather becomes a figure of increasing importance. Gediman/Brown 1991 p166

### Birthfathers cultural and emotional bias

In their roles of birthfathers, men have cultural and emotional biases with which to deal. For one thing, any father's attachment to his children in our society has always been considered less profound than a mother's and less central to his sense of self. Men have also been socialized to keep their emotions in check. Coming to grips with oneself as a birthfather involves dealing with issues which have noth-

ing to do with adoption. A man who confronts his birthfatherhood must ask himself where fathering fits in his identity and what kind of emotions he has about these issues. Our cultural ideals of what's masculine and what's good parenting are out of sync. We've made it easy for men to back away from taking responsibility for unmarried parenting. Gediman/Brown 1991 p167

#### **How do I know the child is mine?**

This is the first thing some birthfathers say when they learn about a pregnancy—or a reunion. It may sound defensive, especially to a birthmother who feels abandoned, but the age-old truth is that he can never know with the same certainty that she can. (A reliable test of paternity is a recent development.)...Some are hiding because they are scared away by birthmothers' anger. Some are afraid they'll be asked for financial support. Some are afraid of telling their present wives for the same reason that birth-mothers are afraid of telling their present husbands. These are new issues for everybody. Gediman/Brown 1991 p167

#### **Birth father double abandoner**

He is a more abstract concept, but the adopted persons anger toward him may be as deep or deeper than toward the mother. *He is, after all, a double abandoner*: he abandoned the mother as well as the child. Yet there is an attraction to this missing father; his absence puts him in the romantic tradition of the loner just passing through and disappearing on his way to the next frontier. Unlike the law-abiding adoptive father the birth father is part outlaw hovering on the fringes of society. Lifton 1994 p192

#### **Adopted person has choices—**

The choice not to shut down psychologically again. The choice to become a fighter, which in the psychiatrist Alexander Lowen's sense of the term means to become an individual, who know he has a right to be, a right to live, and right to fulfillment. Lifton 1994 p198

#### **Fathers and daughters**

An adopted daughter who looks in the mirror hoping to see her birth mother's face has no way of knowing if it is her father who looks back at her. She is linked to her mother through fantasy and longing, but her father is lost in the void with no mooring. Many birth mothers make sure he stays lost by refusing to give the adopted person his name, as if the mere mention of it will make him, and the pain associated with him, materialize on the spot. Lifton 1994 p193

#### **Fathers and sons**

Fewer men than women search at all, and most also speak of wanting to find the mother first. It may be harder for men to confront the pain they have experienced or the fathers who abandoned both their mothers and them. They have more pride, more anger, more vulnerability. There is the stark question: Will it be love or hate?... Some men, also like the women, begin to think about the birth father only after failing to have a relationship with the birth mother. 'I'd like to know who this guy is-what makes him tick,' ...Yet many years may pass before these men search for the birth father. Their male need is buried too deeply beneath their vanity and rage.

The male adopted person may feel more betrayed by the father who has denied him his lineage and more loyalty to the father whose name he has been entrusted to carry like a banner into the future. This missing father; whose body he may be growing into, whose baldness or alcoholism he may have inherited, whose image stares back at him in the mirror, this father left him to live or die under another man's protectorate and to learn how to be a man from men of another clan.

A boy who sees his father as more powerful and stronger than he, a figure to be admired, envied, and challenged, also depends upon him as a shield against dangers in the outside world. Does an adopted boy feel defenseless without his natural father as he grows up with another father more powerful and stronger than he? The adoptive father's unconscious anger and shame at not producing this child may make him try to put down an adopted son: to pull out the supports rather than provide them, to be competitive with him, as if to prove his own manhood. The boy may have nowhere to be safe except with his mother; who herself is standing in for a woman who has deserted him. We might ask if a son who has already been deserted by one father can stand up to the one who rescued him. Can he risk abandonment by the only father he knows?...Can the male adopted person think of a father not of his blood as his real father? Many do. Lifton 1994 p191

#### **Adopted persons secondary search**

Usually, adopted persons initiate the search, even though it tends to be a secondary search for them -secondary in the sense that it takes place after the reunion with the birthmother, and *secondary too in terms of its psychic importance*. Indeed, a segment of adopted persons who have been reunited with their birthmothers evince little or no interest in going further to meet their other birth-parent; some point to close, loving relationships with their adoptive fathers as the reason. Sometimes, though, the opposite dynamic occurs and a relationship with a birthfather assumes especial significance, filling a "father void" and providing an adult adopted person with greater sustenance than the relationship with the birthmother does. Gediman/Brown 1991 p168

#### **Provides second chance**

If the adopted person has been unacknowledged by the birth mother; or is disappointed in her; there is always a second chance with the birth father. Just as Athena sprang into being from the head of Zeus, so the adopted person may hope to achieve some kind of rebirth through the father. No matter the past, the irresponsible father can redeem himself if he will take up the coils of kinship that the mother dropped, if he will be midwife to his child's rebirth. He will in return find himself the recipient of the intense love and need that the adopted person had preserved for the birth mother. Lifton 1994 p192

#### **Touchy subject— asking BM about BF**

Most of what is known about birthfathers comes via birthmothers. Similarly, when adopted persons want to search for their birthfather, the best information about where to begin usually resides with the birthmother, but asking for her assistance can be a touchy matter, espe-

cially if she fails to volunteer it. The feelings she has about the birthfather, good or bad, are destined to be strong, and probably include a mixture of hurt and anger that remains unresolved. He could have been her high school sweetheart—a boy she had been seeing for months or years—or he could have been a more casual affair, even a ‘one night stand.’ He could have been her first sexual partner, even her first sexual experience. He could have been someone she loved and wanted to marry, or someone she never would have considered for marriage. It’s possible he was even her estranged husband. And beyond what he meant to her in any of these ways, his attitude and behavior during her pregnancy, good or bad, is not something she is likely to forget. Birthmothers’ feelings about birth-fathers range from ‘I hate the bastard’ to ‘I’ve always loved him’. Gediman/Brown 1991 p171

#### **When birth parents marry each other**

From the standpoint of an adult adopted person, discovering that your birthparents are husband and wife is an unexpected revelation, but not an unmixed blessing.

*On the positive side*, there’s the exhilaration of finding both parents at once, and the joyful knowledge that they must have loved one another. Also, any siblings you meet are likely to be full-siblings, not half, making the genetic tie with these brothers and sisters complete. Then too, you don’t have to worry about whether your birthmother is harboring hateful feelings toward a man who left her in the lurch, or whether her current husband will be threatened if she helps you search.

*On the negative side*, though, you may feel especially betrayed to discover that their lives rejoined after the adoption and went forward without you...Walking into a reunion after your birthparents have gotten a divorce produces a different kind of disappointment. The reunion may also trigger unresolved anger of the birthmother re her husbands to pressure to relinquish their firstborn. Gediman/Brown 1991 pp174-5

#### **Birthfathers normally gone own way**

The search for a father does not usually result in finding a man who married the birthmother. More often, the adopted person will find a person whose life has moved along a different track from the birthmother’s, with the two birthparents unlikely to have had any contact over the years. Found birthfathers who have kept the secret are presented with the same dilemma that found birth-mothers face: to tell or not to tell. The kinds of reunion and post-reunion relationships which ensue flow from this decision. Gediman/Brown 1991 p176

#### **Birthfathers response to contact**

❑ Some birthfathers are unable or unwilling to tell their wives and families about the adopted person’s existence. This usually is labeled ‘protecting his family’ and amounts to a hello-goodbye contact which ceases after one or two meetings.

❑ Other adopted persons, in contrast, have established pleasing relationships with their birthfathers: close, caring, or loving interactions that are satisfying to both. These

are birthfathers who cared and wondered about their children over the years, and for whom reunion can be joyful and significant. p178

❑ In contrast to situations in which birthmothers consider the birthfather more or less the enemy, there are also situations in which renewed contact with the birth-father arouses feelings of revived romance. Gediman/Brown 1991 p178,180

Lifton— The birth father’s response to the adopted person will, as with the mother; depend on many factors: his relationship with the mother at the time of conception; his loyalty or disloyalty to her during pregnancy and delivery; his involvement in the adoption decision; whether or not he has kept the child a secret over the years; and whether he feels he is in a secure place in his present relationships. Lifton 1994 p192-193

#### **Birth parents have shared history**

The fact that a man and woman do have a shared history can be obscured but not undone. The birthmother was not the only birthparent of the child. The birthfather is a powerful figure in the adoption-and-reunion saga, even if he never materializes in the post-reunion present. Several birthmothers we interviewed felt that dealing with the birthfather and/or their feelings about him, was the most difficult part of the post-reunion experience. Nonetheless, the fact of their shared past can also be helpful to birthmothers in post-reunion. Gediman/Brown 1991 p181

#### **Birthmother responses to BF**

A few birthmothers to whom we spoke in depth expressed the wish that they could eliminate the birthfather from the post-reunion picture altogether, simply because it would be easier to manage their own feelings and relationships. Others expressed wishes to move the birthfather into background positions. Meeting with birthfathers often produces the complications: feeling caught in the middle and feeling competitive about the child’s affection, as well as the romantic rekindlings which threaten present attachments. Many birthmothers keep stiff upper lips about their children’s relationships with their birth-fathers because, for the sake of the son or daughter who wants it, the women see the acceptance of such relationships as the “right” thing to do. On the other hand, it’s also true that several women achieved more complete senses of resolution when their sons and daughters met their birthfathers: feelings that unfinished business had been taken care of and that the circle, finally, was closed. Gediman/Brown 1991 p181

#### **When birthfather has died**

There are also instances in the reunion culture where contact was not achieved until after the birthfather’s death. At that point several adopted persons went on to meet relatives from their birthfather’s family, including half-siblings. As it is when the father is still alive, the personalities and circumstances of these individual family members become pivotal in determining whether the reception is warm or cool and whether continued affiliation lies ahead. Gediman/Brown 1991 p181

### Social changes re fatherhood

Major social changes in USA have sparked new concepts of fathering that did not exist when these adoptions took place and birthfathers were excluded from adoption decision-making. During the last twenty years, the women's movement and a high divorce rate have caused professionals and parents to re-evaluate the role each parent should play and to reconsider what each parent contributes to a child's welfare. These changes have been felt in adoption thinking and practice. In the 1970s, birth-fathers' legal status in adoption started to change when court rulings began to affirm that unmarried birthfathers have a legal claim on their offspring. Practically speaking, however, birthmothers today retain their primacy in adoption decisions. Agencies continue to view the mother, not the father, as the primary client. Gediman/Brown 1991 p182

### Birth father survey

A survey of birthfathers in 1985 provided evidence that even after extended periods of time, the surrender of a child for adoption remains a conflict-ridden issue. In the sample of 125 men, whose average age was forty, thoughts of searching for their child were practically universal and two-thirds had actually engaged in a search. Approximately half the sample had had some kind of participation in the adoption proceedings; over one-third cited external pressure as the primary reason for relinquishment. Some of the men also revealed that, like birth-mothers, the adoption produced problems in terms of their marriages and parenting later. Gediman/Brown 1991 p182

### Birth fathers breaking silence

The fathers of children relinquished for adoption have been a silent, faceless group, but 'the fleeting father' is on his way to becoming an outmoded stereotype. In circles where birthfathers feel more or less comfortable, one can hear men admit to feeling 'guilty as hell' that they didn't come through for their kids or their girlfriends. Some state that they too were victims; of the girlfriends who failed to inform or consult them, of parents who told them what to do, of agencies that provided no alternatives, and of financial resources that just weren't there...most have never forgotten their children. Gediman/Brown 1991 p183

### Working with birthfathers

**CYPS Adoptions Local Placements Manual 1995** "Whenever possible, every effort should be made to involve birthfathers and their families in the planning for the future of the child. It should be made clear to birthfathers that they have certain rights and responsibilities in respect of the child.

### Rights of birthfather

"They can exercise their right to be personally involved, with the collection of information about themselves and their families. It is most advantageous if the birthmother will agree to the early involvement of the birthfather and his family in the decision making process, and this should be encouraged by the social worker. If the relationship between the birthparents is such that the birthmother no longer has contact with the birthfather, or she will not involve him or his family in the decision, it is still very important to gather personal information about the

birthfather and his family for the future benefit of the child. The Privacy Act 1993, requires that personal information be gathered directly from the individual concerned. (Privacy Principle 2) This provides some authority to involve birth-fathers. It is important for the child to know that the birthfather volunteered personal information and was involved in the decision making process. Birthmothers can feel greatly supported knowing that the birthfather and his family have been willingly involved.

There may be situations where birthparents cannot agree on a decision. One of these situations may occur when a birthmother wants to place her child for adoption with strangers and the birthfather and/or any members of his family want to parent the child. If the matter cannot be resolved by the parties themselves it might have to go to the Family Court for decision.

The birthfather has the option to apply to the Court to have paternity rights established and to apply for the custody of the child. If this happens no adoption proceedings can continue, even when the birthmother has already signed consent, until the Court has made a decision in relation to the paternity and custody issues. (There may also be some cases, such as those involving married or separated couples, where paternity and guardianship may not be in dispute, and where the sole issue to be decided is the matter of custody). Birthparents need to understand the implications of this. In the face of such serious disagreement the Court will not concern itself with the feelings and wishes of the birthparents, but will focus on the welfare, and the best interests of the child." NZ Adoptions Local Placements Manual CYPS DSW 1995.

### Search for birthfathers

In a 1992 study 64% of searching adopted persons discussed their current, or hoped for relationship with their birth-father. Those who did not directly address the issue of the birthfather alluded to him in some manner, anticipating some contact in the future. 'Those adopted persons who are curious enough, or needy enough to make a search for their birthfathers may not be satisfied in the long term with only having half of the pieces of the puzzle.' Kenworthy Thesis 1992 pp78,81

### Three ways of establishing paternity

- The mother can apply in the Family Court for a paternity order against the alleged father.
- In any proceedings in any Court there can be a decision on paternity when that is put directly in issue.
- Application can be made in the High Court under the Status of Children Act 1969 for a declaration of paternity. But here is the catch. In paternity proceedings under the Family Proceedings Act a paternity order is *res judicata* only for the purposes of maintenance liability. In the other classes of proceedings in the Family Court the finding of paternity will be *res judicata* binding only on the parties to the proceedings but it is a judgment in *personam*, not a judgment *in rem*. A declaration of paternity in the High Court, however, is a judgment *in rem*, definitively settling the issue of paternity for all purposes. Judge B D Inglis QC. "The Family, Family Law, Family Lawyers and the Family Court Future" *Otago Law Review* (1995) Vol 8 No.3 p309.

## POST REUNION

### Post-Reunion Basics

#### Search becomes an entity in itself

The process of search becomes an entity in itself. It assumes a life and rhythm of its own. Still, at some level the searching mind is always worrying about what will happen when the quest is finally over. What will the other person do after you've discovered his or her identity and made contact? The basic question for adopted persons is: Will my mother love me? It assumes many forms: Will she meet me? Will she accept me or reject me? Will she be able to overcome the past and welcome me into her life? Whatever the conscious goal may be when an adopted person embarks on a search—wanting to see someone who 'looks like me,' seeking information only, or daring to hope a relationship will ensure. Gediman/Brown 1991 p59

#### No one wants to be rejected

No one wants to be rejected, especially not the (adopted) self who once experienced 'primal abandonment' years ago and who generally equates being adopted with being rejected. For all he or she knows, the searcher may be risking rejection once again. As a veteran search consultant points out, 'It's a big risk to say, 'Here I am, take me or leave me.' You're laying yourself out there for someone to either reject or to love. The searching birthmother takes a similar risk. It's no wonder thoughts turn to the extremes—love or rejection, all or nothing—when dealing with a subject as emotionally charged as how your mother or your child will receive you. Gediman/Brown 1991 p59

#### Rejection by BM and acceptance by others

Even if your birthmother rejects you, other members of your birth family may not, which can eventuate in lasting relationships with siblings, aunts, uncles, even grandparents, whom you would not otherwise have known. In other words, you may not meet your mother, but you can still learn about yourself and make a connection to your roots. Another encouraging thought for searchers is that it is not necessarily the birthmother herself who is doing the rejecting; someone else may be advising or pressuring her behind the scenes—perhaps her mother or husband. Gediman/Brown 1991 p60

#### No such thing as complete rejection

It should also encourage searchers to know that there is no such thing as a complete rejection. Repeated attempts to meet someone who is initially unwilling to meet you can pay off. Thus, many search experts advise those who have met resistance not to give up, no matter how rejected one feels. Keep those cards and letters coming, they say, in effect borrowing the wisdom of the salesperson who knows that the more contacts you make, the greater the chance of a sale. Early rejection is often driven by fear, especially among birthmothers who have kept quiet too long, or denied too well. They cannot overcome the repressions of a lifetime in a single phone call. They need time to collect themselves and adjust to the idea. Gediman/Brown 1991 p60

#### No such thing as a bad reunion?

Another reassuring perspective is the body of opinion which holds that, once you achieve contact, there is no such thing as a bad reunion. Every reunion is good in the sense that it is useful, enabling adopted persons to replace fantasy with reality, grieve if necessary, and then move on. Since Freud, therapists have taught us that we must confront our demons to be free of them, and adopted persons are saying the same thing when, despite unhappy reunions which left them hurt or disappointed or shaken, they announce that they do not regret having searched. "We cannot speak of reunions as successful or unsuccessful," writes Betty Jean Lifton. "All of them, no matter whom one finds, are successful in that adopted persons are given a feeling of being grounded in the human condition, of becoming autonomous people in control of their own lives." Gediman/Brown 1991 p60

#### Reunion as a closure

A related, emerging view is that reunion is "closure" in adoption and some professionals anticipate that some day in the future reunion will constitute a more or less routine procedure in the process of adoption. Gediman/Brown 1991 p60

#### Post-Reunion turbulence

According to people who've been there, you have to experience it to understand it. Reunion is the kind of experience that sets off an explosion in your life. It's like being bit by an earthquake. No one feels in control. Everything is shattered, 'rattled up.' It can take years for the dust to settle and, when it does, the pieces of a birth-mother's life come back together in new and different configurations. Reunions rearrange lives. Gediman/Brown 1991 p64

#### Emotional indigestion 'roller coaster'

The emotional climate of reunion and post-reunion involves confused and ambivalent feelings (not just on the birthmother's part), with opposites coming fast upon one another. There are also extreme intensifications of feeling. "Emotional indigestion," one counselor calls it. Many birthmothers talk about being on an emotional roller coaster, the metaphor they use to convey the strong polar emotions that are very natural, but very hard to live with nonetheless. Wanting to befriend their child does not preclude being 'scared to death' about having a relationship or about what the relationship will mean in the broader context of the rest of their life. Gediman/Brown 1991 p64

#### Ricochets of heights of joy and despair

Reunion often catapults a birthmother into experiencing "the loss piece"—the unresolved grief and mourning from the past—at the same time that it brings great joy. That the two can come in rapid succession seems to make no sense. It is not uncommon for birthmothers to wonder if they are going crazy as they feel themselves ricocheting from "the heights of joy" to the "depths of despair" with frightening frequency. Gediman/Brown 1991 p65

#### Being thrust back into the past

In addition to feelings of loss and mourning, the sense of being thrust back into the past generally contributes to the overall emotional confusion. Every birthmother brings

with her into these relationships her own tapestry of feelings about the pregnancy and adoption experience, especially the issues that remain unresolved. The relationship she had with her boyfriend, for example, will rub off onto the birthmother's feelings about her adult son or daughter, making it easier or more difficult and occasionally just impossible—twenty or thirty or forty years later for the mature woman to carve out a relationship with her grown child. Gediman/Brown 1991 p65

### **Reworking the past**

Vast amounts of emotional energy get spent reviewing and reworking the past, deflecting attention away from decisions about the here-and-now of their interaction. The nature of the relationship can remain in an uncomfortable state of ambiguity for some time before birthmother and adopted person are able to come to grips with the key questions they must answer eventually: Who are you to me? and How am I going to integrate you into my life? Being able to acknowledge the past, and deal with it constructively, is a critical post-reunion task for birthmothers who have not done so earlier. Unless the door on the past can be closed, the echoes will keep reverberating through the post-reunion space. Gediman/Brown 1991 p65

### **Volatility of reunion- BM precarious perch**

The volatility arises from the fact that reunion, and post-reunion especially, extends beyond the mother-child diad. We all have a 'lifespace' and these events spill out all over it, churning up our relationships. There is almost certain to be a vulnerability or sore spot, either in the birthmother, in the response of someone close to her, in the adopted person, or in the adoptive parents' domain. Sometimes birth-mothers find other people 'fall away' during post-reunion. Even in cases without major blow-ups, the mere fact that reunion involves a cast of many, rather than being a one-on-one interaction between consenting adults, puts a birthmother on a delicate and precarious perch. Her antennae pick up the feelings of everyone around her, not just her own and her child's. Gediman/Brown 1991 p66

### **How comfortable can you be?**

One of the most disorienting aspects of reunion and post-reunion is that nothing in one's repertoire of concepts or experiences applies. How do you describe a relationship with a person who is your flesh-and-blood child, on the one hand, but a stranger on the other? With what relationship do you compare it? What do you expect it will be like? What rights and responsibilities do you have? What rights and responsibilities does the other person have? What would constitute a good relationship? What would constitute a bad one? Who's to say that 'as long as they're still on speaking terms' isn't 'success'? Small wonder there's conflict in post-reunion. No one knows what the rules are. The timid—which many birthmothers tend to be, especially in the early post-reunion stages tread cautiously, picking their way through the minefield of their own confusing emotions, their past history, and their present lives with spouses, children, parents, and the rest of the supporting troops. Gediman/Brown 1991 p67

### **Absence of the usual props**

In the absence of the usual props we rely on to help us interpret our experience, just being able to talk to one other person who's been through a similar experience can help bring clarity. It can assist in interpreting the storm of feelings coming from every direction, and the behaviors—both yours and other people's—that may be difficult to understand. Gediman/Brown 1991 p67

### **Comfortableness**

Reunion normally becomes more comfortable with time. The majority progress to feeling 'very' comfortable or even 'extremely' comfortable in their relationships. Some were surprised at how little time it took—a few days, a week maybe. For others, the transition was measured in months or years. Others, found that their comfort level deteriorated: in one case, because un-resolved feelings about the birthfather began to intrude; in another, the daughter grew emotionally distant from her birthmother after several years of closeness, leaving the mother hurt, confused, and dissatisfied. Gediman/Brown 1991 p67

### **Factors that affect the post-reunion course**

Reunion and post-reunion are unpredictable. Even so, it's possible to identify three common factors that influenced to some extent the shape of post-reunion. • Readiness and mutuality • Geography • Time

### **Search mechanism pattern**

Some mechanism clicks into place when a person is ready to take action, a readiness activator that, in some individuals, sputters off and on over the months or years a search may last. Even with the stop-and-start pattern that characterizes so many of them, active searchers are the most reunion-ready of anybody. Those who have been more passive in establishing reunions show readiness of varying degrees. The more a birthmother allowed herself over the years to think about her pregnancy and adoption, about her child's growing up, the possibility of obtaining information, and imagine a meeting could really take place, the more reunion-ready she is. The individual who is less ready is likely to experience shock first. Then, shock worn off, she frequently holds back or draws back from her son or daughter as the emotional gravity of the past begins to exert its pull. Gediman/Brown 1991 p70

### **Impact of time**

In the post-reunion timeline, less than a year is practically nothing, and three years is still rather new. Two or three years can be consumed, easily, in working one's way through the terrain—the emotions, revelations and introductions—that is the foundation for what can become a mutually satisfactory and lasting relationship. Five or six years, or more, may be required before significant turning points are reached or major problems are resolved. Gediman/Brown 1991 p75

### **Post-union firsts**

To traverse the whole course, the principals must get through a collection of stumbling blocks which family life and the calendar inevitably present. These include:

- Adopted persons first birthday after reunion
- First Mother's Day together

- First set of holidays
  - First visit to the birthmother's home
  - First meeting between the adopted person and the birthmother's family (spouse, parents, children, siblings, extended relatives)
  - First meeting between the two mothers (and their spouses)
  - First meeting between the birthmother and her child's adoptive siblings
  - Adopted person's attendance at the first major ceremonial event (wedding, graduation, etc.) in the birth family
  - Adopted person's first meeting with the birthfather.
- Gediman/Brown 1991 p76

#### **There are also the emotional firsts**

- The first big disappointment with one another,
- The first fight.
- Some reunioneering pairs won't continue their relationship.
- Some have established limits defining what they will and will not do.
- Some reunioneering pairs test the limits of their comfort zone and conclude afterwards that they won't do whatever it is again (e.g., getting the two families together), either because it's unnecessary in their opinion or because it was too painful or difficult.

The more hurdles a post-reunion pair overcomes, the more the birth-mother and the adopted person will have completed the full agenda of tasks to work through that post-reunion presents. Gediman/Brown 1991 p76

#### **Strangers no more**

Time is helpful in post-reunion because, one by one, the parties experience the 'firsts' and pick their way through the 'little landmines.' Over time, the issues that belong to the past get resolved. The emotions that were put on hold get dealt with, everyone who is going to meet finally does so, birthmothers and their children cease being strangers to one another, and the emotional highs and lows begin to level off. Wariness or suspicion are replaced by understanding, friendship, or love. A point comes when there are no more surprises. Gediman/Brown 1991 p76

#### **Two periods in post-reunion**

*The early years* being the struggle years, the more stressful and volatile ones. Some of the 'little landmines' get deactivated over time and the individuals come to an understanding of where they will, or will not, fit in each other's lives. In the early years, 'everything gets turned upside down'.

*The later years*, the pieces fit together, some perspective is achieved, and life starts feeling normal again. Gediman/Brown 1991 p77

#### **Don't shove under carpet**

Human relationships being what they are, however, questions, emotions or dissatisfactions that are shoved under the table during early years of post-reunion later will be steady irritants, robbing the relationship of a good deal of pleasure for one or both participants. The least happy post-reunion relationships have a resigned quality of 'putting up with each other'. Gediman/Brown 1991 p77

#### **Life long process for all**

Just as adult adopted persons have said that adoption is a lifelong process, birthmothers say that post-reunion is a lifelong process too. Discussing their thoughts about the future of their relationships, they state that they think in terms of 'the rest of our lives' rather than some specific goal they wish to accomplish in time. Gediman/Brown 1991 p77

#### **Patterns of Post-Reunion Experience**

Gediman/Brown— Reunion is about reconnection: finding a missing piece. But post-reunion is about developing a relationship

#### **Uncharted course**

Because every post-reunion has been an uncharted course, with the participants serving as their own guides, any attempt to put markers along the way may help those who are lost on their own by introducing some roadmap of normalcy into this extraordinary voyage. p79

#### **Reunions with teenagers.**

Reunions with late teens' are inevitably affected by the dynamics of the teenage years, a time which confronts the adolescent with a formidable developmental agenda and which produces behaviors that any parent, birth or adoptive, can find difficult to understand, condone, or survive. This is the time of the 'identity crisis.' Resolving identity issues is more difficult for adopted adolescents. As part of identity formation, the tasks of adolescence include separating oneself from family, and dealing with a galloping sexuality. Both are fraught with special and disturbing overtones for the adopted. Gediman/Brown 1991 p80

#### **Reunions with persons in their twenties**

Reunions with adopted persons in their twenties, can find them launching adult lives of their own: starting jobs or employment training, establishing marriages and families. Exploring adult options and making decisions that will affect their long-term futures. As post-reunion progresses, birth-mothers witness their adult children reaching adult milestones—marrying, becoming pregnant, getting divorced. Not infrequently, mothers attribute these events to the fact that a reunion took place. Because the reunion enabled the adopted adult to resolve crucial issues of personal identity and biological continuity. Gediman/Brown 1991 p85

#### **Reunions with mid-age adults**

The adopted person is likely to be stabilized. Birthmothers who meet children in their thirties and forties are women in their fifties or sixties or seventies and the attitudes they bring to reunion were likely planted in their own conservative times. These were not the 1960s or 1970s when people 'let it all hang out.' A search often begins because time is running out, the birthmother could die. There are no guarantees older mothers and children will have an easy post-reunion time...But they often enjoy a mellow quality and sense of calm which seems to come from these older mothers' more philosophical view of things generally. They seem to be more accepting of things and less angry about any negative ways in which the adoption worked out. It was all very long ago, and the reunion has brightened the

years ahead with a new and loving relationship. Gediman/Brown 1991 pp86-87

### Reunions with daughters versus sons

*Mothers of daughter:* Conventional thinking is that mothers feel closer to their daughters, a bond based on shared gender and women's greater emotional openness. Many birth-mothers find daughters explored feelings more than sons would have, and were more empathetic about the position the unmarried birthmother, particularly if the daughter has had a pregnancy or watched an unmarried friend struggle with the same decision.

*Mothers of sons* point to the pleasures that come with reunions, the pride in finding a handsome young man, or a settled and competent family man, or one who is talented, or one who is sensitive and caring. One troublesome aspect of reunions with sons, however, is the possibility of 'genetic sexual attraction\*', a feeling on the part of the mother or the son, or both, that they are in a romantic relationship. Such feelings are extremely unsettling. Gediman/Brown 1991 pp90-2

\*See **SEXUALITY** pp93-95 this Resource book for detail.

### Feelings of familial identification

Post-reunion experience is profoundly affected by what we'll call the adopted person's feelings of familial identification. Which family, birth or adoptive, does the adult adopted person feel, they belong in? Can it be both?

It's possible, post-reunion, for an adopted person to become attached or bonded to the birthmother's family, and that it's also possible for adopted persons to reaffirm their attachment to the adoptive family by relegating the birthmother to some kind of non-maternal, non-familial, or tightly circumscribed role. What happened most often, though, is that these adopted adults became included in the birth family and participated in both families, moving back and forth. Gediman/Brown 1991 p96

### A member of two families

Most adopted adults do not 'transfer over' or becoming 'fully rooted' in the new families, even when they did not bond with the adoptive parents as a child. They generally continue a relationship with both, and, like the child of divorce, they belong in both. Like citizens of two countries, it may not be easy for adopted persons to manage their dual citizenship in two families.

How much easier and more humane everything becomes when the two families can acknowledge and be comfortable with one another. Then, both can be present at the same place, at the same event, rather than forcing adopted persons to shuttle back and forth in a forced pattern of separate interactions with the two groups. Like the best of step-family accommodations, the ideal solution is when everyone accepts and is comfortable with the fact that the child has two families. Comparing reunion relationships to step relationships is a strategy which serves to normalize the post-reunion situation, bringing it more into the mainstream and rendering it more understandable. Gediman/Brown 1991 pp100-102

### The pleasure-pain ratio overall

Reunion is about reconnection: finding a missing piece. But post-reunion is about developing a relationship, and about how everyone in each person's sphere responds to the existence and development of this new entity. Post-reunion relationships proceed not just because of the positives but in spite of all the negatives. The quality of post-reunion almost always seems to be a combination of bitter and sweet, pleasure and pain. Some birthmothers are luckier than others in terms of the objective realities with which fate presents them: healthy, stable children, for example, versus troubled ones; or welcoming adoptive parents versus hostile ones. Some birthmothers make it easier on themselves because they are the kinds of people who judge the proverbial glass to be 'half full' not 'half empty.' Birthmothers convey situations which can be summarized as:-

#### Extremely happy situations-

The people in these reunions felt a loving connection to one another from the outset. The good fortune in these cases is tied as much to the supporting cast as it is to the principal players. These are situations in which there are no troublesome ripple effects with which either the birthmother or the adopted person still needs to cope. The birthmothers in these reunions also enjoyed a state of neutrality or equanimity about the birthfather; whatever action their child took or didn't take in terms of finding him did not set off a 'little landmine' in *her* world.

The mothers in this group also seem capable of accepting their children as people, whatever flaws they have.

#### Happy in spite of problems-

The largest cluster of birth-mothers are basically happy with their post-reunion situation, despite its blemishes and imperfections. They are dealing with, or aware of, some important problem or problems stirred up by post-reunion. Whatever it is, though, the problem is not inhibiting their personal relationship with their son or daughter, and it is not undermining their happiness about maintaining a relationship. Typically, the principal players are pleased with one another and the distress is located outside the mother-child diad. These mothers tend to focus on the value of the relationship, not on the troubles. The thorns and thickets encountered include: intense grieving that was never expected and won't seem to abate, coming to the conclusion that she could have provided a better home herself, even as an unwed mother.

#### Mainly uncomfortable situations-

The birthmothers can't reach a state of acceptance about the relationship; the problems, whatever they are, are just too upsetting. Sometimes they freely state that they are uncomfortable in the relationships. Sometimes their unease stems from the discrepancy between what they want and what the adopted person wants (with the mother usually being the hungrier party). Sometimes the specter of the birthfather stalks in the background. Sometimes the mothers are disappointed in their children. Common to many women is a feeling that they are not in control of what's happening. Gediman/Brown 1991 p103-107

## THE FIRST MEETING

### Unique high experience

Like those milestone events we never forget, the re-union meeting between a birthmother and her child is climactic. Everything that happens afterwards, no matter how tumultuous or how joyous, is an anticlimax because that meeting is a culmination- the point on which all energies are focussed. Everyone conveys its matchless excitement, often referred to as a miracle. Gediman/Brown 1991 p109

### Pre-meeting period

Occasionally, this first meeting is the first contact between mother and child, making the shock of the reconnection an element of the interaction. More often, though, the first meeting is preceded by a telephone or letter contact and it is not infrequent for such contacts to go on for weeks or months before the individuals meet. This pre-meeting period can be extremely valuable. It is a time for exchanging photographs, asking and answering questions about the past, getting acquainted with the here-and-now's, becoming more comfortable with the idea of reunion and post-reunion generally, and beginning to develop a shared history. Gediman/Brown 1991 p109

### Fears of reunion

Some birthmothers and adopted persons who are anticipating first meetings discover that they are fearful about the event beyond the natural uneasiness that comes with the prospect of meeting a stranger. They worry or fantasize that the other person may hurt them or wish to do them harm. Their family members are often quite suspicious too, asking over and over, 'What does he or she want'? ...The unconscious mind apparently expects some kind of retribution- for giving up a child, for exposing a birthmother. Gediman/Brown 1991 p110

### Location

The women we interviewed met their sons and daughters in a variety of public and private places: at restaurants and hotels, at parks and on the street, in front of public buildings, at airports and train stations. The largest number met at the birth-mother's home. A few met at the adopted person's home. Gediman/Brown 1991 p110

### Third parties?

Hardly anyone suggests that physical environment per se makes any difference in terms of how smoothly that meeting went, but it does affect whether third parties will enter in. Some birthmothers wish to meet their children alone, but others include their husband, a close friend, or their other children. Married adopted persons frequently wish to include their spouse, and some adopted persons, younger people especially, wish to include their adoptive parents. Desired third parties definitely provide moral support. But, the presence of others affects everyone's comfort level. Gediman/Brown 1991 p110

### First meeting never comfortable

But the tone of first meetings is never comfortable, because birthmothers are overwhelmed with emotions of all kinds. They may feel elated, excited, or charged, but also tense and scared, or cautious and uncertain. They may feel

loving, but also unexpectedly romantic. Often there is a mixture of joy at meeting one's child, accompanied by an indescribable sadness over the lost years. Tension is high from not knowing what to expect. Some are glad when distractions present themselves -the tourist sights of an unfamiliar city, a baby that needs tending; a meal to prepare. Gediman/Brown 1991 p111

### Eyeing each other

Seeing the other person for the first time is also an occasion for staring at the other person hard and long. Not unlike the way a new mother stares at her baby, reunion meetings are occasions when everybody stares intently at everybody else, even when they try not to be too obvious about it. We are fascinated with the looks of someone who is both so familiar and so unfamiliar at the same time. Adopted persons are equally intent on looks, face to face for the first time in their life with a human being whom they may resemble. Gediman/Brown 1991 p111

### Conversation

The conversation at first meetings is intense, partly because many birthmothers and adopted persons are anxious that if they don't say it all now they may never have another chance. They describe a sense of urgency, trying to cram a lifetime into a few hours. First meetings give birthmothers and their children the opportunity to talk about the circumstances of the adoption, and to piece together what happened afterwards. Awkward greetings are quickly obliterated by the urgent exchanging of informational catch-up. Gediman/Brown 1991 p112

### Duration

First encounters can last anywhere from several hours to a full week. When the interest is mutual and the meeting expected, the stories are wonderful. When first meetings are over and the time comes to say good-bye, birthmothers often experience great difficulty and sadness. It reminds them of having to leave their babies years ago. Gediman/Brown 1991 pp112,115

### What future

In the world of search and reunion, one meeting does not ensure a future. Reuniting individuals quickly learn that each of them has to make continuous decisions about what kind of relationship, if any, theirs will be. Some enjoy an almost instantaneous certainty that a mutual future lies ahead. Some enjoy an instantaneous closeness that provides the same assurance...In other cases it can take months or years before they are fully confident that the relationship will endure. Gediman/Brown 1991 p116

### Plans for second meeting

Making specific plans for a second meeting before saying good-bye can be a helpful tactic. When the subject is not addressed directly, uncertainty about what will happen next can be a source of great anxiety. People leave first meetings feeling totally spent, but important work has been accomplished. People begin to know one another as people instead of fantasies, abstractions or roles. The next move is post-reunion, which begins at the point the birthmother and child decide that they will, have some kind of future together. The question becomes: What kind? Gediman/Brown 1991 p116

## HOW POST-REUNION DEVELOPS

### First meeting omen

What the post-reunion future will be like can frequently be glimpsed in the first meeting. When the meeting is warm and open, positive feelings are likely to continue and intensify as post-reunion unfolds. Those who have feelings of instantaneous closeness find that these feelings deepen with time. Gediman/Brown 1991 p119

### Whats going on in your life

Regardless of how the people feel about each other, early post-reunion happenings are liable to be affected by whatever else is going on in each person's life. The birthmother may be coping with a traumatic divorce; the adopted person may arrive in the midst of wedding preparations for one of the birthmother's other children; a first meeting may occur when someone is gravely ill, or just before a baby is due. When the timing is inopportune in these ways, the found person may decide to delay announcements or family introductions until the other event is over. But such control is not always possible. Gediman/Brown 1991 p119

### Begins with disjointed relationships

Even with the best of timing, post-reunion relationships between birthmothers and their children are disjointed relationships, inescapably marred by a past that was not shared. The history that is taken for granted in other family relationships does not exist. There are no shared memories or family traditions. Everything is strange in the beginning. Gediman/Brown 1991 p120

### Stranger who's not a stranger

Getting to know their adult child is frequently characterized by birthmothers as "getting to know someone that you already know." They struggle to describe the peculiar combination of familiarity and strangeness they feel, but can find no analogy. Gediman/Brown 1991 p120

### Making re-connection

While just about every birthmother probably feels some sense of connection with her grown child, there are dramatic differences. Some women, less disoriented than others by the time and role confusions inherent in the reunion phenomenon, experience a primal sense of motherhood connection immediately. Others focus more on the years and histories that separate them, initially experiencing the adult adopted person as essentially familiar. Gediman/Brown 1991 p121

### Frequent, intense contact

A common dynamic in post-reunion experience is frequent, intense contact. In its ultimate form, the adopted person moves in with the birthmother. Some birthmothers view the frequent contact they have after reunion with their son or daughter as a simple desire to make up for lost time. They describe high phone bills, visiting several times a week, spending overnights or weekends together, restaurant lunches or dinners... shopping expeditions, long walks, watching a son play sports etc. - all accompanied by endless talking. Gediman/Brown 1991 p122

### Difficult good-byes

Another aspect of this early, intense contact is the same difficulty saying good-bye that was encountered at the first meeting. One of the recurrent themes of post-reunion is how difficult it is to "cut the cord," because the original separation continues to resonate. Gediman/Brown 1991 p123

### Re-bonding feeling

These early post-reunion days are reminiscent of falling in love, and many reuniting pairs talk with one another about the parallels: the headiness, the obsession, the fact that they don't want to share the other person with anyone else. What they mainly conclude is that, strange and frightening as the feelings may be, they are somehow related to bonding. Gediman/Brown 1991 p124

### Connect but not merge

As in other human relationships, the challenge facing many of these reuniting pairs is to connect but not merge, and a problem with their concentrated contact is that it becomes over-whelming. In their fervor, one or the other may push things too fast, violating the other's comfort zone and provoking a withdrawal for 'space.' Early post-reunion can be a case of too much too soon, with birthmothers either romanticizing the possibilities of the relationships or acting out of guilt and attempting to 'make up' to their children 'abandoning' them. Birthmothers often engage in what one calls 'symbolic gestures to undo the past.' Gediman/Brown 1991 p124

### The honeymoon and after

The early elation of reunion is like a honeymoon, and some reuniting pairs continue to be in a honeymoon phase for many months. They may want to tell the whole world about their reunion. They may feel a kind of magic: that everything's for the best in this best of all possible times. The pleasure of getting to know the other person is intense-and this is no ordinary someone. Some people suspend judgment and see only the good in the other person. The most ordinary occurrences of daily life hold special pleasure and meaning. Gediman/Brown 1991 p125

### Both on best behaviour

Another aspect of the honeymoon period is that people are on their best behavior, trying to impress one another and, in this way, seeking to ensure that the other person doesn't leave them a second time...

But wanting to do everything right, and wanting everything to be perfect, puts additional effort and anxiety into a period that is already highly charged. As several point out, no soap opera could compete. Cautious about giving offense, reuniting pairs often display an exquisite concern with one another's feelings. They engage in lengthy ruminations with themselves or their behind-the-scenes advisors about what they should or should not say or do; many try to curb impulsive actions. But no matter how much time is spent second-guessing how the other person is likely to react, the possibility of being misunderstood remains high. Gediman/Brown 1991 p125

**End of honeymoon**

It is the nature of honeymoons to end. Many birthmothers and adopted persons experience an unexpected sense of letdown after the honeymoon highs vanish. Often, this is when a feeling of unresolved grief returns. Unfinished grieving can remain as a post-reunion backdrop for a long time. Added to postponed grief about losing their baby, many birthmothers also grieve over the years they missed raising the child-not having been there for the first smile, the first tooth, the first step, the first day at school, and the like. Confronted with a grown person, all they've missed is suddenly, painfully apparent. Gediman/Brown 1991 p126

**Integrate realities- give up fantasies**

At this point many birthmothers and adopted persons sink into depression. This is the time one must integrate the realities and give up the fantasies that have been such a central presence in one's psychic life, and their departure can be felt as a significant loss. Adopted persons letdown states can also be the result of loss, sadness, guilt, or anger associated with other aspects of their adoptive condition or history. Many adopted persons feel guilty about betraying their adoptive parents. Some mourn the self they think they could have been. Among the birthmothers we interviewed, a few have been lucky. Good feelings of the honeymoon persist and there have been "no crises" in their post-reunion relationships. The majority, however, describe major or minor crises that broke the spell. Gediman/Brown 1991 p126

**Negative feelings and fights**

A year or more often passes before a birthmother and her child feel able to disagree or to argue. The first fight imposes a risk in any relationship, but the risk is especially grave in post-reunion. The prospect of fighting raises the specter of repeating the earlier loss. However, being able to risk a fight (hence, risking the loss of the relationship) can be a turning point. It often produces more secure feelings on everyone's part. Although most reunions go through "a honeymoon period" there are also reunions with a lot of yelling and screaming right from the beginning. Gediman/Brown 1991 p128

**Anger and fear**

Just about every birthmother expects her child to be angry about having been given up for adoption. Because so many of the women are angry at themselves, they are certain that their sons and daughters must also be harboring or sitting on angry feelings. For the birthmother, one of the benefits of post-reunion seems to be receiving the child's "pardon" or relieving herself in some other way of the nagging fear that the adopted person must hate her... Years into post-reunion, some adopted persons can still be found 'sitting on' their anger to protect the relationship-a dynamic that occurs in many relationships, especially among women. In these relationships especially, fragile and fraught with pain on both sides, people are even more inclined than usual to suppress angry feelings because building and sustaining the union occupies a higher priority. Gediman /Brown 1991 pp129-130

**Testing**

A frequent behavior in adopted persons post-reunion repertoire is testing. They test their birthmothers by behaving in ways that ask; Will you be there for me this time? Will you reject me? They seem to seek symbolic evidence that the bond is secure and that they can trust the birthmother. Sometimes, birthmothers do the testing. They ask 'What do you really want from me?'. Testing can occur between birthparents and adoptive parents as they too struggle to invent rules for their unprecedented relationship. There can be the 'provocation dance,' with the adopt-ed person testing and the birthmother 'walking on eggs' until she becomes upset enough, or feels secure enough, to set limits and force a halt. Gediman/Brown 1991 p131

**Retreat and 'back offs'**

Besides 'holding back,' reunionees describe periods of 'pulling back' or 'backing off,' which means less frequent contact and less emotional involvement with one another. Withdrawals may be precipitated by a fight, adopted persons anger, adoptive parents' pressure, need for space precipitates the hiatus. Retreat can last for months. It can occur towards the beginning of post-reunion or years after. Gediman/Brown 1991 p133

**Therapeutic work process**

Both birthmothers and adopted persons have work to do, both on themselves and jointly on their relationship. Most fundamentally, the work of reunion is freeing oneself, insofar as possible, from the unfinished business and related emotional baggage which adoption produced. However, some experts maintain that scars will always remain, no matter how diligent the efforts. By the time a birthmother and her adopted son or daughter are able to forge a genuinely adult-to-adult relationship-the kind of relationship a regular mother might have with a grown-up child- they have probably completed a scope of work that includes:-

- ❑ Filling up the informational vacuum-i.e., finding out the story and what's happened since in each person's life
- ❑ Resolving the psychological issues and coming to peace with the past- for birthmothers, issues associated with relinquishing their child; for adopted persons, the issues associated with being given up
- ❑ Catching up present relationships; informing family members and others about the past; integrating the new relationship into other existing relationships
- ❑ Growing a shared history-accumulating experience, which will enhance feelings of connectedness, warmth, and closeness; putting pages in a joint book of memories
- ❑ Negotiating and inventing a mutually acceptable relationship- deciding how to relate to one another.

Post-reunion develops along two paths more or less simultaneously: the tangled path that leads backward to the past; and the newly laid track that is carrying birth-mother and adult adopted person into their future. New opportunities are released by virtue of reunion and post-reunion, and their futures include possibilities for personal growth, and for relationships that did not exist before. Gediman/ Brown 1991 p137

## POST-REUNION THEMES

Once they are set upon the post-reunion journey, birthmothers and adopted persons will inevitably discover several areas that command their attention or decision-making energies. The most recurrent ones are (1) genetic ties; (2) invisible history becoming visible information; (3) labeling each other; and (4) money matters.

### Genetics at a glance

Recent studies indicate that the influence of genetics is far more powerful than previously thought. In addition to all the physical characteristics that are genetically transmitted, some personality traits which were once thought to be learned are now thought to be genetically-based as well. Birthmothers' reunion experiences echo this finding about the strength of genetic influences. Gediman/Brown 1991 p140

### Genetic bridge of commonality

The interest which two people share often forms a bridge on which they can meet. Imagine then the strength of the bridge constructed of shared genetics. Discovering that you look like this other person- that you have the same kind of hair, or hands, or facial structure, or that your interests or habits are similar- is an amazing experience.

Discovering that you have the same sense of humor, or walk or smile the same way, or that your houses are furnished in the same style, or that you both have the same poster hanging in your living room, are thrilling signs of commonality. Gediman/Brown 1991 p140

### Birthmothers perceptions

Birthmothers report definite, strong, sometimes 'uncanny' resemblances between their sons, daughters and themselves or someone else in the birth family; the resemblances are often confirmed by other, more 'disinterested' onlookers. Many also see likenesses between the child and the birthfather. This can be a potential source of ambivalence. If he hurt or angered the birthmother years ago, even if it was just a casual affair, she can be dismayed to encounter his presence in the child. Gediman/Brown 1991 p141

### Importance of photographs

Even before they meet, a photograph can be the proverbial picture that's worth a thousand words. In a culture where reunion is not socially sanctioned, physical resemblances provide reuniting individuals with the validation that, in some sense, they belong together. Perhaps this is also the reason that picture-taking, as well as showing the photos to anyone who will look, is a common reunion and post-reunion activity. Early in reunion, the focus on genetic similarities also helps to make both adopted persons and birthmothers feel more familiar with each other, easing the awkwardness and discomfort their meeting generates. The power of these resemblances is so profound that some of the birthmothers feel that they never fully recognized the significance of having relinquished a child, or what adoption meant, until they saw their child in the flesh. Gediman/Brown 1991 p141-2

### Delights of similarity

Birthmothers simultaneously delight in enumerating their physical similarities with their children, and regret the unhealthy conditions they've transmitted. It is the non-physical resemblances- the emotional similarities, common interests, that evoke a singular pleasure, partly because they were unexpected and because these are the kinds of affinities on which close relationships thrive. An adopted person whose interests were always a mystery to his adoptive family, may respond especially warmly to a similarly inclined birthmother, and she to him. Creative abilities such as art, music and writing, in particular, may produce these ties. Gediman/Brown 1991 p143

### Emotional commonality

One of the major commonalities that birthmothers and their children fasten upon is similarity in their emotional styles- that is, whether the other individual expresses emotions openly or is more inhibited, especially if there was a difference between the adopted person and the adoptive family in this area. Several birthmothers point to common emotional styles as bulwarks of their relationships, though any common characteristics, temperament, interests, career choice, interpersonal style, etc., seem to strengthen the bonds. There are also instances when mother-child similarity turns out to be less than helpful to the post-reunion alliance. 'We both need our independence,' for example, or 'we're both stubborn,' or 'we're both reserved,' or 'she has a terrible temper; she inherited it from me.' Gediman/Brown 1991 p144

**Processing information:** Learning the truth and coming to grips with it

### Filling the information vacuum

The work of post-reunion includes filling in the informational vacuum. It is a task that belongs on the adopted person's agenda, but it is also an important post-reunion activity for the birthmother. What she learns about her child's adoptive home, and about how the child has fared over the years, has important bearing on her post-reunion state. Such information has the power either to affirm her adoption decision or to deny its validity. Mothers who learn that their child had a 'good' home, or were 'better off' than they would have been without adoption, enjoy greater post-reunion equanimity than those who discover unhappy facts. The latter scenario means 'feeling responsible when I was not responsible,' which adds a new load of guilt to already overloaded circuits. Not infrequently, the guilt is turned into a moral imperative- to figure out what's necessary and provide it because "I owe her." It doesn't matter if the post-reunion going gets rough because "I couldn't live with myself by slamming the door again in her face."

### Can't fix the past

Although a birthmother may want to come to the rescue and "fix it," the past is not easily rewritten. There is little a woman can do, for example, if she learns that her child was not adopted until age two; or that the adoptive father was an alcoholic, or mentally unstable, or prone to violence. There is nothing she can do when she's told that the adoptive mother favored another child and that hers got

second-class treatment. The discovery that a daughter was raped by the adoptive father or brother, or that a son is bisexual, or that her own unwed pregnancy was re-enacted by her daughter, is difficult to accept. And these things happened. Gediman/Brown 1991 p149

### **Birthmothers cop more unpleasant truths**

In our sample, there are more birthmothers encountered unpleasant truths than of adopted persons encountering such material, but adopted persons are often confronted with bitter realities also. They may find out that their birthfather is an alcoholic or drug abuser; or that he is in prison; or that they are the product of rape. These things all happened. Gediman/Brown 1991 p149

### **Information-processing task**

From the birthmother's standpoint, the information-processing task means catching up on the child's past life. The operational question is, 'Are you okay and what kind of life have you had?' Everyone in the adoption triad seems aware of the question intuitively, judging from the frequency with which post-reunion participants spend hour after hour going over 'all the photographs' as though the succession of images will somehow fill up the vacuum and erase the time warp as well. Gediman/Brown 1991 p150

### **Adopted persons info catch-up**

The adopted person also has a difficult assignment, playing informational catch-up on several fronts at once: learning his adoption story; learning about his birthmother as a person, her current family connections, and the rest of the family tree; learning about the birthfather's side. What are the family 'cultures' like? Who are all the relatives? What do they do? How do they spend their time? Celebrate holidays? The adopted person must integrate all this information and at the same time let go of the fantasies that have been his or her emotional mainstay for so long. Gediman/Brown 1991 p150

### **Benefits to adopted persons**

Acquiring their informational legacy produces various types of benefits for adopted persons: the identity 'clicks'; the assuaged curiosities; the helpful hints. There is a good deal to absorb, both intellectually and emotionally. Integrating it all into one's sense of self can take many years. When the discoveries are far afield from their prior experience, integrating them may turn out to be more troublesome than otherwise, but correct information, however surprising or unpleasant, is almost always preferred to the amalgam of secrecy, half-truths, and guesses that was available before.

### **Birthmother results**

For birthmothers, an unanticipated result of post-reunion is that they learn details about their own stories that they never knew. Finding out such details often leaves a birthmother dazed and angry; she realizes that she was lied to and robbed of control. But the new information also enables her to possess her own history fully for the first time. Mini-mysteries that existed for years are also suddenly solved when post-reunion lifts the veil of secrecy. Gediman/Brown 1991 p151

### **Synchronicities**

The information exchanged between mother and child often turns up a host of uncanny coincidences of names, addresses, tastes that people note with wonder and that introduce an aura of otherworldliness into the post-reunion space. A few refer to them as "synchronicities," the term Carl Jung used to describe events that were meaningfully related but could not be explained by the laws of cause and effect. Gediman/Brown 1991 p152

### **Should I Call You Mother?**

Outside adoption, and traditionally, the concept of mother usually means two things: the woman who gives birth and the child's primary caretaker. Inside adoption, the 'nature' and the 'nurture' aspects of mother are split between two different individuals. Who is the 'real' mother?

Calling one woman the birthmother and the other the adoptive mother doesn't seem to answer the question for many people, possibly because it's cumbersome, more likely because the impulse to designate only one individual as mother is so deeply and strongly ingrained in all of us. The word conveys specialness, a privileged status. 'Which one do you think of as your mother?'

Adopted persons in post-reunion are often asked, which is another way of asking, to whom do you grant this prized title? Similarly, 'What does he call you?' Is one of the first things post-reunion birthmothers are asked, the inquirer's way of getting a quick sense of what their relationship is all about. Birthmothers are acutely aware that the confusion about language is really a confusion about status.

Because thoughts and feelings often are out of sync with the labels, birthmothers try to find analogies to the post-reunion relationship but mostly conclude that there's nothing else like it. Looking for familiar roles that might serve as models, some people have suggested using step-relationships as a model.

The majority of birthmothers report feeling parental towards their child. Just about all have feelings of responsibility toward the adopted person. Assessing their children's motives, the majority also tell us that their sons and daughters were not seeking parental relationships at the outset. What these adult adopted persons did want instead is variously described: being connected to blood relatives, being a member of a family; a sense of belonging; a sense of self, being loved unconditionally, relationships with brothers and sisters, new friendships, etc.

Ambiguities and all, reunioning pairs have to settle on an answer to "What shall we call each other?" The issue of "What shall we call each other?" Symbolizes the essential ambiguity of the post-reunion relationship: indeterminate roles. Being unable to name the role, unfortunately, is a very real deterrent to feeling comfortable in the relationship. It's difficult to own an experience you can't name or to feel secure when the territory is limbo.

Some adopted persons call their adoptive mother 'Mum', and their birth mother 'mother', some refer to her by her first name. Gediman/Brown 1991 pp153-157

## POST REUNION BIRTH-MOTHERS NETWORK

Gediman/Brown— Reunion is not a private event. The number of people whom it touches includes birthmothers' husbands, their own parents and siblings, and friends—

### Birth family

The birthmother's family can cast a positive, negative, or neutral hue on post-reunion proceedings. When the hue is positive, the family members act to bolster the relationship between the two principals, helping it root in greater depth than it would without their presence. When the influence is negative, these interactions account for many of the "little minefields" that the reunioneering pair must negotiate. Gediman/Brown 1991 p204

### Husbands

□ *When the husband is the birthfather*, reunion and post-reunion present an opportunity for the couple to scrutinize and thresh out their shared past.

□ *When the women are married to other people*, which is more frequently the case, post-reunion puts a premium on husbands' understanding and patience. Fortunately, most of the women had told their spouses about the adoption before they married, but there was often a post-reunion period of upset or adjustment anyway due to the wife's preoccupied state of mind, her overt attraction to a male child, or the fact that another man (the birthfather) suddenly became prominent, either in memory, conversation, or in person. The reader has only to recall the possibility that birthmothers can "fall in love all over again" to imagine how very threatening post-reunion can be to husbands and to understand why they so often feel excluded. Gediman/Brown 1991 p204

□ *Second marriages*— When a reunioneering birthmother is in a second marriage, as some were, the stress of post-reunion is superimposed on what can already be a stressed household such as new blended family an ex spouses... More commonly, birthmothers indicate that their husbands or men-friends have been supportive to them in post-reunion and kind and gracious to their son or daughter in spite of any initial difficulties. The men usually understand how important these relationships are for these mothers. Many have grown fond of the adopted person and have evolved pleasing, friendly connections of their own, with a dash of parental pride or concern occasionally thrown in. Some were 'ready' for these relationships, because they knew their wives were searching...Ready or not, though, tension between a birthmother and an adopted person in the household can affect everyone. Gediman/Brown 1991 p206

### Birth Grandparents

Many of today's senior citizens were yesterday's decision-makers. Their responsibility in the original decision inevitably colors the way they view reunion. For some, the materialized adopted person represents the problem they thought they solved, newly arisen. Others find that the passage of time means they can now accept what was once unacceptable because society has changed, they have

grown old, and it can be wonderful to have a grandchild. Birthmothers can't know which of these positions their parents will take until they reveal the reunion event. When parents are elderly or sick, the women frequently choose not to, thinking it better to let them live out their days without disturbance. But it's a judgment call and a piece of unfinished business a woman may later regret.

The vicissitudes of parents' health and aging sometimes takes the choice out of birthmothers' hands entirely.

Some grandparents, however, didn't know about their daughters' pregnancies in the first place, which means that reunion produces a grandchild they never knew they had. They are spared being defensive or feeling guilty about any role they might have played in the original separation, but they're likely to have decidedly mixed feelings about their daughter's failure to inform them at the time of her dilemma. Gediman/Brown 1991 pp207-8

### Extended Family

If the essence of grandparents' reactions to reunioneering adopted persons tends to lie in whatever meanings lurk in past events, the reactions of extended family members- by which we include birth aunts, uncles and cousins- are less colored by this particular strand of determinism. These relatives range from 'not interested' or embarrassed to warm and welcoming, and their stance affects the birthmother's view of her relations. What frequently happens is that reunion produces a greater emotional charge between the birthmother and her brothers or sisters than between the adopted person and his aunts or uncles, perhaps because sibling relationships are closer and more charged to begin with.

Families who are far-flung geographically may get the news of a reunion by letter or Christmas announcement. In the absence of personal contact, they can be left uncertain about how the birthmother really feels. They may be less than comfortable themselves with "airing the dirty linen in public." Large family occasions often turn out to be the time when the extended family meets the adopted person, preventing them from going beyond casual conversation to find out who the adopted person really is or what his motives are (assuming they want to). People who have adoption connections in their own lives, as adoptive parents say, bring personal predispositions about reunion to the news. Many families honor the role with appropriate gestures, they act in a friendly manner when holidays or other circumstances bring them together, but they don't develop close relationships. Gediman/Brown 1991 p212

### Friends

Friends are an important part of our lives, especially at times of crisis, so it comes as no surprise that these 'voluntary intimates' play a role in birthmothers' reunion and post-reunion experiences. Mainly, we find them displaying, by offering support and encouragement, the loyalty that most of us want from our friends.

□ Their focus is on helping their friend, rather than befriending the new son or daughter, and so, like many in the extended family, they respond to the adopted person more in role-related terms than as an individual.

- ❑ Being a friend to a birthmother who's had a reunion often becomes an education in psychology or social policy.
- ❑ Being judgmental of a birthmother who's happy to have a reunion can threaten or ruin a friendship.
- ❑ As reunion and post-reunion unfold, it's natural for friends to wonder about and express concern about the adoptive parents. Many don't realize that this can be a touchy area for birthmothers to discuss. Friends who are adoptive parents themselves, or who have adoption in the family, can be discomfited by these events. Even the closest of friends sometimes need to be assured that the adoptive family is giving its permission for reunion to occur.
- ❑ Once birthmothers have gained confidence, they venture beyond the protection of close friends into the ranks of not-so-close friends and acquaintances—the array of neighbors, co-workers, tradespeople, etc. —and tell them about the adopted person.
- ❑ Some birthmothers reach a point where they can finally tell anyone and everyone about their reunion without worrying about being judged.
- ❑ Reunion becomes a community event and the reactions of people in the birthmother's network can either undercut her post-reunion pleasure or reinforce and expand it. None may be more significant in this regard than the adoptive parents. Gediman/Brown 1991 pp214-218

### Some Conclusions

Gediman/Brown—There's no such thing as a perfect reunion. Every reunion is built on the foundation of closed adoption, and the closed adoptions from which these reunions sprang were permeated with secrecy, guilt, shame, and loss. It's a wonder that anything good and healthy could spring from such a soil, but it has.

There's no such thing as an easy post-reunion, because too many people are involved, each with his own personality, history, conflicts and uncertainties. Having a reunion and building a post-reunion is like erecting the Tower of Babel: a precarious balance must be achieved in a scene of noise and confusion, a discordant mixture of needs, desires and personal styles. It's a marvel that people connect at all. Yet fantasies are put aside, reality is acknowledged, jealousies are soothed, insecurities fade, feelings of loss and threat are resolved, issues of all kinds get dealt with, and relationships endure.

The pangs of reunion and post-reunion are no less real than the pangs of birth, but the rewards are great. It wasn't true that these birthmothers would forget their children, put the pregnancy and adoption behind them, and get on with their lives after the surrender. It begins to be true after reunion, when birthmothers can derive peace of mind, enhanced self-esteem, and feelings of liberation. Post-reunion can produce some measure of closure. Just as impressive is what post-reunion can accomplish for adopted persons. We see men and women taking on the sense of being real, normal adults, just like everyone else. We see self-esteem strengthening after adopted persons learn the circumstances of their birth and find out they weren't "dumped." We see an ending to the paralysis of the un-

known, the flow of unleashed potential. Adopted persons get rid of "the adoption difference" and move on. Gediman/Brown 1991 p243

### Personal Strategies

We do not wish to leave the impression that reunion or post-reunion will solve all the personal problems that birthmothers and adopted persons bring into them. Reunion and post-reunion are not the magical cure for all life's problems, despite the parties' understandable inclination to present them that way and to minimize the disappointments and difficulties. Until society favors reunion with approval and with social amnesty, reunion advocates can be expected to accentuate the positives and play down the negatives when they are explaining their experiences to everyone else.

Post-reunion unfolds like a marriage: you have to work at it. Basic survival training in "birthmotherhood" should include the following pieces of advice from those who've been on the front lines—

❑ *Get help:* join a support group; see a professional who's versed in adoption/reunion issues; find a "buddy" who's been through it. Read whatever books and newsletters you can find. You'll discover you're not alone and you're not crazy. Don't wait until your reunion hits a snag; do it right away. And consider the possibility that your spouse might benefit from counseling too especially if the birth-father re-enters your life.

❑ *Expect an emotional roller coaster* ride, from depression to ecstasy. Try to be in touch with all the contradictory feelings. Try to express them. It's okay to feel whatever you feel. It's okay to be angry.

❑ *It's not unusual to feel guilty* about relinquishment, or about what the adopted person didn't get, but try to avoid self-flagellation. You can be sad without being guilty. You have it within your power to interpret the past in a way that will make you feel better or in a way that makes you feel worse.

❑ *Take it slow, one day at a time.* Don't try to make up for years of separation (or guilt, or deprivation or whatever) all at once. Try not to overwhelm the other person. Take your fears one at a time too.

❑ *Give the relationship time,* be patient. Even outside adoption, feelings of connection between parents and children need time to develop. Relationships takes years to build.

❑ *Be honest.* Adoption has been full of secrets. Be open and truthful. If you can't deal with something, say so. Don't lie about your feelings to please, or to avoid hurting him or her, either. Lies will just cause trouble later.

❑ *Give a lot, but set limits* if you must. You don't owe the adopted person everything they ever missed. Resist the impulse to spoil. Don't take on mothering role.

❑ *Be cautious, think before you act.* These are complicated relationships and powerful emotions. Behave with an eye toward continuing the relationship.

❑ *Appreciate whatever you have* in reunion. Try to be content; don't push for more. Gediman/Brown 1991 p245

## SEARCH

### **The journey toward your unknown parents and your unknown self.**

Wanting to know your heritage and biological connections is natural. Most people know who their ancestors were and who their relatives are. In non-adoptive families, it is not considered odd to discuss who resembles whom in the family and to comment on similarities. Only in adoption does the topic of origins become a twisted and secret subject. Thus, searching involves adopted persons and birth parents in closed adoptions. In open adoptions there is no need for search because there is no secrecy about who the other triad members are.

#### **Normality of searching**

The decision to search is a normal one, not a symptom of a problem: it is a normative crisis for the adopted person. *Searching for a self that incorporates one's past and one's present is a normal life pursuit for all human beings.* It takes on larger proportions when information is missing, obscured, or unknown. There is, in late adolescence and early adulthood especially, a need to find out where we came from in order to figure out where we are going. Yet the information many adopted persons need about their past families, past cultures, past countries, is often not known. There is a need to know our ancestors in order to recognize our children. The search is something that all human beings do in one way or another. The second generation of an immigrant family finds a need to return to the 'old country' and to give their children ethnic names. It is not disrespect for one's present family that leads one to search for the past. It is a human need to know as much as we can about who we are. Pavao 1998 pp75-76

There was a time, not too long ago, when many professionals believed that only maladjusted adopted persons had a need to search for their origins. The implication was that good (loyal) adopted persons did not search. Now therapists are beginning to understand that there are primal strivings behind the adopted persons need to reconnect in some way with the birth family. Lifton 1994 p128

#### **A universal quest**

We can see the search for Home as a universal quest, but for the adopted person it is also a literal one. It is a quest for the beginning of one's narrative; for the lost mother; for unconditional love; for meaning; for the recovery of lost time; for a coherent sense of self; for security; for form and structure; for grounding and centering. The search for Home reflects the adopted persons need for biological, historical, and human connectedness. It is close to a religious search because it is an attempt to connect to forces larger than oneself. Lifton 1994 p128

#### **Call to search**

If we believe that exile is a loss of biological and psychological identity, then adopted persons have been in exile since their separation from the mother. The original birth certificate—that universal passport that connects every-

one to his or her origins—is lost to them. From the time of Oedipus, adopted children have wandered through strange lands trying to recover that legendary place other people call Home—the place they started out from. Lifton 1994 p127

#### **The hero's journey**

When adopted persons set out on the search, they are answering...The Call: the first stage of the mythic journey in which the hero ventures forth from the familiar world into the unknown...The journey is the adopted persons heroic attempt to bring together the split parts of the self...It is an act of will; a new dimension of experience. It is the quest for the intrinsic nature one was born with before it got twisted out of shape by secrecy and disavowal. It is a way of living out the script that might have been. It is a way of taking control of one's own destiny, of seizing power. It is a way of finding oneself. Yet we must not forget...The adopted persons journey can be a time of chaos as well as wonder. There are no safe parameters. No way of staying in control...adopted persons are elated one moment, devastated the next...They are moving not only toward the original mother but also toward the original trauma. Lifton 1994 pp133-134

#### **Crossing the threshold**

Some adopted persons get their 'wake-up call' on 'Oprah'. Others are jolted out of sleep by an unexpected life crisis and find themselves suddenly falling through a trapdoor in the self into the dark pit of the unconscious. Everything that was neatly arranged and nailed down in their psyche comes undone and flies through the trapdoor with them. They are caught in a gravitational pull toward an alternate reality: the very Ghost Kingdom they had so painstakingly split off. They could disappear entirely. It is terrifying, this moment you realize you are going to cross a threshold from which you may never return. Lifton 1994 p131

#### **What are you searching for?**

##### **Great expectations**

Adopted persons are not clear what they are searching for when they first begin. They say that they just want to find medical information, or the reason they were given up, or someone who looks like them. Or they say they want to know their family history, to look into the eyes of someone of the same blood, to say thanks for giving birth to them. Having been out of touch with their feelings for so long, it is hard for adopted persons to know what it is that is driving them forward. They may deny that they expect to find anyone special in their birth mother, but unconsciously everyone hopes to discover a soul mate—someone strong and independent who will reach out with unconditional love. At the moment of beholding her, they expect to be instantly transformed into the whole self they were meant to be. Lifton 1994 p135

##### **Wanting to find the truth**

Triad members have various reasons for wanting to search. Adopted persons want to know their history. Birth parents want to know how their children are. The basic underlying reason for searching is wanting to know the truth. Russell 1996 p122

**The right to know**

Adopted persons come to the decision to search by realizing that they have a right to know who they are, where they come from, and who they are related to. Believing in one's right to know adds strength to the desire and footwork necessary in the search process.

Many birth parents struggle with the decision to search. At the time of relinquishment, they made a decision and signed an agreement to release their child. However, they seldom foresaw the emotional impact of their decision. The right to search is an emotionally laden issue. Anyone contemplating adoption today must be aware of what the triad members of the past can share. In a closed adoption, triad members will wonder about each other. Some triad members will want to search and will try to locate family members. If search is too threatening an issue for potential adoptive parents or potential birth parents, then options other than adoption need to be considered. Russell 1996 p123

**Knowing versus not knowing**

For most people who search, knowing is better than not knowing. No matter what they find out, they find fulfillment in knowing the truth rather than continuing to wonder. The shift from not knowing to knowing can be dramatic and can affect many parts of a person's life. The sense of being able to integrate the whole picture of who one is allows the people to move on in their life. Russell 1996 p129

**Filling in the blanks**

Adopted persons in closed adoptions also have many questions. Most of these questions can only be answered by birth parents. What non-adopted persons know by simply looking at their relatives, many adopted persons must seek. The hope of reunion and being able to fill in the blanks inspires many adopted persons and birth parents to search for each other. Russell 1996 p112

**Synchronicity**

Synchronicity refers to the seemingly coincidental occurrences between people and events. Many adopted persons and birth parents describe, synchronicity that occurred before or during their search. Synchronicity makes people feel connected to each other on a deep level. Russell 1996 p115

**Feeling the connection**

Many triad members describe 'feeling a connection' to another triad member over time and distance. Perhaps it is the connection from the prenatal experience of pregnancy that continues on despite the separation. Perhaps it is a biological predisposition that makes our species continue on. Searching can be driven by the strong connection between triad members. The desire to reconnect and to fill the empty space can persist no matter what else the triad member has in life. There are many different ways to feel the connection between birth parent and adopted person. Human beings use all their senses to identify people and situations. The more senses that are involved, the more connected people will feel with each other. When the connection is made, there can be a feeling of rightness and familiarity. Russell 1996 p115

**Retrieving lost connection**

American psychologists working in prenatal studies have come to similar conclusions. They speculate that the fetus has stored away cellular knowledge of its mother, which can be retrieved. Adopted persons in search are trying to do just that: retrieve that lost connection, even though they know that their families, gave them up voluntarily. They hope that a place has been reserved for them in the family, that they were relinquished legally, but not psychologically. But how can they know whether or not their mother and father or other members of their clan have kept that psychological connection and will be there to welcome them? Lifton 1994 pp128-129

**Evidence of cellular knowledge**

A team of psychiatrists in Argentina has gone so far as to posit that the need to experience human connectedness through knowing about and seeing one's family of origin may have innate origins. They were amazed at how easily some of the 'disappeared' children, who had been adopted by the military families responsible for murdering their mothers in the late 1970s, had been able to adjust when returned to their original families years later. The doctors decided that there must have been communication between the fetus and its mother that the baby had split off but not lost. The prebirth knowledge was 'as if locked into a shell—in a protected nucleus capable of evolution at a later, safer time.' Reunion permeated the protective cloak of the shell, so that the child felt an innate sense of familiarity with the mother's surviving family members. Lifton 1994 p128

**Regressed self**

For the adopted persons returning to the beginning of time, time curves back on itself. They regresses as time regresses. One is on a 'pilgrimage back to the womb,' moving toward one's mother. Actually one is moving toward two mothers: the fantasy mother, frozen in time, whom one has internalized, and the actual mother, whose life has moved on without her child in the real world. And all the while the adopted person regresses, he or she is becoming two people: the ambivalent adult who returns and the needy baby who was left behind. Lifton 1994 p144

**Medical information**

Adopted persons from closed adoptions do not know their medical history. If anything is known, it is usually about the health of the birth mother at the time of pregnancy and adoption, but much can change over the years. In closed adoptions, there is sometimes no way to let an adopted person or adoptive family know about current medical information. A birth parent may leave information at an adoption agency, but may never know if the information has been passed on to the adopted person or the adoptive family. Many adopted persons will state that the reason they want to find their birth family is to know their medical history. This is usually a safe and valid concern and acceptable to others. People tend to think that wanting to know one's medical history is a legitimate reason to have curiosity about one's birth family. Many times, however, the medical information reason for searching is the tip of the iceberg and a smoke-screen for other, deeper feelings. Russell 1996 p113

## When to Start

### Deciding to search

Deciding to search can be a real turning point for adopted persons and birth parents. The decision is usually made after much consideration and marks the beginning of an unknown journey. Deciding to search can also be a time to open up about adoption feelings and issues. Along with deciding to search, adopted persons and birth parents must also decide who they are going to tell about their decision to search. It is natural for old wounds and current fears to arise when making the decision to search.

It is not unusual for adopted persons to decide to search after their adoptive parents die. Adopted persons worry about how their adoptive parents will react to the decision to search and try to avoid conversations about searching. One disadvantage of waiting until adoptive parents die is that they sometimes have information that will help in a search. Also, by that time birth family members may also have died. Deciding to search can come at any time. Most who decide to search, do not regret their decision, no matter what they find out. Knowing that time is limited can inspire one who is hesitant to search. Russell 1996 pp118-9

### Internal timing

Taking up the search involves an internal shift where the desire to know outweighs the complacency of not knowing. Action may begin by writing letters, joining a support group, or hiring a searcher. Knowing the truth becomes more important and pressing than keeping the secret. Sometimes anger motivates an adopted person or birth parent to search. They have kept their feelings inside for a long time and finally feel entitled to search. For some people, searching is the first time they have stood up for themselves or acted assertively. The search then becomes a statement of acting on one's own behalf. Russell 1996 p129

## Where to Start

### Where to start

Where does one begin a search? It can be overwhelming to try to figure out how to go about starting a search. Sometimes there is very little information to go on besides a bit of a story here or there.

When beginning a search, it can be productive to go back to the beginning, the adoption agency or the attorney who handled the adoption. In some agencies, adopted persons and birth parents can leave a letter for the other person in the file. Some agencies even facilitate reunions for adoptions that took place in their agency. Sometimes agencies can give information about where to go next.

Another way to start a search is by asking adoptive parent, for all the information they have about the birth family. Sometimes information can be found in the story of how the adoption took place or who the professionals were in the adoption. In a legal adoption, there is always some kind of paperwork involved with original information such as a name, city, or even a Social Security number. Clues will surface through various means. Russell 1996 p124

## Teenage Searchers

Schooler—If a decision is made to search, it's important that it be a family decision that everyone is comfortable with. In most cases, this should be initiated by the adopted person and always, it must be agreed to by them.

### Adopted adolescents

Adolescents begin to ask profound questions such as Who am I? What am I going to do with my life? and What is the meaning of life? Adopted teens are no different. They struggle with the same questions, but perhaps with a difficult dilemma. Defining who you are as an individual is a major part of being an adolescent. Like everyone else, adopted persons need to know where they came from in order to begin to develop a sense of who they are. Because they lack the basic knowledge of their biological roots, teenage adopted persons have a harder time trying to form their own identity. Most adopted adolescents struggle with life's normal transitions, under the shadow of a history about which they know little or nothing and, therefore, do not fully understand. Schooler 1995 p164

### Search issues for teens and families

Making the decision to move beyond getting non-identifying information to initiating a reunion is a critical one for an adolescent. Dr. Maguire Pavao suggests the following as considerations...

### Involve supportive, objective individual

It's helpful to have a consultant—whether a search and support group or a therapist acting as a consultant, not as a therapist. The family can have someone objective helping them with their communication. No matter how much adoptive parents 'intellectually' get it and believe they are doing the right thing for this child, many struggle with it emotionally. They worry about what they will find. They are very nervous and protective.

### Talk about stages of the search and reactions-

Teens may encounter. Families need to be aware of and talk about stages of the search and responses from others the teen may experience. Many searchers get pretty obsessed with the search. It becomes like a detective story.

### For people on the outside, it might look like a soap opera. For the people on the inside, it's real life.

As the search progresses, it's pivotal to realize that the journey is as important as the destination.

### Different search levels

At thirteen or fourteen they may do a search for their roots just for concrete information. In their twenties, they may go back and do it all over again a different way at a deeper level.

### Parental help

Some teens say they want to search, yet a year later have taken no action. They often have no idea how to do a search. Adoptive parents can offer administrative assistance. But the teen needs to feel in charge, must decide what they want to do, and know they can put the breaks on at any time. Schooler 1995 pp176-177 re Dr Pavao For more detailed information re teenage searching See Schooler 1995 pp163-178

## Mid Life Searchers

### Five challenges for 40s- 50s

**Generativity** Schooler—The need to leave something behind of yourself- a legacy. Most experience interest in looking back at their family history. May pass on wisdom, create art, or write to transmitting ideas to the next generation.

Acceptance of inevitable decline in physical prowess and greater reliance on mental prowess for satisfaction.

Redefinition of relationships with others; they become broader and more social.

Capacity to shift emotional investment to new people or new activities.

An ability to remain mentally flexible and open to new experiences or new ways of doing things.

Because it is mid-life, unlike old age, there's still time to initiate new relationships, change the course of one's life, and reconstruct old decisions. The question 'How long have I lived?' Now becomes 'How long do I have left?' The ever-growing sense of one's own mortality creates a whole new urgency to accomplish tasks left undone...It may be the first time the adopted person experiences an overwhelming, intense need to search. A whole new burst of emotional energy propels them to open doors that had been closed. Search and reunion for adopted persons in their forties and fifties is equally as emotional and traumatic as for searchers of a much younger age.

### Reasons why some wait to search

*I didn't want to hurt my adoptive parents* Many adopted persons feel strong loyalty to adoptive parents, they would not do anything to hurt them. As they see their adoptive parents aging and facing death, they feel freer to consider searching. Other reasons are \*I had to resolve difficult childhood issues. \*I didn't have enough time. \*I didn't know you could do it. \*Death of adoptive parents left orphans \*Their own children encouraged the search. \*Coming to terms with their own mortality- men tend to defer these emotional issues for a long time in their lives.

\*There's a strong sense that time is simply running out.

### Concerns for mid-life searchers

The longer you wait, the more likely your birth parents have died and told no one about your birth.

You have a lot of living to continue. You must not allow the search to take over and control everything else.

If your birth parents relinquished you forty or fifty years ago, you may find a less receptive environment in which to search than the more open one that prevails today.

The search and reunion will have an impact on your immediate and extended family.

You may experience major changes within your emotional and psychological make-up-changes that will impact how you relate within the family and beyond.

The more years since the adoption, the harder the search

. **Source** Schooler 1995 See pp149-162 for a detailed study mid life searching. cf also Brodzinsky *Being Adopted: The Life Long Search for Self*. 1992

## Impediments to search

### Not wanting to be found

Not everyone wants to be found. Some people are not ready to be found or feel it is best to not have any connection with the past. It can be painful for the person who searched to find someone who doesn't want contact, and the searcher may need time to integrate another experience that feels like loss and rejection. Sometimes other relatives found in a search are interested in maintaining a relationship. Having some connection with some relative generally feels better than no contact at all. No one can take the place of the person being sought, but other relationships can ease the disappointment and provide information. Russell 1996 p131

### Fears

It is natural to have fears about the search. Fears can paralyze a person into not searching or stopping the search process. Acknowledging fears by expressing them and deciding which fears are based in reality can free up energy to move on in the search process. Russell 1996 p114

### Fear of knowing

I am often asked why some adopted persons search and others don't. What is the difference between them?...The difference between those who search and those who don't lies in how they formed their defensive structures as children: how much they denied, repressed, and split off...

From the moment they are separated from their birth mothers, all adopted persons are consciously or unconsciously in search of some place, perched somewhere between conception and birth, that could be called Home. Each time an adopted child wonders whose tummy she was in, what her mother looked like, why she was given up; each time he has a fantasy or a dream, looks on the street for someone who looks like him, the adopted person has taken a small step on the journey toward Home. The adopted person may have run away as a child-acted out. That is a form of searching. He or she may have experimented with living at a friend's house or joined a cult. All of this is search behavior before things happen in life that make one turn toward or away from the possibility of a literal search. Lifton 1994 p129

### Non-searchers

Have a fine nose for scenting the possible psychic chaos waiting to be unleashed should they drop their guard... Since the self's quest is always toward nurturance and growth and away from death-related qualities of disintegration, it is not surprising that an adopted person would turn away from the threat to the self that the very idea of search carries with it. Still, the fact that an adopted person is not in search one year does not mean that he or she will not be in search the next. To mention the search to most nonsearchers is like banging on a door in the middle of the night and rousing the sleeper within...Adopted persons decide to search after they are in touch with the unconscious, when they have access to the feelings they have stashed away. Freud called it the 'return of the repressed.' The dissociation, which has worn thin in places, like the ozone layer; no longer protects them from the ultraviolet rays of reality. Lifton 1994 p129-130

**The peril**

Adopted persons face risk, trapped as they are by the taboos and guilt and divided loyalties that destiny, under the mandate of the closed adoption system, has inflicted on them. The journey toward self is draining, overwhelming, and lonely, fraught with perils.

**Searching adopted persons are in peril—**

□ Because they are breaking the taboos around the birth mother. Just as primitive people believed that they would drop dead if they made contact with a tabooed object, so adopted persons fear they could be annihilated by contact with the tabooed mother.

□ Because they are searching for an internal fantasy of the mother as much as for the external reality. They could lose the fantasy mother who is more real, and in some ways more important, to them than the real woman whom they seek.

□ Because by losing their fantasies of the birth mother, they could lose the center beam in the structure of the adopted self. These fantasies, like the adopted person, have developed over the years, but, like the adopted person, they are still split. The birth mother is still the archetypal 'good mother' who offers unconditional love, but she is also the 'terrible mother'...

□ Because they could lose their own magical self that was fused with the birth mother. They could lose the self myth that...is the truest part of an individual. The myth gives us force, direction, and sustenance...

□ Because they could bring down the walls of the adoptive family system...

□ Because they could lose their adoptive parents, who were their only protectors and providers.

□ Because they could lose the self that grew up adopted. And no matter how fragile it might be, artificial, riddled with holes, patched, and fragmented, it is the only self they have ever known.

□ Adopted persons are in peril because the search uncovers their psychic split, beneath which lies the threat of fragmentation and disintegration, which they have spent a lifetime trying to ward off. Lifton 1994 pp136-137

**Waiting to be found**

Some people are waiting to be found. Rather than taking up the search themselves, those who wait hope that the other person will find them. It can feel safer to wait to be found. Searching is a process that requires courage, persistence and the willingness to face the risk of rejection. Many people who sit in wait for the other person to find them have the fantasy that they will be found. To those who wait and want to be found, being found represents love and concern. Russell 1996 p130

**Treatment of those who search**

Searching is, in and of itself, emotionally difficult and overwhelming...Many who decide to search are treated badly and with disrespect, or are questioned about their motives and told to leave the past as past. Sometimes their only support comes from other triad members who believe in the right to search. Russell p124

**THE SEARCH****Internal searching**

Many adopted persons and birth parents search for each other in a quiet, unspoken way. This internal search process involves looking in crowds for the person, wondering where the other person is, and wondering how the other person is doing. Russell 1996 p116

**External searching**

For many triad members the internal search crosses over and becomes an external search. Wanting to know begins to outweigh the fears of searching. Many triad members who search are looking to fill the void they feel. This void is caused by not having full information.

Many times the desire for medical information begins the external search. The closed doors and sealed records of closed adoption make it difficult to gain access to the information necessary to complete a search. There can be much frustration, disappointment and anger at what people need to go through to have a successful search.

External searching is a very personal process that allows the searcher to gain more awareness of him or herself and of the issues involved. Russell 1996 p117

**Search is empowering**

Searching can be a time of true empowerment. Searching brings up feelings and emotions that must to be addressed. Strength comes from facing these emotions, dealing with them, and realizing that not everyone has the courage to struggle with such raw feelings. Control is an issue for all triad members. Choosing to search is a way to feel in control. For many, the process of searching and the choices made along the way are empowering. Russell 1996 p134

**The power of searching**

There is more to the search than just searching. People learn how to be resourceful and continue on when things don't look promising. Many also learn how to ask for help and get support. The process of searching can teach people many lessons about life and relationships. The power of searching is seen in the strength people gain during the process. Much growth and healing can take place while searching, for it offers an opportunity to open up to others, to get support from others, and to become aware of one's own hidden qualities. Russell 1996 p130

**Intrusion**

People who search know that searching and finding will have consequences. Some searchers worry that contacting the other person will be seen as an intrusion. Adopted persons are usually aware that their birth may still be a secret in their birth parents' lives. Birth parents typically know that their child may be surprised by contact. Searching means walking into unknown territory. Searchers can't know how someone is going to react to being found until they find them. Russell 1996 p133

**Intuition**

Searching can be a time when people reconnect to their intuitive self. We are all born with a sense of intuition, a variety of senses, and a knowing that guide us throughout our lives. For many in the adoption triad, intuition has gone

underground to make way for socially acceptable thoughts and feelings about adoption. Russell 1996 p133

### **Obsessiveness of searching**

Whether it is the internal searching or the external searching, there can be a constant craving for information about the person being sought. Continually thinking about someone is a way to keep them alive in one's heart and mind. Searching can become a full time job for triad members. Many who search seem obsessed and driven in their pursuit of finding people and information. The activities of searching, writing letters, making phone calls, and going to meetings, are a way to manage the feelings that surface during a search. Russell 1996 p120

### **Pinocchio syndrome**

Adopted persons sometimes identify with Pinocchio, the wooden puppet who came to life only to be flooded with emotions he didn't know how to handle because he had never been able to feel before. As feelings quicken in them, adopted persons experience a euphoria that they describe as a real high.

They say things like: 'I'm becoming real, I'm materializing, I exist.' But once they have opened themselves to feelings that had been split off before, they are in touch with the loneliness that has always been there. This loneliness, the hole inside that cannot be filled, connects them to the baby falling through a dark universe after separation from the mother, as well as to the forbidden potential 'true' self that now begins stirring...

Formerly disavowed feelings of grief, rage, fear, and abandonment can cause adopted persons to have extreme mood swings... As frightening and intense as these mood swings are, the emotional chaos adopted persons experience is a positive sign they have managed to reconnect to those feelings that had been lost to them. It is a necessary stage before true healing can begin. Lifton 1994 pp137-138

### **The crossroads**

All searchers come to the same Crossroads of Identity where Oedipus arrived so many centuries ago. It has not changed—

#### **Three roads intersect—**

□ One road will take the searchers back to where they started, the Adoption Kingdom, at which point they return to the category of nonsearchers.

□ One road leads to Limbo Land, where they can pitch tents and reside indefinitely, never knowing whether they are more afraid that their mother will not see them or that she will.

□ The third road leads forward, toward the Ghost Kingdom, for those who dare to cross over. A new riddle: Who goes there? Who, indeed? The searcher does not know who it is who goes there. 'Who am I?' is the very riddle that has brought him to this spot. Lifton 1994 p142

### **Crossing over**

Crossing over means building a bridge between the material world one has lived in and the shadowy Ghost Kingdom one has fantasized about. It is a fearsome rite of passage, for one is moving away from the adoptive parents as one moves toward the birth parents. One lays a new plank over the abyss with each step one takes. One proceeds with fear and trembling that one could get stuck in the middle, able neither to turn back nor to reach the other side. There are no safe parameters in this no-man's land between two states of being, the born and the unborn... They are going to be born again. But this time they will be in control, and will do it right. They are moving toward the birth father as well as the mother, toward the whole birth clan, toward the lost baby, toward that fragment of the self that waits to be reattached. Lifton 1994 pp142-143

### **Adoptive parents and the search**

Some adoptive parents are very supportive of their child's desire and interest in searching for birth parents. These parents are usually open with any information they may have about the birth family and are aware of the importance of the birth family to their child.

Adopted persons are very aware of the feelings their adoptive parents may have about the search. Some do not tell their adoptive parents about searching for fear of hurting their feelings or of having to defend their need to search. Others will talk about the search but hold back some of their excitement, not wanting to upset the adoptive parents.

Even very supportive adoptive parents can have mixed feelings about the search. Searching can take adoptive parents back to the time of adopting and raise earlier fears and feelings. It is important to acknowledge and validate all feelings that come up around search for all the triad members.

Adopted persons tend to have a strong loyalty to their adoptive parents. It is important for adoptive parents to realize that searching is not a statement about adoptive parenting. Searching is a personal need to find out information about oneself.

Searching can feel very threatening to adoptive parents. Some adoptive families do not handle adoption or search issues very well. Searching is not an insult to the adoptive family. Searching is an attempt to know one's history and fill in the missing pieces. Russell 1996 pp120-2

### **Search and support groups**

Support is very important before, during, and after a search. It can be very comforting to be with a group of people who understand the feelings and issues that one is experiencing. Many people outside the triad have difficulty understanding the desire and emotional need to search. Being in a search and support group validates feelings and helps people move forward with their search. Many support groups are open to all triad members. Participating in a support group allows one to better understand one's own feelings and those of other triad members. Russell 1996 p127

## Search Rejection

Schooler— Denial or rejection stand as the greatest fear for any adopted person who makes the decision to search. Rejection is the dashing of a hope to embrace and to be embraced, to love and to be loved by the one person who has existed only within the deep recesses of the heart. Schooler 1995 p138

### Initial rejection <> agreement to meet

Sometimes people just need time to adjust to the initial shock of being found. With time and patience, an initial “No” can turn into a “Yes.” It is important to respect the other’s responses, whatever they are, and to understand that they have their own personal reasons for their reactions. Russell 1996 p132

### Results of search rejection

Experiencing rejection or denial from one’s birth parents is devastating to self-esteem and pushes a person into depression. The rejecting experience does one of two things for the adopted person: (a) Leave them emotionally stuck in anger, bitterness, and depression or (b) push them toward understanding and healing. A major step in avoiding becoming emotionally stuck is to step back a generation or two into the societal context of that day. Within that backward glance are the ‘whys’ a birth mother rejects the contact from her son or daughter today. Schooler 1995 p138,142

## Why birth mothers reject

### Mothers who carry shame

Many women still carry the shame and guilt of becoming pregnant out wedlock. The pressures of family, clergy, social workers, and society created the belief that women who were pregnant out of marriage and surrendered their child were worthless. Most were told they should never share the fact of the pregnancy or surrender with anyone, not even their future husbands. Many have taken those words to heart. When contact is made by the surrendered child, old feelings of shame and guilt rush to the surface. Schooler 1995 p142

### Mothers fear letting secret out

They have never told another person of their experience. A woman may be married and never have shared this personal information with her husband or children. This prospect can be extremely frightening. Many women fear their husbands will leave them, and their children no longer love them. This fear of loss can be overwhelming. Schooler 1995 p143

### Fear is the key element

It is much easier to deny or ignore than to face something that may be painful to self or others. Many times women believe that if they deny the contact, the other person will just go away. In most cases, that is not true. Fearing to tell one’s adult family is part of the blockage, but so is dealing with one’s family of origin. Schooler 1995 p143

### Some women never told parents

They were able to mask the pregnancy. The fear of having to face their parents after so many years can be so frightening that they choose to deny or reject their child before facing their parents or siblings. Schooler 1995 p143

## What to do if rejection occurs

Schooler— Denying a contact with the adopted person will leave in its wake a sense of incompleteness because for so many adopted adults, total acceptance is one of the hidden needs of the reunion. There are however, some practical things you can do in the wake of a rejection experience.

**Letter** If you have not received a good reception to a phone call, following up with a short, kind letter expressing that you understand your birth mother needs time to process the contact. Give your name and phone number so your birth parent has it for future consideration.

**Phone** If you made contact by letter and received no response, maybe a phone call would be appropriate to explain that you are not going to just appear on the doorstep without notice. It’s helpful to send pictures after call.

**Time** You’ve had months or years, to process what is happening. Your birth parent has not. Waiting a year or even eighteen months after the initial response is an appropriate time to wait to make another contact.

**Siblings** Do not contact siblings without sharing this desire and possible action with the birth parent. Many adopted persons feel it is their right to know their birth siblings, but this should not be at the expense of their birth mother, her well-being, and existing family relationships.

**Perspective** All searchers need to realize they went into the search for answers to many questions, not necessarily a relationship. The answers, may be enough to help you put missing pieces of your life history together.

**Share** Don’t deal with the rejection issue alone. Find and participate in a search group. It’s a good place to find people who truly understand. Check out your actions with others who are experienced in these situations. *Wait the time necessary for your birth parent to process what has happened.* Each day may seem like a long time, but it’s important to give your birth parent the time she or he needs to think this through and deal with personal feelings. Schooler 1995 p145

### Right to demand a relationship?

Lifton— Has the birth mother a right to shut out the child she brought into the world? My answer: an unequivocal No. As for whether adopted persons have the right to meet with the birth mother at least once to hear their life story: an unequivocal Yes. You can’t relinquish all of the responsibilities for parent-hood just by relinquishing the child.

Does the child have a right to demand a relationship with the birth mother after she gives him the information he needs? No, the child does not have the right to intrude on the life the birth mother has made for herself after relinquishing him.

Does the birth mother have a right to be part of the adopted persons life? No, the birth mother does not have a right to anything that the adopted person is not ready or willing to give.

It cannot be stressed enough that the original intent of adoption was to serve the best interest of the child, and the

original intent of the sealed record was to conceal the child's illegitimate birth from the public, not to cut him off from his heritage. When adopted persons, at any age, need to know their origins, those needs should supersede those of the other adults in the triad. No birth mother has the right to confidentiality from her child at the expense of her child's well-being... All people who walk the face of the earth possess the inalienable right to know their history and to meet the man and woman from whom they drew breath. Lifton 1994 pp191-2

### Healing of search rejection

To come full circle toward wholeness-and healing of the pain of rejection by a birth mother or other birth family members, an adopted person must recognize and verbalize her own depth of feeling. Often, unable to reach down far enough for herself, it is helpful to listen empathically to the feelings of others. A second step in the process toward healing is to look at the 'whys' behind the rejection, for surface appearances fail to tell the whole story. The adopted person must step into the shoes of someone who perhaps has pierced her heart severely and examine the reasons why the arrow flew from the bow. Finally, she must learn how to deal with the issue of rejection and to allow the process to mature her and enable her to stand tall once again. Schooler 1995 p138

## Search End

### Finding dead ends is very hard.

If a searcher cannot find a person, he can perhaps find places. He can go to the places, explore his heritage. He can perhaps find people who knew his birth parents. It doesn't totally take away the sense of loss in not locating birth parents, but the process can be revealing and helpful. Encountering dead ends in the search process requires the adopted person to step back, reorganize his hopes, his dreams and reorder his world. Pavao cf Schooler 1995 p128

### Death of a dream

Hearing the disappointing words, "Your birth mother (or father) has died," evokes incredible sorrow and bitter disappointment for many adopted persons who intellectually knew of the possibility but blocked it from the heart. To emotionally survive such a momentous disappointment compels one to rewrite the script. Those who have walked that path can best speak of their pain. Some are still enveloped by feelings of defeat and grief. Visiting the grave can be very helpful grief experience. With time and process, others have worked through the anguish to redefine their dreams, to redefine their hope. Schooler 1995 p128

### Moving toward resolution

If your search has ended at the grave of a birth parent, how can you resolve the losses around such finality? How can you walk through this valley of the shadow and emerge reconciled and at peace? Is it possible?

'It is a difficult process, for this is not the, recognized loss of a mother that brings sympathy and comfort from family and friends. Even those who have seen their mother only a few times are overwhelmed by the impact of their grief. This dead mother was the woman who gave you

life. Your body, born from hers, feels wrenched by its disintegration...I did not hear of my mother's death until four months after it occurred. It was the end of a dark fairytale in which we could not rescue each other or ourselves. She took her grief and her loss and her secrets with her just as she took some part of that child she had held onto and who continues to hold onto her'. Lifton 1994 p180

### Dead end search

Secrecy and the law are just two barriers that may cause a dead-end search, another comes from within.

*Self imposed dead ends* Some people put up self-imposed dead ends, they put up their own roadblocks. They say they've been searching for years but have not done the work on their own search. They want to leave the process to others. It seems they are incapable of doing anything for themselves when it comes to taking the final steps toward finding a birth parent. Reasons can range from fear of rejection to fear of acceptance and closeness. They may fear they can't handle what they might find, such as mental illness or poverty.

### When to give up searching?

Never getting past roadblocks for some adopted persons brings them to a decision-making point in the road. When does a searcher know to give up? Two guidelines:

#### *When Obsession is the Rule instead of the exception*

There come a time when an adopted person has to give up. A sign that it's time, is when the search has consumed the adopted person for a long period of time; when it has become such an obsession over the months, even years, that everything else in the searcher's life has been shelved.

#### *The Search is emotionally self-abusive*

Finding oneself in the midst of a search places the adopted person on an emotional roller coaster. When information is found— exhilaration. When information is wrong— disappointment. When a sealed record is opened— anticipation. When information is incomplete— discouragement. When the adopted person has spent too much time living on the edge of the search, it can become emotionally abusive. There comes a time when he must make a decision to lay the search aside, at least for a time. cf Kate Burke. Schooler 1995 pp127-8

### Death at the end of a search

For those who find death at the end of their search, the search is not in vain. There is a peace that comes at the end of any search, no matter what the outcome. Searching is always a journey of personal gains and possible losses. If the person being looked for has died, other relatives may be available who can fill in the missing pieces of the person. Strong and healing relationships can be made with these relatives. Russell 1996 p134

### Is it worth it?

It is impossible to put a price on one's emotional well-being. Searching takes time, emotional energy, and sometimes money. It forces a person to be patient and tolerant. It provides opportunity to vent anger and to open one's heart to others. As with all of life's challenges, the

search can teach valuable lessons not possible in any other circumstances. Russell 1996 p135

#### **Some encounter angry birth mothers**

Some adopted persons who contact their birth mothers encountered unresolved anger. One thing the adopted person is not usually aware of is the mental and emotional process a birth mother goes through when contact is made. She will most likely begin reliving the relationship that created the pregnancy, the pregnancy itself and the surrender. These often are raw and untouched emotions she may find devastating to feel.

She may start having angry feelings and expressing them to the adopted person, when she's really angry about what she's remembering. She may be angry with her family or her boyfriend for not helping her when she needed it the most. She may be angry with herself for not being stronger and standing up for what she truly wanted— to keep her child. She may be angry that she was sent away from home to live in a maternity home. She may be angry about the loss of her teenage years after childbirth. And all that anger could manifest itself in anger toward the adopted person. It's important to understand this. Curry Wolfe

Shame, fear, and anger are three of the major barriers that block a positive contact between some birth mothers and their relinquished children. Knowing what to do with that experience can enable the adopted person to move through the pain and avoid getting emotionally stuck in anger and depression. Schooler 1995 pp143-4

#### **Therapeutic value of adopted person making contact**

The general feeling expressed through the comments was that mediation and searching was a therapeutic process and that social work and counsellor skills should be used to help applicants feel confident enough to do their own mediation rather than taking over the mediation. From the reports of independent counsellors and social workers, there is evidence that the initial contact itself is the most powerful, therapeutic and healing experience for the parties involved. It was generally agreed that *social workers acting as mediators, can never convey or recapture that moment of that first reaction when contact is made*, to the applicants. To deny applicants this experience seems to detract from the experience as a whole, which belongs to the two parties concerned. Confirmed by Kennard (1991). Iwanek 1991

#### **Public acceptance of search in New Zealand**

In New Zealand as a result of Adult Adoption Information Act 1985, we are now in a different situation to USA. We have proven that given the opportunity most adult adopted persons will search. Also by 1999 we have reached the stage where most adoptive parents expect their adopted child will search, it is now taken as normal behaviour for adopted persons, and they will help them search. About 85% of new adoptive parents forestall the need to search by meeting the birthmother at the time of the adoption. Many choose open or semi-open adoption. Not only has the adoption circle endorsed open adoption, but society, social workers and legal fraternity are coming to accept open adoption as the normal practice. KCG

## **ADDITIONAL SEARCH MATERIAL**

**Dual search** Adopted persons have a dual search-

- The **external search** for birth parents and origins.
- The **internal search** for adult self-identity.

#### **Communicating with adoptive parents—**

and extended family members about the need to search presents a challenge for all adopted persons. For some, the challenge is minimal, the 'telling' easy, the support present. For others, breaking silence about the people and circumstances that led to the formation of the adoptive family introduces a whirlwind of emotions that swirls around all parties touched by the opening of a previously closed, even taboo, issue. Most adoptive parents agree that it's a natural thing for their adopted young person to want to know about his or her past. People need to know their roots. However, in responding to this need, feelings emerge that are considerably complex. For some parents, cognitive recognition that this is a normal issue for an adopted person stands miles apart from the psychological and emotional impact. Schooler 1995 p38

#### **Crossing a rickety bridge**

Opening the door to discuss search and reunion issues with adoptive family members requires you to cross over what feels like a rickety, unstable bridge. That bridge, built by materials from an unknown past, reinforced by the circumstances of the present, yet jeopardized by the concealed issues of the future, stands shaky and uncertain. *As you near the bridge*, you know that crossing it will alter the lives of everyone within your family circle. To gain support while crossing that span, you must take time to step into the shoes of those whose lives will be most greatly affected— your adoptive parents and grandparents. A step back into the last generation and a look into the future will provide helpful insight as you communicate with your family about your need to search and ask them for their blessing. How can that be done and what will it accomplish?

¶ A glance back at the historical and societal attitudes present at the time of the adoption will help you recognize how the viewpoint of a generation ago shaped your parents' thinking and actions.

¶ A look at the intergenerational changes that have occurred within your family's style of communication furnishes a unique insight into why parents perhaps failed to deal at all with adoption issues in the past two generations.

¶ Listening to the feelings and deep concerns that fashion your parents' perception of their lifelong experience as adoptive parents will help you field their responses in the future as the search issues become an ever-increasing reality. Schooler 1995 p39

#### **Perils of the rickety bridge**

As an adopted person steps onto the rickety bridge connecting the unknown past to the unknown future, she places herself at great peril. The perceived reality of that peril grows as the adopted person confronts the taboos connected to the desire to search. The peril broadens as the adopted person faces the risk of losing relationships-first,

her adoptive parents and then, perhaps, her birth family. The peril feels overwhelming as the adopted person attempts to scale the seemingly insurmountable wall of the adoption system. A sense of peril creates fear. Fear can be an immobilizing emotion. It can temporarily block or permanently stop an adopted person's attempts to locate birth family members...Feeling sadness, facing rejection, disappointment, painful memories, loss of control, and dead-ends—all are legitimate experiences encountered by adopted persons as they prepare to cross over the bridge leading to reunion. Facing emotional upheavals prior to and during the early days of the reunion and confronting sadness and fear will build strength into the emotional backbone of the adult adopted person. Schooler 1995 p58,60.

### Search as therapy

Foremost adopted persons, facing the issue of the search is far more than just an adventure. It is often a frightening decision, filled with enormous physical and emotional investment. It often comes after years of pondering, waiting for the courage to begin. It is a therapeutic step because it confronts facts, issues, people, and feelings that were once vague wonderings. It brings most to a point of resolution regarding the complexities of growing up as an adopted child. The result of the search spans a wide continuum for each adopted person, from satisfying a need for factual information to touching the deepest level of the heart and soul with a reunion. Schooler 1995 p26

### Why some don't search

Why some individuals decide not to search appears to be related to a variety of causes. Researchers in the field cite the following rationale for not conducting a search: ,

- Not interested right now.
- Loyalty to adoptive parents
- Carrying other issues.
- Uncertain about the right to disrupt lives
- Fear of rejection.

Schooler 1995 p30

### Validation searchers and non searching

Adults who have taken the step to search have many positive reasons for the undertaking. For those who have decided not to search, the reasons need equal validation. To gain an objective perspective on the topic is to allow each individual to stand face to face with the question to search or not to search, for it is his decision alone. It is also necessary to allow time, maturity, and growth to complete its work and to rest with the conclusion at which the adopted person arrives. Schooler 1995 p33

### Is there a right time to search?

According to therapist Linda Yellin, there are several reasons why an adopted person may postpone his or her search to work on emotional readiness.

❑ When the adopted person searches with an absolute planned outcome and unrealistic expectations. These types of searchers are not prepared for the unexpected and are setting themselves up for more difficulty. It's a normal part of the search process to have some fantasies, fears, hopes, and dreams about the birth family. Yet there are no guarantees about the outcome. Key questions to ask yourself are, 'Am I ready for the unknown? Will I be okay no matter how it turns out?'

❑ You may not be emotionally ready as a result of severe un-met needs in your adoptive family. 'Searching for a birth parent or birth family with the hope of regaining a parent-child relationship with the birth family is unrealistic... Exploring some of the un-met needs will help move you toward more readiness.'

❑ When it is not motivated by the adopted person, but by others pushing the issue. It's important for you to drive the search process. Yellin believes that overall readiness to search occurs 'when the adopted person wants to be in the driver's seat on the unknown search road of detours, humps, roadblocks, rest stops, and curves in unpredictable weather.'

Facing the decision to alter the relationships and events of your life and the lives of your birth family members, adoptive family members, and your own adult family is an important one. Listening to good advice in the early stages can bolster your courage to do what you feel you must. Schooler 1995 p34

### Parental response to searching

What do parents feel when the adopted person says "I'm searching"? Incredible ambivalence is a common response to the search. 'They want it for their child, but it hurts deeply,' Demuth says. 'On the one hand, they want their child to be healed through the reunion encounter but are pained because they were not fully adequate to provide that for them. Some parents even question if they fulfilled their nurturing role since they, in themselves, could not make the pain go away for their child.'

Recognizing the sensitive, fragile concerns of adoptive parents is an important step in the whole process of the search and reunion. Knowing that the question may renew painful memories of loss and failure, ignite feelings of inadequacy for your adoptive parents, or fuel fears of rejection or hurt in yourself will equip you to approach your parents with sensitivity and understanding.

Dr. Severson strongly believes that an overwhelming number of adoptive parents understand.

"The essential point is that every human being on the face of the earth has a right to look into the eyes of those from whom they drew life.... It is my belief, heartfelt as well, that no human being would wish to deny adopted persons that right once they can be helped to see the human justice of it. And certainly I do not believe that any adoptive parents whose love for the child...is as enduring and ennobling as any love on earth, would deny that right to his or her adopted children. But if they do not see it, it is not because they are blind; it is because their eyes have not yet opened. Love and respect and understanding are the answer, not blame and guilt. R Severson *Adoption and Spirituality* Dallas Aries Center 1994 p17

To move beyond blame, guilt, and misunderstanding is a noble goal in crossing the bridge together. To explore, understand, and to forgive your parents for lack of support or even misdirected hostility opens doors to keeping the relationship open and healthy. Schooler 1995 p46-49

**Making the search decision**

Making the decision to initiate the search is a critical turning point in the life of an adopted person. As he walks a path that may link unknown events and people from an unknown past to the events and people of the present, preparation is an absolute necessity, and he must face a multitude of concerns.

- ❑ The searcher will encounter unexpected emotions that may propel him into confusion, anger, fear, even depression at a depth which he has not yet experienced.
- ❑ He must learn to recognize unrealistic expectations within himself and balance those with probable reality
- ❑ He should be aware of the people he will meet and their reactions, both positive and negative. A searcher must have a reasonable perception of what circumstances he may find regarding his birth family.
- ❑ The searcher must know how and where to gain support, for this is a journey not to be undertaken alone. Schooler 1995 p56

**Emotional roller coaster**

The only thing for certain when plowing new ground is that unknown ruts, rocks, even boulders can block progress. As the adopted person plows new ground in his search, he may find himself profoundly confused at the depth and breadth of his emotions. Schooler 1995 p56

**Why females search more than males**

Of the two sexes women are more likely to search, several suggestions have been made—

- ❑ Female ability to be closer to their feelings.
- ❑ Females express emotions more overtly than men.
- ❑ Men are more inclined to suppress emotions.
- ❑ Childbearing links daughters to mothers.
- ❑ Daughters frequently experience this collection anew at the time of their first pregnancy.
- ❑ Relationship and attachment occupy a more central in the female psyche.
- ❑ Male identity formation is based on separating from, not on relating to, -thus they find it easier to integrate the fact of adoptive status into their identity. Gediman/Brown 1991 p55

**Search may trigger anger**

The search process can trigger a great deal of buried anger. Blocked from expressing unwelcome feelings about the adoption as a younger person, the adopted persons emotions often vault to the surface as incredible rage.

Betsie Norris, in her work as president of Adoption Network Cleveland, a large support and advocacy group in Ohio, often sees that anger and believes it originates from and is directed toward many different people.

At whom or what is the anger directed? The anger may be aimed at:

- ❑ The birth mother- Why couldn't you keep me?
- ❑ The birth father- Why couldn't you support your family? Why couldn't you get your life together?

- ❑ The agency- Why couldn't you help my mother or why didn't you share the truth?
  - ❑ The adoptive parents- Why didn't you talk to me more about my adoption; why didn't you tell me the truth? Whatever the source, legitimate or misdirected anger is something many adopted persons face. What to do with it then becomes the issue. While often viewed as something to avoid, anger can become the ally of the adopted person. Betty Jean Lifton\* comments, 'We must remember that no matter how painful these waves of grief 'and anger are, they are part of the ongoing process of mourning that comes with reclaiming one's lost emotions and integrating them into the self Adopted persons find it hard to believe at the time, but the chaos carries healing in its wake.'
- \*Lifton *Journey of the Adopted Self* 1994 p155

An adopted person's anger en route to healing is best encountered with help. Adoption counselor, Barbara Wentz, strongly suggests the adopted person seek an open ear from a third party as anger surfaces. 'Someone outside the relationship who would not be affected by the venting of the adopted person's anger can best be that buffer. It could be a therapist or a trusted friend who understood the dynamics of the healing process.' Schooler 1995 p57

**Adopted persons drive to search**

When people are not personally involved with adoption, they rarely think about it's 'might have been' nature. Adopted persons do. There are times in the lives of some when they can think of little else...Adopted persons themselves are often hard-pressed to explain their motives to those who do not already share some understanding. With appropriate language in short supply, they have difficulty in expressing themselves even to sympathetic outsiders. Faced with hostile audiences, they may cling to the more socially acceptable replies to justify what, to their mind, should need no justification. According to Robert Andersen, an adopted person who is also a psychiatrist, asking an adopted person, "Why do you search?" is an absurd question because it is really asking, "Why are you interested in your mother, father, grandparents, brothers, sisters, cousins, nephews, nieces, ancestry, history, proclivities, aptitudes, liabilities— in short, why are you interested in you?" Another adopted person has written that the desire to search is 'like instinct. It feels right and necessary. It is difficult to explain. Something seems to be missing, and reconnecting presents a possibility to find that indefinable missing piece.' What these people are saying is that there is a void in the adopted persons life that only the birthmother can fill, a void that has little to do with the quality of their relationship with the adoptive parents. To call it curiosity is too weak, the need seems far more primal. Using himself as a case in point, adopted person-psychiatrist Andersen concludes that after all the socially acceptable reasons have been stated, the search is 'most fundamentally an expression of the wish to undo the trauma of the separation.' The central wish is for 'contact and healing.' An adopted person's drive to search can also be understood as arising from identity issues (Who am I?), informational issues (Why did my mother give me up? What is my story?), and medical issues (What is my genetic history?). Gediman/Brown 1991 p49

**SECRECY**

In an ideal adoption, there are no secrets. No secrets mean no need for amended birth certificates, no fantasy stories about birth parents, and no lying to children about their beginnings. Honesty is easier than secrecy and takes much less energy. The truth does set you free. Russell 1996 p184

**Conspiracy of silence**

To keep a secret from someone is to block information or evidence from reaching that person and to do so intentionally. To keep a secret is to make a value judgment, for whatever reason, that it's not that person's right to possess the secret. To keep a secret requires a maze built by concealment, disguises, camouflage, whispers, silence, or lies.

For many adopted persons in mid-life and beyond, the fact of their adoption was hidden in an attempt to deny its reality. For many adoptive parents of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, this secrecy was a misguided decision encouraged by the paradigm of the time. Yet this action gave no thought to the long-term future of the adopted person or insight into what the consequences of such secrecy would do. Schooler 1995 p104

**Secrecy disavows reality**

Lifton—I have come to believe in the course of my research that it is unnatural for members of the human species to grow up separated from and without knowledge of their natural clan, that such a lack has a negative influence on a child's psychic reality and relationship with the adoptive parents. By enveloping their origins with secrecy, the closed adoption system asks children to disavow reality, to live as if they were born to the parents who raise them. They grow up feeling like anonymous people cut off from the genetic and social heritage that gives everyone else roots. Lifton 1994 p8

**Adoptive family's secret motors**

While it may be true that all families have secret motors under their hoods, there is a difference: the engine that propels the adoptive family system is the only one both created for and maintained by society. The only one to authorize, even promote, the separation of children from their birth families. The only one to build secrecy into the relationship of between parent and child. The only one to make it taboo to know one's heritage. Lifton 1994 p9

**Family secrets**

In some families adoption is a secret. Some relatives may know about the adoption, while other relatives do not. It becomes difficult to remember who is a part of the secret and who is not. Some adoptive parents do not want to tell their child about the adoption but worry that relatives will reveal the secret. Typically, if adoptive parents are not telling their child about being adopted, then there is some issue that the adoptive parent needs to work out.

Any secret has the potential to cause harm and hurt feelings. It takes a lot of energy to keep secrets, to remember who knows, and who does not, and to try to figure out what to say to cover up the secret. Secrets block open com-

munication and create feelings of mistrust between people and in families. The truth really does set one free. Russell 1996 p58

**Family conspiracy**

A family that allows open and honest communication among its members is considered healthy. A family that cuts off communication with secrecy is considered dysfunctional... adoptive families that harbor secrets about the adopted child, is dysfunctional by these standards.

While some secrets can bring people together by giving them a sense of intimacy and sharing, secrets can be destructive if they cause shame and guilt, prevent change, render one powerless, and hamper one's sense of reality.

When there are secrets in a family system, there is a conspiracy of silence. The conspiracy does not have to be agreed upon verbally, but can be unconsciously communicated to members of a clan. A conspiracy holds family members together like a negative energy force, but it also

keeps them apart. Stronger than any one individual, it controls whatever interactions take place. It is the internal censor. It feeds on the emotions of its victims like the Minotaur in the labyrinth: it demands tributes of loyalty and submission. Invisible as radiation, it can be as lethal.

To understand the psychological fallout that adopted children experience in a family that keeps their background secret, it is essential to think about the nature of family secrets. I found it helpful to look at the three major kinds laid out by the psychologist Mark Karpel: the individual secret, which one person keeps from the others; the internal secret, which a few family members keep from another member; and the shared secret, when all the family members band together to keep outsiders from knowing what is happening inside. Lifton 1994 pp22-23

**Family secrets kept from adopted person**

It is painful for adopted persons that they do not hold their own story, that others hold many of the secrets and many of the pieces of it. Pavao 1998 p70

It is the internal secret that I am concerned with here, *the secret that is kept from the adopted child*. We also find this secret operating in stepparent families when children are not told the identity of a deceased or divorced parent (usually, but not always, the father) who disappeared from their lives when they were too young to remember. We find it in survivor families when children are not told that the mother or father raising them is not really their parent, that the real parent died in the Holocaust. Lifton 1994 p23

**Skeletons in the closet**

There is an attitude that adopted people must be protected from difficult information about their birth family or about their early history. There is a feeling that somehow they are fragile and won't be able to handle the facts. Most of us, though, have skeletons in our closet: this is a part of any family history. And even when there is negative information, there can be positive results, the confirmation of what they already suspect or know. Pavao 1998 p77

**The secret in today's adoptive family**

Is not that the child is adopted, but who the child is! The adoptive parents often know things about the birth parents that they do not reveal. Once the child suspects that primal secrets are being kept from them, they may come to perceive their parents as adversaries who stand between them and their rightful parents. They may envy 'normal' children, those raised by their real mothers and fathers, for knowing how to maneuver in the real world. Cut off from blood roots that could ground them in the universe, they feel like a foreigner who needs a guidebook to show them the way that others know naturally. Lifton 1994 p23

**Secrecy disrupts emotional development**

The power of secrecy to disrupt positive emotional development can be seen in the life stories of many adopted persons. Author and adult adopted person Robert Anderson said, 'One does not build a house on a sandbar or a personality on a pile of problematic secrets. Feeling secure about oneself is difficult when basic aspects are unknown and frightening. It is all too easy to worry about what might be at the core of the secrets with the possibilities limited only by one's imagination.' Robert Anderson. *Second Choices: Growing Up Adopted* 1993 p21 cf Schooler 1995 p14

**Background to conspiracy of secrecy**

Adoption has always wavered between the legal fiction that a child is reborn into the adoptive family and the folk belief that blood is thicker than water...It is hard to remember that until the last half-century, adoption was an open transaction in this country, often an informal arrangement between an unmarried pregnant woman and a childless couple who befriended her. The birth mother may or may not have kept contact with the family, but she had the security of knowing who was raising her baby, and the adoptive parents had the security of knowing the background of their child. The situation changed when licensed adoption agencies were set up in the 1920s to protect the interests of homeless and indigent children—who, since the middle of the last century, had been used by wealthy families as indentured servants or sent out West on Orphan Trains to work on farms. But by the late 1930s these agencies shifted their focus from the needs of dependent children to those of infertile, middle-class couples who desired healthy, white infants. Lifton 1994 pp23-24

**Original purpose of legal secrecy**

Legal secrecy in the adoption field was to protect the newborns from the stigma of being born out of wedlock, not to deny them their birthright. Social workers urged the courts to seal away the baby's birth certificate, which was stamped illegitimate, and to issue an 'amended' one that substituted the names of the adoptive parents for those of the birth parents. As the policy of sealing records spread rapidly from state to state after World War II, however, *it lost sight of its original purpose and became a means of protecting the adoptive family from interference by the birth family.* Secrecy effectively pitted adoptive mothers against birth mothers and kept adopted children separated from their birth families. Lifton 1994 p24

**Adoptive secrecy unique in law**

'There is no other situation in which the law of the land reaches into the private lives of people so intimately to limit the right of association,' a professor of social work tells us. A law professor, who is also a single adoptive mother, points out: 'The legal system ordinarily makes no attempt to write out of existence, by sealing records, or other such mechanisms, the various parental figures who walk out of their children's lives, such as the divorced parent who relinquishes custody. It is only in regulating adoptive families—families formed in the absence of any blood link—that the government feels that it has to seal records so as to figuratively destroy the existence of the family that is linked by blood.' Lifton 1994 p24

**Secrecy hides ambivalence and shame**

When we try to understand why state legislatures collude in this injustice to all the members of the adoption triangle, we begin to see—

□ Secrecy protects not only adoptive parents but everyone in society from their ambivalence and shame about adoption arrangements, and their own fears of abandonment. For adoption, as the child analyst Paul Brinich points out, includes elements that are drawn from the very roots of human psychology: fertility and infertility; love and hate; acceptance and rejection...

□ Secrecy hides the ambivalence and shame that people feel about rejecting children who are handicapped or of another race. Yet their desperate emotional need for a child can eventually lift couples across racial and geographical boundaries until one baby is as good as another, and no price is too high...

□ Secrecy also hides the ambivalence and shame of the birth mother, who may have wanted to keep her child but could find no way to do so in a society that encourages adoption not only over abortion but over preserving the relationship between mother and baby." Lifton 1994 p25

**Agents of secrecy know their mother**

The adoptive mother who feels threatened when the child she is raising asks quite naturally about his own mother—the 'other mother;' who gave birth to him does not stop to consider that she knows her own mother; just as the legislator who approves sealing the identity of the adopted child's mother knows his own mother; and the lobbyists who work to keep adoption records sealed know their own mothers. How can any of them understand what it is like to be among a select group of people who have been chosen by destiny, and by society, not to know? Lifton 1994 p13

**When secrecy breaks in adulthood**

Some adopted persons stumbled onto life-altering secrets after their personal identity is formed, adult relationships secured, and heritages passed on to future generations. They grew up in the shadow of the secret. One day, at the most unlikely time, they heard the disturbing words- 'You were adopted.' This revelation changes the course of their lives. It's a secret that redefines present relationships and a dilemma that added new people and places and enlarged a family system. It sends many wandering into an emo-

tional, psychological, and spiritual wilderness. It is a crisis of the whole person— mind, body, and soul. Finding out the secret of one’s adoption as an adult feels like absolute betrayal. When the truth comes out, an emotional rippling effect takes over, there is a rhythm of shock, anger and relief. It requires responses from the depths of the soul, that would eventually, hopefully, lead to inward resolution and outward reconciliation. Schooler 1995 pp104-5

**Out into the wilderness**

Suspecting the secret of one’s adoption generates feelings of bewilderment. Learning the truth pushes them to an entirely different level of emotion. It sends them into the wilderness. There are no easy steps to take in dealing with this crisis of the self...it moves one into the desert of the soul...a wilderness of the heart. There will be changes. One will never be the same...This journey is a walk into a wasteland, laid bare by silence and what feels like utter betrayal. It’s a walk one begins alone. How one returns from the wandering has everything to do with time, process, support, understanding, and forgiveness. Schooler 1995 p108

**Hope for resolution**

How does a person manage the past mismanagement of the most intimate detail of life—one’s personal identity? How does a person regain a sense of self and stand on solid emotional and psychological ground? How does one face the people in life who often unknowingly and without harmful intent created the maze of secrets and maintained it at all costs?

For each adopted person who uncovers the reality of their adoption as an adult, the circumstances are different, the pain is unique. For some, in the early stages of discovery, emotional balance and freedom from anguish feels completely out of reach. Others find themselves on a road leading out of the wilderness heading toward resolution and reconciliation. Schooler 1995 p108 cf Dr. Severson.

**Adopted persons cant stand secrecy**

We older adopted people, whose adoption took place in the especially closed era, can’t stand secrecy and get very angry if people are clandestine or hide things through passive aggression. Just tell us the truth! The truth may hurt, but having it kept from us is even more devastating and infuriating. The truth is what we’ve always wanted. Openness and sincerity. Our anger is dynamic. It moves us to get involved politically, to want to change the world because our world was changed so dramatically. We can focus our anger and use it to challenge what is wrong. We can be agents of change, as we were infants and children of change. Change is our legacy and our strength as well as our downfall. Pavao 1998 p91

**Truth and deception**

Truth and deception are close neighbors in adoption. What is acceptable to talk about within the family may not be considered acceptable to talk about outside the family. Both adoptive and birth families face the task of dealing with how honest they will be about the adoption and the pregnancy. In some families, the pregnancy or adoption is not mentioned after the adoption is completed. In other fami-

lies, it is unclear or unstated just what will be said. However, lies grow in the space that lacks honesty.

Some people feel they were told untruths or lies by omission during the adoption process. Prospective adoptive parents and birth parents may not know what questions to ask and therefore depend on professionals to lead them in the right direction. The structure of adoption can hinder truth telling in a situation where honesty is crucial for the well being of all involved. Russell 1996 p65

**Privacy in adoption**

Privacy in adoption is different from secrecy. People need to have boundaries. They need to use discretion in what they talk about and with whom they talk. Secrecy is when things about you are kept from you.

Privacy is when *you choose* to whom you want to tell things about yourself. As we discuss the family situation in adoption, it becomes clear that one thing that should be private is any discussion about the adoption of a particular child.

Many children who come in to see me are upset that their parents are discussing their adoption with a stranger or a neighbor in the supermarket. It is that child’s *privacy* that is being violated when this happens. The family may have many discussions at home about adoption and may tell the story of the adoption of each child nightly. The problem is having many strangers know the story of the child before the child is ready to hear it in full, or when the child wants to choose not to have these particular people talk about her story.

This may happen even more frequently with transracial and international adoptions when the parents and child look so obviously different or speak different languages. It may be quite obvious that the child is adopted. But the issue of privacy is very important, and a child can feel invaded by having it discussed at a time when it doesn’t feel appropriate or comfortable to him. Pavao 1998 p20

**Erection of the secrecy barriers**

**1955-1985** The Adoption Act 1955 erected secrecy barriers. New Zealand adoption legislation from 1881 to 1955 imposed no concealment of records to the parties involved. In 1950 the Registrar-General was first given discretionary powers to refuse issuing copies of the adopted persons original birth entry. In 1951 discretionary refusal was extended to ‘inspection’ of the adopted person’s original birth entry. It was the Adoption Act 1955 that for the first time in New Zealand statute incorporated secrecy and ‘complete break’ as a foundation policy and practice.

**Secrecy barriers coming down**

**1985-2000+** The passing of the Adult Adoption Information Act 1985. Adult adopted persons and their birthparents were given rights to search, subject to a veto provision.

**Suppressed truth** generates tremendous pressure: “If you shut up truth and bury it underground, it will grow, and gather to itself such explosive power that the day it bursts through it will blow up everything in its way” Emile Zola *J’Accuse* In defense of Dreyfus- France 1898

## ADDITIONAL SECRECY NOTES

### Consequences of secrecy for birthmothers

Nearly all the birthmothers interviewed had kept their pregnancy and adoption history a secret throughout the years. Even when family members or close friends knew, the adoption was almost never mentioned again, often at the specific request of the birthmother or one of her parents. After their reunions, some birthmothers became aware that, occasionally, information had leaked out during the years, despite the overwhelming conspiracy of silence. Maybe a relative had leaked the news and then sworn the person to secrecy. Maybe the word had slipped out over drinks, when confidences were being shared and inhibitions were let down. But, generally, with few exceptions, the cover stories remained secure. The stories that had been invented by parents to explain the noticeable absence of a daughter ran the gamut. Several were sick; a few were visiting or attending relatives in distant cities; a nervous breakdown; a few were declared married...

Many of the birthmothers broke the pattern of silence with men whom they subsequently dated, especially if they thought the relationship was leading to marriage. These men had a right to know, they felt, and the woman wanted some assurance that this history would not change the man's desire to marry. However, a few birthmothers waited to tell their husbands until after they got married, a strategy that produced its own complications when the couple began to think about having children, and/or at reunion time.

The central trait of secrecy is hiding-intentional concealment... Secrets are powerful agents, and we sense their mystery, attraction, and danger even from early childhood. As adults, we all know from experience that to keep a secret requires a healthy dose of will power; that keeping a secret can make us feel guilty, duplicitous, or unauthentic; and that, over a long period of time, it can have a powerful influence on character and personality. Often, we are offended and angry when we find out that we have been the objects of people's concealment. Secrecy suggests distancing at best, cover-up at worst.

Secrecy is associated with shameful acts, immoral behavior, illegal activity and negative thoughts. One common response in discovering a secret is to want to break through it, but also common, is the cautious inclination to leave it alone. Both in our personal lives and in society at large, secrecy triggers a conflict between the desire to respect what's hidden and the desire to un-mask it. Keeping things hidden, however, can extract a heavy price. Secrecy can impair communication, cause fantasies to flourish, and let wrongs go unnoticed.

The concealment built into adoption law and practice has produced a host of unfortunate consequences, both in terms of the kinds of unseen evils we were discussing earlier, and in terms of hardships inflicted upon people in the adoption triad. Birthmothers, who were advised that they could 'go on with their lives' after the adoption, were expected to live with a socially sanctioned denial. As one veteran

social worker writes, 'it not only interferes with the resolution of grief, but intensifies the birthparents' poor self image by reinforcing the idea that what they have done is so heinous that it must forever be concealed'...Throwing off the burden of secrecy can be one of the most healing and exhilarating aspects of reunion for birthmothers.' Gediman & Brown 1991 pp13-14

### Finding out as an adult

Finding out the secret of one's adoption as an adult feels like absolute betrayal. It is the most prominent, deepest sense of betrayal. It is a real blow, a psychological injury. Dr. Dirck Brown.

Although the adopted person knows nothing of his family status, extended family members often do. Psychologist Mark Parel calls this type of secret the *internal* secret, which a few family members keep from another family member. Even if the adoptive parents ably maneuvered through the maze of concealment with disguises, silence, or lies, a careless comment by a relative, the discovery of hidden papers in the back of a dresser drawer or the reading of a will brought the secret to light.

Dr. Randolph Severson— There are far more people who learn of their adoptive status at the deathbed of a parent or the settling of an estate than the general public has any idea. When the truth comes out, an emotional rippling effect takes over...There is both absolute shock and relief. More people suspect it but have not admitted, it, or they are unconsciously aware of it. There were probably subtle hints along the way, such as a lack of pictures during pregnancy or coming home from the hospital. There were probably no stories unless they were fabricated. Some have resurrected memories of whispers at family reunions and holiday get-togethers. As the shock subsides, relief comes when the adopted person realizes what he thought was off base wasn't...As the truth emerges, there is a rhythm of shock, anger, and relief. cf Schooler 1995 p105 re Dr R Severson.

### Secrecy versus privacy

There is an important distinction, especially in adoption. We've seen that secrecy too often has been a corrosive influence on birth parents' lives...Too often, adoption has a great deal of secrecy surrounding it for everyone involved. For *adoptive parents* who have not been helped to understand that grief over infertility can be a normal part of the adoption process, secrecy concerning these feelings can prevent them from healing. For *birth and adoptive children* not told the truth about their or their siblings' origins, secrecy can have a profound effect on their ability to trust and to form identity...

And yet I feel strongly that secrecy is not usually the fault of the birth or adoptive families, but of the system and the professionals in it who do not respect these people enough to feel that they can manage their own lives and their own stories. Too often it is the system of adoption, with its sealed birth records and its legal fictions-falsified birth certificates- that creates an aura of secrecy, that attempts to erase the truth that, for the child, needs to be acknowledged, not denied. Pavao 1998 p19

## SEXUALITY

### Focus on sex

In adoption, sex becomes a focus. A birth mother had sex and got pregnant, the adopted person is a product of sex, and the adoptive parents were having sex so they could get pregnant. In non-adoptive families, the same things can be going on but no one pays attention to them. Perhaps it is important to remember that adopted persons are not the only people in the world who were unplanned pregnancies. Russell 1996 p58

### Homosexual adopted persons

“An adopted persons child may be the only blood relative he or she will ever see, and so it should not surprise us that gay adopted persons speak of the sorrow of losing not only their past family but their future one. Alex, a divorced man with three daughters, said that he had such a horrible feeling of being alone all his life that he longed to have children of his own. When alcohol and drugs didn't relieve his pain, he determined to marry just to have children: 'I was selfish. My need for connection overrode being gay. I got married for that reason. I needed that. A few years ago I came out, and I'm with another man now. But I'm glad that I have my daughters.' Conversely, one's very lack of connection to the past can deter adopted persons from wanting children. Ruth, a lesbian adopted person activist, believes that her lack of knowledge about what she would pass on to her own children resulted in a feeling that reproduction was impossible for her. 'This probably did not make me gay,' she says, 'but it could have led me away from one of the reasons men and women marry: to have children.'” Lifton 1994 p120

### Genetic plus adoption impact

“I've also wondered what effect adoption, with its legacy of secrecy and disempowerment, has on a child's psychosexual development. Recent studies have emphasized a genetic basis for homosexuality, or stressed the importance of neuroendocrine factors, with the assumption that one's sexuality is fixed from birth. All of this may be true for some people, but can we discount the others whose sexual orientation might be influenced by traumatic psychosocial factors such as one finds in adoption?”

I first started thinking of this question some years ago when I received a call from a woman who said that she was at an AA meeting with five people who discovered they had three things in common: they were recovering alcoholics, they were gay, and they were adopted. They wanted to talk with me about which was their main identity. Until then they had been working on their problems with addiction and coming out, without ever considering their adoption issues. We met informally for several months, and they came to the insight that adoption had played a more crucial role in their sense of self than they had realized. So much so that of those three identities, they saw being adopted as the central one.

Over the years I have asked gay adopted persons if they think there is a connection between being adopted and

being gay. It will probably not be a question that engages them until they feel more accepted by society. 'What is the value if there were some correlation between adoption and homosexuality?' A lesbian adopted person activist asked me. 'I think the important issue is the ability to love. The gender of our lovers is less important, or would be less important, if we lived in a sane society that didn't harbor intense homophobia of gay love and its sexual expression.' I found that the more crucial questions for them now are what it is like to grow up adopted and gay, and which identity one comes to terms with first.” Lifton 1994 p121

### Lesbian adopted persons

“‘Being a lesbian and an adopted person affects all of who I am and how I view the world,’ one woman told a workshop on gay-adopted persons issues. ‘It was only by coming to terms with being a lesbian that I was able to come to terms with being an adopted person. It's been an ongoing process of hiding and revealing my identity.’ An older woman, of a generation before gay rights, spoke of having had to come to terms with her adoption before she could feel safe enough to come out as a lesbian.

Still, I noticed that the question of whether one would have been a homosexual if one were not adopted comes up in indirect ways. A woman who spoke of feeling ‘displaced’ rather than ‘placed’ in her family wondered if becoming a lesbian was a way to connect to someone who is similar to her physically, as well as a way to equalize power in relationships. She felt ‘one down’ in her adopted family. ‘Each person has her own fundamental reason for being homosexual,’ another woman said. ‘I think for me it is a love of women that motivates me. Not hatred of men or because horrible things happened to me. My ways of being connected to women enable me to connect to the mother I never had. But I don't think I'm a lesbian only because I was separated from my mother.’” Lifton 1994 pp121-122

### Male homosexual adopted persons

“A male adopted person in the group expressed his belief that adoption is the ultimate ‘emasculatation’ experience. As a boy he had felt there was something sinful about the fact that he was not the ‘real’ son but the ‘illegitimate’ one. His father was abroad on business most of the time while he was growing up, and his adoptive mother was seductive with him. ‘How can you trust a woman?’ He asked. ‘I had horrible fears of sex. I thought of birth as being sinful. Sleeping with women was sinful. I wanted to feel whole, and being with another man makes me feel whole. It has to do with nurturing. I'm attracted to younger, innocent men who remind me of myself between twenty and thirty. Or to strong, virile, masculine men, who are protective.’” Lifton 1994 p122

### Sexual origin fantasy

Sexual fantasies about origins are common among teenage adopted persons. The quest to discover their sexual origin is an important aspect of sexual identity. Adopted persons denied the truth of their sexual origins are left to masturbate their way through a wide range of fantasies. There is an almost unlimited range of conception scenarios. A steady relationship to a one night stand, from friends to

strangers, from innocence to seduction, from passion to pain, from climax to trauma, from love to rape. Unless the truth is known none can be ruled out, any could he true! KCG 1992

### GENETIC SEXUAL ATTRACTION

In adoption circles, this bewildering phenomenon is spoken about in whispers as 'genetic sexual attraction'. Is it genetic? If life is in the service of perpetuating our genes, as the sociobiologists tell us, do genes call out to genes when people discover the kin they've never known? Is it sexual? Or is it just the emotional need for connectedness that drives their behavior? Is it incest? Since birth parents, adopted persons, and blood-related siblings are not legally related, are they breaking the incest taboo when they act on this attraction?

#### Taboo

Is an old Polynesian word that means 'forbidden.' The taboo against incest has existed from early times, as if primitive and ancient peoples recognized it as something both desirable and dangerous. Moral dread, horror, and shame were, and still are, associated with it. If we accept Freud's comparison of persons and things regarded as taboo with objects charged with electricity, we can get some insight into the dangerous magnetic field around the birth mother and father when they re-appear in their children's lives." Lifton 1994 p226

#### How do we explain it?

I think we can begin to understand the libidinal pull that parents and children have toward each other if we see it on the far end of a continuum of repressed longing that has accrued over the years since separation and builds up during search and reunion. The touching and holding that they were denied with that separation can become eroticized when they return to each other emotionally regressed but in adult bodies. So powerful are their heightened feelings that some behave as if they are under a sorcerer's spell or lost...Adopted persons who experience this attraction are baffled by the uncontrollable passion that sweeps over them in reunion. Lifton 1994 p227

#### Siblings

Adopted persons who do not get emotional fulfillment from a reunion with the mother or father will often find it with a half or full brother or sister. The sibling, being closer in age, resembles the fantasy parent, without the toll of time and without a history of abandonment and betrayal to cloud the relationship. Adopted persons may see a mirror image of themselves in a sibling. Lifton p235

#### Battening down the hatches

"As the possibility of experiencing genetic sexual attraction becomes known, adopted persons, birth parents, and siblings are seeking practical ways to prepare themselves. It's not unlike bracing for an approaching hurricane-battening down the hatches. Those who are in the eye of the storm, or have been, feel safe enough to recount their experiences at support groups. Many seek counseling and the understanding of family members, read what is available on the subject, and weigh the social and psychologi-

cal consequences of committing incest. Perhaps most reassuring for those hovering nervously on the brink is hearing from others that the strength of the attraction diminishes with time.

The erotic feelings eventually fade as everyone moves out of the Ghost Kingdom and settles for acceptable roles within their extended family circles. Yet I must confess that each time I hear someone's story, I am struck anew at the power of this attraction to transform seemingly normal people into tragic heroes out of Greek drama. At the same time, I know we must avoid sensationalizing it, but rather place it within the possibilities of human behavior." Lifton 1994 p238

#### Is it incest?

"I asked a psychoanalyst who specializes in sexual abuse cases. 'It's incest, but it is not what we usually mean by incest,' he says. 'It's not about a child being abused by an adult. We're talking here about someone growing up feeling his other half is missing. And then he enacts something as an adult that has been his childhood fantasy-not sex with the mother, but union. It's become sexualized, but it's about something totally else than sex. It's about feeling whole again.'" Lifton 1994 p238

#### Questions

"As the data come in, we have to keep asking the questions: Does the unnaturalness of being separated from blood kin drive human beings to unnatural acts when they are reunited? Is our erotic arousal caused by our 'selfish' genes seeking out their own kind, or by a psychological need for connection with our kin? Is it biology, memory, or fantasy that casts a spell over us? Are we in love with substance or shadow? Who will give us the answers: the scientists or the poets? Lifton 1994 p239

#### Defensive strategies

"One way to understand this phenomenon is to accept the deep mystery in the attraction that family members who come together after a long separation feel for each other. And then to create a frame of reference to give meaning to the experience, as well as defensive strategies to keep it under control. This is possible if one is aware that:

□ The adopted person meets the birth parent or sibling not in the legitimate world ruled by taboos but in the Ghost Kingdom, which is outside society's jurisdiction. The illicit features of the adopted persons birth, eroticized by society, become eroticized by mother and child.

□ The attraction the adopted person feels is to the idealized parent rather than to the real person he or she finds. Freud said that in being in love with one's mother, one is never concerned with her as she is in the present, but with the youthful image carried over from one's childhood. The adopted person is concerned only with the idealized phantom he or she knew in the Ghost Kingdom.

□ The parent or sibling, being part phantom, cannot give the adopted person the nurturance he needs. All is illusion. The adopted person is holding his own baby self, not the parent, in his arms.

□ Incestuous feelings, consummated or not, are an attempt to undo the damage of rejection that the baby felt when it

was sent into exile. Merging with either birth parent or a sibling is like returning home. It is not a sexual need, but a need to rebond, a need for reconnection.

The consummated liaisons usually end up badly, with each side feeling betrayed. The adopted person may feel rejected again because the birth parent can be neither the lover nor the parent for whom he or she has yearned. Incest cannot satisfy an adopted persons insatiable need, because it is not sex that the adopted person craves, but reconnection to undo the loneliness.

q If one feels attracted to a parent or sibling, one should avoid romantic situations and meet in family settings. One should demystify romantic feelings by speaking openly about them. One might even call a birth mother Mom and a birth father Dad as a reminder of the parental relationship.

q Whatever the adopted persons age, it is the birth parent's ultimate responsibility to behave like a parent and to set up proper boundaries that will protect." Lifton 1994 pp-239-240

#### Repeating the pattern

Patterns can repeat themselves in families. It is not unusual for adopted persons to get pregnant at around the same age that their birth mother got pregnant with them. It is important to be aware of the possibility of this pattern so that adopted persons will be conscious of their actions and the potential impact. Some adopted persons make a concerted effort to not get pregnant, imagining what their birth mothers went through and knowing what their experiences have been as an adopted person. Adopted persons may also worry about whether they are dating or marrying a possible relative. Russell 1996 p73

#### Genetic sexual attraction in New Zealand

Over the last 20 years I have been contacted by about 20 adopted persons or birth mothers involved in post reunion sexual relationships, some living within prohibited marriages. The results very much confirm Greens-berg's study. All except two cases involved a sexual relationship between sexually experienced consenting adults. There were no strong feelings of incest taboo, although all felt a strong incest taboo and abhorrence for any sexual relationship with anyone within their nurturing family. In most cases the sexual relationship was a short term high intensity experience. Many spoke of it as a positive inevitable experience, some did not know how to terminate it, others had regrets and confusion. Most were bewildered by the intensity of the relationship and the unique aspects unlike any other they had experienced. It was more of a fulfillment of a craving for complete intimacy and re-bonding with one they had lost that mirrored themselves.

At the 1994 MOA Conference in Auckland a well attended workshop on Genetic Sexual Attraction was held, there was a frank exchange of experiences and the complexity of the problem was evident.

For the few that enter and remain in a prohibited consanguineous marriage, they have little option but to flee the country. KCG

## ADDITIONAL NOTES

### Reunion sexual attraction

Gediman/Brown – One of the most troublesome aspect of reunions with sons, however, is the possibility of what reunion and post-reunion observers have come to call 'genetic sexual attraction,' a feeling on the part of the mother or the son, or both, that they are in a romantic relationship. Such feelings are extremely unsettling, and birthmothers who have found themselves drawn to their grown sons in this way are comforted to learn that they were not the only ones caught in the grip of these unexpected, intense and disturbing feelings.

Several mothers spoke about having experienced this kind of attraction early in their relationships. Before they understood what it was or knew how to deal with it, they found themselves engaging in dating-like thoughts or behavior, even though they were confused and embarrassed about why and what they were doing. They would hold hands, for example, or dress up as if for a date. It can go on for many months or longer, before it becomes so uncomfortable that one or the other is finally forced to confront it verbally. If she's feeling it, he's probably feeling it too.

In attempting to describe what they felt, and what they thought it meant, several of the women vacillate between a motherly desire to have physical contact with their sons, like young mothers who can't stop fondling their new babies, and more womanly and erotic desire. The fact that their sons are grown men, not babies, makes even the motherly feelings disturbing. Complicating the situation still further, the sons sometimes resemble, and thus remind them of, their lovers from years back, hurtling them back in time to their younger self. One of the birthmothers talks about herself as "the twenty- three-year-old that I had become" when she and her son first met. It is a fine line between the more acceptable motherly- like desires and those which are erotic and taboo.

*Not all mothers of sons experience genetic sexual attraction.* Those who do are often loath to talk about it, embarrassed or fearful that they are the only ones with such feelings. Judging from its frequency in our sample, though, it's probably very common, and experienced by sons as well as mothers. Birthmothers have also been known to have feelings of "being in love" with daughters, but one hears less about this phenomenon in the support group network than about the more disturbing version associated with sons. One also hears about genetic sexual attraction among siblings separated by adoption, and there are occasional newspaper stories of men and women who wanted to marry only to discover, to their horror, that they were brother and sister.

### Current hypotheses

#### q Physical bonding theory

One current hypothesis explaining genetic sexual attraction centers on the theory that the feelings are associated with physical bonding. Because these mothers and children did not experience this bonding in the childhood years, they do so now, but it is colored by the fact that this grown-

up male and female did not live together in a family environment and do not feel like mother and son, at least early in post-reunion. Because the child did not grow up in the household, the incest taboo that normally protects us from acknowledging such feelings, much less acting on them, is far less strongly felt.

#### q Emotional intimacy theory

This explain genetic sexual attraction and connects it with intimacy, suggesting that the emotional intimacy which may be shared by a man and woman who have been reunited can easily ignite the desire for intimacy of the ultimate kind, sexual intimacy.

#### q Mirroring theory

There can be attraction to a person who looks very much like the self. Seeing the other person is like seeing yourself in a mirror; and, like the mythical Narcissus who fell into the water from admiring his own image, the element of self-love may be strongly involved in this attraction between mother and child.

For the birthmothers we interviewed who experienced it, genetic sexual attraction to their sons was something that made post-reunion more complex, confusing, and uncomfortable than it might have been otherwise, but it was not responsible for permanently ruining any of the relationships. It needed to be acknowledged, understood, and handled. When it was, the feelings could begin to dissipate. But there are people in reunions around the country who are grappling with this issue less successfully, and for whom such feelings persist. **Source** Judith Gediman & Linda Brown 'Birth Bond' 1991 pp92-96

#### Crime of Incest

The crime of 'incest' in New Zealand dates only from 1900, as an addition to the Criminal Code Act 1893, by the Criminal Code Act 1983 Amendment Act 1900.

**Crimes Act 1961 s130** "Incest (1) Incest is sexual intercourse between (a) Parent and child; or (b) Brother and sister, whether of the whole blood or of the half blood or (c) Grandparent and grandchild— where the person charged knows of the relationship between the parties. (2) Every one of or over the age of 16 years who commits incest is liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 10 years." cf 1908 No.32 s155.

Adoptees are inflicted with twice the number of potential incestuous relationships. The adoptees birth and adoptive families are deemed to both remain in full standing for the purposes of determining the crime of incest.

"Even if a biological parent has ceased to be a parent because of an adoption order (s16(2) Adoption Act 1955), he or she is liable to prosecution for incest if he or she has a sexual relationship with his or her birth child: proviso to s16(2). The same thing is true of siblings whose family relationship has been severed by an adoption order and grandparent-child relationships. The crime of incest also applies to adoptive grandparents, adoptive parents and their adopted children, and to a brother and sister whose relationship has been created by an adoption order, because they fall within the definition of 'parent' and 'child' in s130(1)(a) Crimes Act 1961." Trapski's Family Law Vol.5 Brooker's 1995 Adoption G22

## SIBLINGS

A most helpful study on sibling relationships in adoption reunions, is that of Judith Gediman and Linda Brown. The following are extracts:—**Sudden siblings by nature**

#### Can be significant as finding a parent

Finding a brother or sister you never knew can be as significant as finding a parent. Especially in cases where the birthmother is deceased, reunions between adopted persons and their birth siblings become paramount. Sibling reunions can also be a substitute for meetings between adopted persons and birthmothers if the birthmother is alive but refuses to meet. Why should she have the right, adopted persons ask, to prevent me from knowing her other children, my own brothers and sisters? p186

#### Desire to connect with siblings

There are situations in which the desire to discover and connect with siblings is what initiates the search. Adopted persons who know about siblings they've never met often have compelling desires to meet them. Many of those who lack the knowledge ponder the possibility. Connecting with a birthparent means filling a void, but connecting with a brother or sister is a bonus. If the adopted person grew up as an only child, finding a sibling can be especially meaningful. p186

#### Sibling pre-adoptive memories

It sometimes happens that reunions take place between siblings who actually spent a few months or years growing up together. It's possible that the older child remembers when they were separated; or, if not that, remembers when the mother was pregnant with the baby who was subsequently adopted... p186

#### Not reunions but meeting for first time

The preponderance of sibling reunions that result from adoption are not really, re-unions at all. Because relinquishments generally result from unwed mothers giving up infants, brothers and sisters in reunion are usually meeting one another for the very first time. The absence of a shared upbringing does not preclude the possibility of strong, even instantaneous, kindred feelings. Shared heredity often creates felt ties of its own, and sudden siblings can feel connected to one another from the outset. Indeed, we have heard stories about birth siblings raised apart who, on meeting as young adults, felt closer to one another than they ever did to their adoptive siblings.

With twins, in whom the genetic tie is most complete, research currently underway is revealing unexpected similarities between identical twins reared apart— more so than among fraternal twins reared apart or reared together. Researchers from the University of Minnesota's Center for Twin and Adoption Research have observed separated twins who knew about one another and experienced feelings of loss and inner emptiness for years. With reunion, they frequently become very enmeshed with one another, even moving to the same town and developing close relationships. Fortunately adoption agencies these days are more cognizant of trying not to separate twins. p187

**Sibling reunions are less complicated**

Compared to the first encounters between adopted persons and their birthparents, siblings seemed to greet one another with a cleaner slate, less encumbered by the sticky issues of a complicated past. Siblings who meet appear to have an easier time than their elders for several reasons. *First*, the relationship is less likely to be derailed by unresolved issues. *Second*, the individuals are closer in age (the same generation anyway) and grew up in an era when the prevailing attitudes about sex were more relaxed and accepting than in the birthmother's era.

*Third*, family size and composition can work in their favor. If the birth family is large, for example, one more brother or sister can be accommodated with relatively little fanfare. Or, if the family is small, the adopted person may encounter an only child who always wanted a brother or sister, or one who always wanted an additional sibling of whichever gender was lacking; young children may even make the adopted person into an object of hero-worship. p188

**BMs dread of telling siblings**

At the outset, though, the birthmothers shared a common dread about telling their other children about the adopted persons existence. For some, it was the most agonizing aspect of the reunion and post-reunion experience. For the reasons we've indicated, however, the other children frequently failed to be as horror-struck, or as devastated, or as shocked, or as judgmental and unforgiving as the mothers feared. The women typically began these conversations in the most somber tones. Some of their listeners responded with relief: 'is that all? I thought some-body died.' 'So what? These things happen.'

**BMs never anticipate 'no big deal'**

Birthmothers never anticipate a "no big deal" quality to their children's reactions, because they are anxious, embarrassed, and concerned that they will lose their children's respect. Even under the best of circumstances, displaying one's sexuality to one's children is something most parents would rather avoid, and these confessions are all the more uncomfortable because the mothers are worried about what kind of message or model they're presenting. As it turns out, sons and daughters occasionally express anger or disappointment, not for the deed, but because it was kept a secret. They thought their mother never lied to them; they thought they knew "everything" about her. 'If I could tell them that, I could tell them anything,' one birthmother learned, and the women often discover that there is value in their children's coming to understand them better and see them as 'a real person.' Occasionally children had 'heard talk' over the years, but, even if they were shocked to learn their mother's story, the usual response in these families was to rally round and extend support. p189

**BMs stay on the side lines**

As things progressed in these sibling relationships, the birthmothers, because of their own anxiety and confusion about whether and how to incorporate the adopted person into the family structure, generally stayed on the sidelines. From that vantage point, the associations between the adopted person and their other children can look relatively

serene. If a problem doesn't force its way to their attention, they don't go looking for it. p190

**Sibling relationships less problematic**

Hardly any birth mothers indicate that siblings' relationships are a problematic part of post-reunion as far as they're concerned. They want all their children to love each other or, if that's not possible, at least to like one another or, if that's not possible, to be polite. They may suggest from time to time that the children they raised 'be nice' to the adopted one in various ways— call, write, send a birthday card, invite him to your house but they avoid pushing too hard because of their own discomfort. They don't want to be in the middle. p190

**Sensitivity and awkwardness**

Other children, for their part, are sensitive to the awkwardness of post-reunion. Some protect their mother by putting on company manners or by not telling her their complete feelings about having a new person in the family's midst... The pattern some birthmothers witness after a while is that their other sons and daughters will be friendly to the adopted person when he or she visits, but they don't seek the new person out. p190

**Many birth siblings don't understand adoption**

They need to be educated about the loss issues which are the adopted persons lot, and the adopted person's position (versus theirs) as the one who was given up. Many siblings, however, sympathize with the adopted person immediately and some are deeply empathic. p190

**Older siblings more perceptive**

When birth siblings are in their twenties or thirties, an older stage of life helps them to the perception that something has been gained, not lost, when an adopted brother or sister appears... Grown-ups can be more magnanimous than children. They are occupied with lives and families of their own. Some live far away from both the birthmother and/or the adopted person, which makes it unlikely that a newly arrived sibling will affect their lives in any negative way. It's very different, and usually far less threatening, than step-families in which a new kid comes visiting on a regular basis, or moves in, while you're a pre-teen or teenager still living under your parents' roof. p191

**Bringing in new histories**

Young or old, the birthmothers' other children bring with them into these new sibling relationships their own histories, personalities, and insecurities— and they greet the adopted person in character. Even in the same family, two brothers had quite different reactions upon hearing about their adopted sister. One immediately accepted her as his long-lost sister, the other contended her position in the family was more like a cousin. Several years into post-reunion, these initial reactions continue to hold. p191

**Challenge to household tranquility**

Regardless of what the adopted person symbolizes to his new-found relatives, the siblings they encounters are not just responding to some cardboard figure labeled brother or sister. They are responding to an individual. They may have rough time...because of rivalry, or wanted to make

him an outsider, or because he is a genuinely difficult person. The domestic household tranquility may be challenged while siblings work through their own feelings and relationships. p192

#### **Upsets pecking order**

Resistance to welcoming the new person is not uncommon, but it can also dissipate after the initial shock. The eldest child may have problems moving down a notch in birth order out of first place, or a child who was accustomed to being the only son or daughter in the family doesn't want to lose that distinction. p193

#### **Range of relationships**

The kinds of sibling relationships that presented themselves in our sample ranged from extremely close to guarded and perfunctory. Some are of the take-it-or-leave-it variety, and some run 'hot and cold,' but there is only one case where the younger siblings' disinclination to accept the adopted person is proving to be a crisis for the birthmother.

*In the middle ground*, stand sibling relationships that are friendly but not close, cordial but not warm: uncertain and polite. Some of them have met only briefly, often at large family gatherings where the opportunities for dialogue are constrained by the occasion. Most birthmothers feel they need to get to know each other better. But some have spent time trying to develop relationships and have discovered incompatibilities and irritants of various kinds, including unequal interest in maintaining a relationship.

Eventually, some of these "middle-ground" relationships will find the adopted person relegated to the category of distant relative- a person you almost never see or think about-but they haven't reached a final disposition yet. p195

#### **Determining the new relationship**

The bottom line question that most adopted persons and their birth siblings pose for one another is: "Do I love you like a sister," or "Do I like you like a friend," or "Do I have to put up with you because we're related?" Whether the adopted person is a full-sibling or half-sibling does not seem to be a determinant of how warm or cool feelings will be...However it turns out, birthmothers are glad they've met and that their biological kinship has, at least, been acknowledged. Beyond that, the mothers seem unlikely to interfere. p198

#### **Siblings by nurture**

Adoptive siblings get along the same way that birth siblings do and don't. Still, the fact is that brothers and sisters in adoption start out without the genetic connections that link biological brothers and sisters together. Endowments as basic as racial, religious, and national origins could be the same or different, not to mention interests, talents, character traits and the like. p198

#### **Adoptive sibling may split roles**

Adopted siblings display their individuality in the different feelings they express about searching for birthparents. One may think about it a lot; the other not at all. It's possible they split roles on the issue while growing up, with one becoming the 'good adoptee' and other becoming the 'bad adoptee' in the family. The 'good adoptee' was the one who was well-behaved, didn't give the adoptive par-

ents any trouble, and acted as though being adopted was of little or no import. The 'bad adoptee' was the rebellious troublemaker. p199

#### **Inter sibling reactions to searching**

Once adopted siblings become teenagers or adults and one of them initiates a search, the other may become angry that his counterpart is being disloyal to their parents. The angry one may actually want to search too, but be reluctant or scared about "putting them through that" again. Then again, he or she may have decidedly different views on the matter, which can put a thorn in the sibling alliance. When adoptive siblings are in their teens or twenties, a few months or years can elapse between the first sibling's search or reunion and the second's, partly because the brothers and sisters are different ages but also because the one who is not actively engaged in search and/or reunion is sitting back and observing: perhaps becoming stimulated and intrigued himself; perhaps just lying low examining his own feelings; or perhaps becoming frightened when a brother's or sister's experience turns out to be too difficult or disappointing. p199

#### **Sexual issues**

Another risk that faces siblings in adoption is the chance that the parties will encounter sexual issues that biological brothers and sisters do not...When siblings are connected only by environment and not by blood, surely the incest taboo is weaker...It also seems to be weaker among reunited siblings, some of whom experience strong feelings of physical attraction to one another. p200

#### **Equality issue**

Sibling issues have yet another complexion in adoptive households where one child is biological and one is adopted. The question for the adopted child is: are they treating me equally? Am I just as important? Both negative and affirmative answers show up in our sample...p200

#### **Changing boundaries**

In mixed families, the adult biological child has to contend with another kind of question-namely, if my adopted sibling searches, who is his birthmother to me? And who are all those other birth relatives to me? Reunion and post-reunion change the boundaries of the family. p201

**Source** 'Birth Bond Reunions Between Birthparents and Adoptees- What happens After' Judith Gediman and Linda Brown. New Horison Press 1991 Ch 10. pp185-201

#### **Dramatic shift in birth order**

Life is not always what it seems, and this can be particularly true in adoption. Depending on the amount of secrecy around an adoption, a person's birth order can shift dramatically and quickly. Figuring out family relationships in adoption can be especially challenging.

The birth order for an adopted person or child of a birth parent can shift at a moment's notice. This shift can feel exciting, disconcerting, and displacing. People become accustomed to filling a certain role in the family - the baby, the oldest, the middle child. It can take time to get comfortable with new family members and new family positions. Russell 1996 p60

## TRAUMA

### Psychic trauma

One definition of psychological trauma is an experience that is sudden, unexpected, abnormal. It exceeds the individual's ability to meet its demands. It disrupts one's sense of self and identity; it threatens one's psychological core. Lifton 1994 p48

### Accepting traumatic dimension

It is difficult to change our thinking about adoption from that of a wonderful, altruistic event to that of a traumatic, terrifying experience for the child. It is difficult, and understandably so, for the adoptive parents to look at the infant and think that he/she might be suffering. Yet how can he/she not be? Except in the case of some truly enlightened adoptive mothers, there is no acknowledgment of the child's loss of the original mother. Therefore, there is no permission, either implicit or explicit, to mourn. Verrier 1993 p70

### Four Traumas Create Divided Self

**First trauma** *Abandonment* A two-part, devastating, debilitating experience for the child. The *first* part is the abandonment itself. No matter how much the mother wanted to keep her baby and no matter what the altruistic or intellectual reasons she had for relinquishing him/her, the child experiences the separation as abandonment. The *second* part is that of being handed over to strangers. Verrier 1993 p14

**Second trauma** *child learns that they are adopted.* Hearing that you were not born to your mother is a profound and unrecognized trauma. It is as if the child has received a 'deadly traumatic telegram,' as the psychoanalyst Harold Blum puts it. 'The child finds it incomprehensible'. This is not to say that the child is irreparably damaged, as some adoptive parents fear is meant when professionals speak of wounds or traumas. Children are known to be resilient, to suffer all kinds of early abandonments and other traumas and to recover. Lifton 1994 p49

**Third trauma** *The child learns they are, and are not the child of their parents.* When the adopted child learns that he/she both *is* and *is not* the child of their parents, the shock connects to that earlier preverbal trauma the baby had at separation from the mother and has retained as an inner experience. Lifton 94 p49

**Fourth trauma** *The secrecy that disconnects the adopted person from their parentage and history* They are forbidden to know to whom they were born. Blum suggests that the revelation of adoption can be softened in the context of a 'lovingly secure parent-child relationship.' This is true but, unfortunately, not even the most loving adoptive parents can soften the psychic toll that secrecy exacts from the child in that it interferes with the child's struggle to form an early sense of self. Lifton 1994 p49

### Cumulative adoption trauma

Lifton—"When I began research for my book, I was primarily interested in how secrecy affects the formation of the adopted self. I saw it as emotional abuse (of which adoptive parents are unaware) because it distorts the child's psychic reality. In the course of interviewing adopted persons, however, I realized that it is not just secrecy that affects their sense of self but rather a series of traumas.

This 'cumulative adoption trauma' begins when they are separated from the mother at birth; builds when they learn that they were not born to the people they call mother and father; and is further compounded when they are denied knowledge of the mother and father to whom they were born. I was not unfamiliar with the literature on trauma. My husband, Robert Jay Lifton, has been preoccupied with trauma on a massive scale. As a journalist, I have reported on the war-wounded, orphaned, and traumatized children of Hiroshima, Korea, Vietnam, and the Holocaust. Still, as an adopted person, loyal to my adoptive parents, I didn't allow myself to see that closed adoption is also a form of trauma—an invisible and subtle one—until years later when I began noticing parallels between adopted children and children of alcoholics, children of survivors (even survivors themselves), and children who have been abused." Lifton 1994 pp7-8

### Misunderstanding adoption trauma

There has already been some misunderstanding about the linking of adoption to trauma. Far from being regarded as traumatic, adoption is still widely viewed as fortunate for the child who is rescued from homelessness, and for the adoptive parents who are rescued from childlessness. And in most cases it is. Yet the word trauma has been slipping into the psychological literature on adoption with increasing frequency in the last decade as clinicians come to realize the high psychic cost that both parent and child pay when they repress their grief and loss. Lifton 1994 pp7-8

### Clothier 1940

As far back as 1940, the psychiatrist Florence Clothier, a pioneer in the psychology of the adopted child, was already concerned about this: 'The child who is placed with adoptive parents at or soon after birth misses the mutual and deeply satisfying mother-child relationship, the roots of which lie in that deep area of personality where the physiological and psychological are merged. For both child and mother, that period is part of a biological sequence...It is doubtful whether the relationship of the child to its post-partum mother, in its subtler effects, can be replaced by even the best of substitute mothers.'

Clothier concluded that the adopted infant is 'traumatized' by its separation from the mother at birth. It has to find a way to compensate for the 'wound' left by the loss of the primitive relationship with her, 'a relationship that gives stability and reassurance of safety.' Nancy Verrier, a therapist and adoptive mother, became aware of this wound when her adopted baby kept pushing her away and refused to be comforted. She calls it the 'primal wound' because it happens at the beginning of life, while the child is still in a primal relationship to the mother: 'The wound may make an infant feel that part of itself has disappeared,

leaving it with a feeling of incompleteness or lack of wholeness.' Lifton 1994 p32

### Infant splitting

Adoptive parents are understandably alarmed when they hear therapists speak about wounds and traumas even though the professional, like Verrier, may be an adoptive parent—because they interpret it to mean that the baby is hopelessly damaged before it even enters their home. Yet, clinicians are not writing off adopted children when they speak about trauma; rather, they are describing a vulnerability that responsible parents should be aware of. Adopted babies, like all infants, can be tremendously resilient if given the chance, but they have experienced a profound loss that other babies are spared. Adoptive parents who love their children must have empathy for, not fear of, the sorrow that their children carry in their souls. They must not turn from the pain, or turn on the professionals who describe it in the psychological literature. Lifton 1994 pp32-33

### The survival bind

Having to live in two worlds at once, inner and outer, drives a child to seek compromise positions in an attempt to hold on to both worlds, according to Guntrip. Adopted children try to straddle the two worlds for a while. They ask questions over and over in an attempt to make some sense of what has happened to them. They may even think that a mistake has been made and that the 'first' mother will come back for them. Many adopted persons have told me of waiting for their mothers to return. We can see this as the first stage of grief: denial that the birth mother would leave them behind....

Thoughts of being kidnapped and rescued often go in tandem in the adopted child's psyche as part of the denial that the birth mother has disappeared for good.... Sometimes the adopted child has nightmares that she has been or will be kidnapped and may or may not be rescued. Birth parents and adoptive parents alternate as the kidnappers and rescuers. The wish to be kidnapped by the birth parents may surface as a fear of it actually happening. Lifton 1994 pp49-50

### Birth mother trauma

In reunion, we are faced with psychological rather than legal and moral dilemmas. Violent acts, such as having to give up a child unconditionally, can cause violent responses. The birth mother is as much a victim of the closed adoption system as is the adopted person, traumatized to such a degree that, even when the child returns, she may not be able to recognize her own child. Lifton 1994 p190

### Suppressed trauma and depression

Depression as a result of unresolved grief, and anxiety caused by a long-forgotten trauma and a concomitant sense of impending doom (another abandonment) work in tandem and often restrict the full functioning of an adopted person's emotional and intellectual capacities... adopted persons talk about an underlying sadness which seems constant and pervasive, a hindrance to real joy. Verrier 1993 p71

### Post-traumatic stress disorder

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a condition that often affects people who have experienced a traumatic event that is considered outside the range of normal human experience such as rape, fires, earthquakes, and tornadoes. The separation of a child from its mother is also a trauma that is outside the range of normal human experience. PTSD symptoms can include trying to avoid situations that remind the person of the traumatic event, having flashback memories, and anniversary reactions. It can be said that an adopted person's birthday is the anniversary of a traumatic event. Some adopted persons feel sad around their birthdays or remember birthdays as a time when they acted out or got in trouble. Russell 1996 p75

If depression and anxiety are twin symptoms for adopted persons, the closest diagnosis might best be described as post-traumatic stress disorder. Because the early source of symptoms is often overlooked, however, this diagnosis is not recognized. An adopted person may demonstrate the tell-tale signs of anxiety or fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation; yet, unless there is evidence of child abuse they are not seen as having suffered trauma...Verrier 1993 p71

### Other signs of trauma

Intrusion of a traumatic memory of that first abandonment, and constriction, a shutting down or surrendering to the situation at hand (being in the 'wrong' family)... Intrusion makes the adopted person alert to a possible repetition of a past trauma or the feeling that one needs to facilitate it...Even if the present environment is safe, it may not feel that way. Traumatic memories, in the form of emotional or bodily sensations, keep intruding into consciousness. This often causes the adopted person to appear irritable, aggressive, impulsive, and anti-social. Verrier 1993 p72

### Adopted persons have no pre-traumatic self

Trauma is earlier for adopted persons than for most other people. It begins at birth, with separation from the mother. And it's more persistent because adopted persons have *no pre-traumatic self*. When adoptive parents are traumatized by infertility, they already have adult selves to absorb and work through the shock. Birth mothers may have been young when traumatized by unwanted pregnancy, but had a self to fall back on as she continued her life. But the adopted person, who experienced separation and loss early in life, usually at birth, has no previous self, no pre-traumatic self from which to draw strength. Lifton 1994 p260

### Self identity trauma

Some of the most devastating complications of adoption I have had to deal with, arise from misguided attempts by Courts or adoptive parents to conceal an adoption. A teenage person unaware they are adopted, builds their self identity structure on a false foundation. On discovery of the real truth, their self identity structure is prone to collapse. This can be very traumatic to the adult adopted person, and the whole adoptive family relationship, and is certain to cause irrevocable damage. KCG

## TRUST

### Basic trust a ground of our being

Trust is a primal learning in the life of a child and foundation of all subsequent learning. *Trust remains the key, core, crucial emotion in all human relationships.* Trust undergirds, interconnects, integrates, interrelates all the other emotions and affections. Without trust and we go to pieces! Trust holds us together. Trust's a root emotion. In stress we fall back through the levels of fidelity, competence, adequacy, courage, initiative, autonomy, will, hope until we encounter the fundamental ground of our being Trust. cf D.Augsburger. 'Caring Enough to Confront' Ch.5 1981.

### Impaired trust

Impaired trust is very common among adopted persons and often causes difficulties with self confidence, rejection and relationships.

### Source of impaired trust

For adopted persons, especially those in closed complete break adoptions impaired trust is caused by a series of trauma experiences.

- ❑ *Abandonment* at birth is a profound primal trauma that can destroy trust and create hyper vigilance and mistrust of others.
- ❑ *Learning you are adopted* is a profound trauma that can destroy trust
- ❑ Discovery you have *two sets of real parents* and two family trees, complicates parental trust.
- ❑ *Secrecy* The trauma of being denied the truth of your own identity and origins, severed by a court operated statutory guillotine destroys trust.
- ❑ *A false birth certificate* that certifies your birth parents are your adoptive parents destroys trust.
- ❑ *Being an ex-nuptial*, Illegitimate bastard conveys alienation and stigma that destroys trust.

Impaired trust is a normal experience of adopted persons as a result of being subjected to abnormal trauma experiences that are an integral part of adoption. Open adoption and law reforms based on openness, honesty and integrity may reduce the impact of some the above traumas and consequent trust impairment.

### Effects of trust impairment

- ❑ **Hyper-vigilance** Having to be constantly 'on guard' takes its toll. Part of that which might be sacrificed in ego development is a sense of spontaneity and carefree abandon, which may be associated with the early trauma of the disappearance of the mother. The loss of the mother disallows the achievement of *basic trust*, the first milestone in the healthy development. The ability to be spontaneous, to enjoy life, is rooted in trust that the mother will be there to keep the child safe. Part of my belief that the loss of *basic trust* and subsequent behaviors are a result of prolonged separation from the mother is based on studies of children placed in incubators at birth. Verrier 1993 p36

- ❑ **Fear of homelessness** Many adopted persons carry through life a sense of dislocation, a sense of being the outsider, a sense of orphan-hood. The *adoption papers are their passport*, but their true home is lost to them. They have been in exile ever since being cut off from their origins, and they fear they will end up in exile. Having experienced total loss once, they fear they could experience it again. cf p122 Lifton

- ❑ **Trust and intimacy** The issues of trust and intimacy are closely related to those of abandonment and rejection. There is such a fluid movement among these issues that it is difficult to separate them. The adopted persons lack of trust in the permanency of relationships brings about a distrust of closeness or intimacy and a need for distancing. At the same time there is a yearning for the very thing which is feared. p88 Verrier

- ❑ **Difficulty giving and receiving love** Love grows out of trust. Impaired trust therefore affects loving. Adopted persons often lack spontaneity in giving and receiving, especially with adults.

- ❑ **Distrusting self** Distrust is evident, not only in the permanency of relationships, but in the goodness of self. This lack of self-esteem or self-worth is intricately intertwined with the lack of trust and fear of intimacy described by many of the adopted persons. cf p90 Verrier

### Options—

#### Opt-outs

- ☐ *Denial* I'm OK' any trust problem is because other person not OK.
- ☐ *Withdrawal* avoid any close relationships that test your trust.
- ☐ *Rationalise* I distrust- because of what happened to me- I can't change.
- ☐ *Self justification* Keep catalogue of other's wrongs to justify mistrust.
- ☐ *Substitute trust* put your trust in animals not people.
- ☐ *Generalization* 'you can't trust anyone these day's.

#### Healing options—

- ☐ *Confronting* your trust impairment and taking action
- ☐ *Coming out* declaring and sharing your trust problem with significant others- close friends- adopted persons or counsellor.
- ☐ *Join a support group* share with adopted persons who have struggled with trust issues- learn from shared experiences.
- ☐ *Letting go* Adopted person must learn to let down protective barriers they have built around themselves so they can begin to trust.

#### Creating a climate of trust

- ☐ **Trust relationships** To be trusted, you must trust. The first crisis in most relationships is about trust. Trust is essential for relationships to grow. You must learn to create a climate of trust which reduces your own and the others person's fears of rejection and build hope of acceptance and support. Distrust destroys relationships.

□ **Risking** Trust and risk go together. As trust level rises willingness to risk being open with each other increases. There are risks involved in all love, acceptance, and trust. The main risk is rejection.

□ **Trust pivots on acceptance or rejection** When we are told we are trusted, we feel loved, accepted and respected. When told we are not trusted we feel disliked, cut off and rejected.

□ **Trust includes feelings** A climate of trust develops out of mutual freedom to express real feelings, positive and negative. As each person moves to greater acceptance of total Self, more of their potential for loving, trusting, responsibility and growth are released.

□ **Trust empathy** If I come to understand your inner world. If I sense your confusion, timidity or fears. If I can feel them as they were my own, then a highly sensitive empathy grows between us. A rare kind of trust develops. In trust-empathy I enter into your world on your terms and that is risky.

□ **Trust a two-way street** Trust, by its very nature, aims at interpersonal truth. Trusting you with the truth about me is the only authentic way of inviting you to share the truth of your experience.

□ **Trust requires truth** The truth essential to trust relationships is grounded in authentic self-disclosure. Truth is owning what is, recognizing what's is within us, affirming what is potential, actual and thus possible. Such authentic truth opens us to trust each other.

□ **Trust with your eyes open** Trust that cares enough to confront each other responsibly, requires equal honesty, frankness, being out in the open with our thoughts feelings and desires. Such trust willingly accepts apologies, forgives the past, cancels old debts, and gives the other their future back again. Love and honesty are inseparable parts of trust because trust is a relational two way experience. It is circular, continuous, reciprocal. It is trust-between.

□ **Support group risk and trusting** Members risk openness by sharing disappointments, pain, and hopes for change. Their openness is the catalyst encouraging others to drop their facades.

□ **Distrust behaviour** Constantly evaluates others. Directs judgmental remarks at persons or personalities. Tries to control other's actions, words, or feelings. Uses plans to get your way, manipulate or threaten. Act neutral when feelings get tense. Act superior when other's vulnerable. Demand absolute promises from others. Dogmatically assert your opinions as beyond question. Does not disclose your real self. Masking. Reject other's self-disclosure. Clam up.

□ **Trustful behaviour** Accepts people as they are. Respects freedom to think, feel, choose. Make simple, honest statements and clear open requests. Can stand up and be counted. Being equally vulnerable. Encourage spontaneous choice, response and action. My opinions are always open to question. Discloses real self. Affirm and reciprocate self-disclosure.

### Two basic elements in trust building

- One person risks by self-disclosure.
- The other person is accepting and supportive.

### To engage in trust I need to accept—

- My choice to be open could have good or harmful results.
- Realize results depend on the other persons behaviour.
- Count the cost, I will suffer more if trust ends in rejection than I would gain from acceptance.
- Feel confident the other person will be helpful. I expect my disclosure to be received in an accepting, non-threatening way and that some positive consequence will follow. cf D.Augsburger 'Caring Enough to Confront' Ch.5. 1981.

### Impaired trust

Separation from the birth mother often causes the adopted person to suffer an impaired sense of trust. This, in turn, causes them to develop a deep sense of mistrust of all others during the course of their life...Impaired trust is generated by the further fear of abandonment. They often operate out of hyper vigilance and anxiety, always afraid the protector will disappear without warning. This causes them to feel that they cannot count on anyone at any time..Adopted person must learn how to let down the protective barriers they have built around themselves so that they can begin to trust the world. Carlini 1997 pp27,84

### Rejection and basic trust

Even the false self cannot ward off the feeling of rejection and the loss of *basic trust* which ensues. The sense of rejection caused by the original separation may have untold effects on the ego development of the child... Besides the usual demands made upon the ego, they are denied the primal relationship, the continuity of nurturing and security experienced in utero, as they make their entrance into the new and alien world outside the womb. Verrier 1993 p35-36

### Trust-birth link

In adoption, adopted persons are typically separated from the birth mother immediately or soon after birth. This is the developmental stage of learning to trust. If an infant is separated from the only mother it has known for nine months, it will be more difficult for that child to establish trust. Some adopted persons continue to have a difficult time in relationships. Their fear of rejection and lack of trust affects how they relate to others. Russell 1996 p67

### Lack of trust

Lack of trust is demonstrated over and over again in adopted persons relationships throughout their lives. No matter how much they are shown or told they are loved, they are unable to believe it, it remains only a half truth. There is a barrier that outsiders cannot penetrate. The adopted persons experience of abandonment or family dislocation results in a distrust of closeness and intimacy and a need for distancing. At the same time there is a yearning for the very thing they fear. I can only give of myself what I know of myself. People confused about their self-identity have difficulty getting close to anyone. KCG

**VICTIM**

“The victim who won’t forgive will often live in psychological bondage to the victimizer, leading to a kind of paralysis.” Coretta S King

### Blaming the victim

Although blaming the victim is often a phenomenon of trauma, (rape victims and battered women, for instance), being separated from their birth mothers and handed over to strangers in the *adoption process is the only trauma where the victims are expected by the whole of society to be grateful*. They are not grateful; they are grieving, and the original abandonment and loss are the sources of many other issues for the adopted person. Verrier 1993 p80

### Adopted person as victim

Closely related to guilt and shame is control. To be guilty of something means that one has or had some control over the situation. One could have done something differently. Yet even though adopted persons tend to feel innately responsible for their own relinquishment, there is a paradoxical feeling of having been a victim. This, then, implies a need for someone to blame. Adopted persons vacillate back and forth between blaming themselves for not having being good enough to keep to having a feeling of helplessness and undifferentiated anger for having been so manipulated. This ambivalence is sometimes misinterpreted by therapists and seen as an excuse for not taking responsibility for themselves. They are sometimes seen as using their adoptive status as a rationalization for conflicts which arise with parents, making resolution of the conflict impossible

While it is true that seeing adoption as the only issue may cause parents and children to overlook some obvious interpersonal conflicts, it is important to keep in mind that adopted persons are victims of manipulation of the gravest kind: the severing of their tie to their birthmother and their biological roots. The feeling of being a victim is not just a fantasy, but a reality. Being abandoned often leaves one with a permanent feeling of being at the mercy of others. Verrier 1993 p96

Feeling like a victim sometimes has a paralyzing effect on an adopted person, because even though they try to control their environment, they still don’t feel as if they are in control of their life. Their striving to be complete was disrupted by someone taking over their life and altering it forever. Verrier 1993 p98

### Shunning victim role

The first thing an adopted person can do is to become sick and tired of being a victim, of feeling as if they have no power in their life. That feeling of helplessness and hopelessness, left over from their child years, permeates their consciousness even today. They have to want to get rid of it. They have to want to take responsibility for themselves and not blame everyone in the whole world-for what is happening to them. In order to grow up, to become an adult, they will have to take an active part in their own healing process. This takes effort, commitment, and energy. Verrier 1993 p182

### Victimization

When adopted persons speak of feeling victimized through the institution of adoption, they are seeing themselves as not good enough in various ways; therefore, nothing can be done to change their situation. If they feel they have been irreversibly damaged through adoption, then they may feel worthless, unlovable and undeserving of better. Their self-esteem is further diminished by the inability to refuse to take risks because they are afraid of losing what they already have. The answer may lie in finding their biological family, but the fear may be sufficient to stop the search beginning. Carlini 1997 p47

### Operating out of victim stage

Abandonment through adoption can develop a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. As a result the adopted person feels victimized, a sense that they never loose. Many adopted persons work out of the victim stage without even realizing it. This was manifest through negative self-talk and loneliness, carrying around a sense of guilt or shame, or feeling powerless, out of control, or chronically depressed. They, feeling unworthy, unlovable or unwanted, believes no one could possibly love them. Through much of their adopted life, their actions may have reflected the victim’s point of view. As an infant they may have felt an inward infant’s rage and lashed out at people; or they may have been hypersensitive, feeling manipulated and controlled by the adoption process, causing them to withdraw into themselves. Carlini 1997 p105

### Victim auto responses

Feeling and acting like a victim is an automatic response that can become a habit hard to break. Before long this behavior can make the adopted person feel trapped and powerless. When this happens, being a victim becomes one of the most important aspects of the adopted persons identity. This identity allows them to play the role of the victim in all aspects of his life, including within relationships, from then on. By focusing on the pain of the past and consequences of it in the present, the adopted person, through a variety of acting-out behaviors, gains the affection of others they so desperately want. Carlini 1997 p106

### Victimization damages self-esteem

Convinced their life was permanently changed or damaged by painful past experiences, the adopted person becomes paralyzed by self-pity. In working out of the victim state, the adopted persons feelings of abandonment, rejection or criticism are enhanced. Their worst fears are realized. They must now cope with the negative consequences they hoped to avoid, along with all the other emotional baggage from the past. What they must admit to themselves is that they were victimized. This is a fact of their life. They were manipulated and controlled from the very beginning by being adopted. They could not prevent the separation from their biological family and must admit that their life is possibly less than it might have been had they not been hurt by the abandonment. Carlini 1997 p106

**Letting go the hurt** Life is now about choices. Does the adopted person choose to stay in the victim stage or change their life? Continuing to feel unworthy is a choice; self-indulgence through compulsive addictive behaviors is a choice. Repeating old patterns is the manifestation of a choice; but choosing to empower one's self and let go of the hurt is a preferable choice. Letting go of the hurt may prove a difficult step. It is easier to remain in the 'victim's stage' because it is familiar. Moving towards healing may prove disruptive in the adopted persons life and, therefore, frightening. Moving out of the victim stage requires taking on new attitudes which include activities and behaviors which will accommodate a new and healthier life style. Through the process the focus will change and the adopted person will stop feeling like a victim. Attention will turn to establishing a life of happiness rather than one of pain and self-pity. Carlini 1997 p107

**Non-victim behaviors**

While living in the victim stage, the adopted person works out of negative behaviors such as manipulating, controlling, arguing, withdrawing or using compulsive addictive behaviors. These behaviors must be changed into positive behaviors which will enhance self-esteem and improve emotional and physical well-being. Positive behaviors include a regular exercise program, a healthy diet, going to an adoption support group, seeing a counselor, taking up hobbies...In switching over to positive behaviors, a new pattern of behavior emerge, leaving the old one behind... During the victim stage, many unmet needs tend to arise that may never be met. In the non-victim stage many of those needs can be fulfilled. Of course they must be identified first. For many adopted persons the need to find the birth mother is often primary. Forming a relationship with her heals much of the pain. When the reunion occurs, the adopted person's focus will turn toward the present and the future, rather than the past. Carlini 1997 ppl07-10

**Breaking the victim cycle**

As we share our story, we begin to break free of being a victim or a martyr, of the repetition compulsion.

<b>Martyr/Victim Cycle</b>	<b>Recovery Cycle</b>
Journey False self	True Self
Self-contraction	Self-expansion
There and then	Here and now
Unfinished business	Finished and finishing
Few personal rights	Many personal rights
Stagnation, regression	Growth
Sharing little	Sharing as appropriate
Same story repetition	Growing story
Repetition compulsion	Telling present story
Impulsive & compulsive	Spontaneous & flowing
Pity parties	Enjoy parties
Unaware stuckness	Progressively aware
Unfocused	Focused
Not working on recovery	Working on recovery
Less open to input	Open to input of others
Dry drunk	Working thru pain and joy
Often grandiose	Humble yet confident
Unhappy dream	Happy dreams
Exclude Higher Power	Includes Higher Power
Illness	Health

**Source** C L Whitfield MD 'The Child Within' 1987p111

**Forgiveness key to victim release**

Carlini re Birthmothers– Resentment Causes you to “re-play” old tapes over and over in the mind, giving the past memories more power to destroy your present and your future. Forgiveness, gives you permission to let go of the past disappointments and live in the present.

**Forgiveness**

When we talk about forgiveness, we are not talking about a mushy sentimental process, but rather a heartfelt effort to let go of the old resentment and anger for yourself and others from the past.

- ☐ Letting go of old resentment and anger allow the frozen emotional energy to flow out from the subconscious.
- ☐ Once you acknowledge this forgiveness as being real, you are filled with a positive healing energy that propels you onward to a happier future that frees your soul.
- ☐ Forgiveness is the beginning of accepting the past.
- ☐ It frees you from the crippling emotional wounds of the relinquishment.
- ☐ It allows you to let go of any unfinished business you still harbor from the past so that it can no longer contaminate your future.
- ☐ This blocked emotional energy can then be transformed into empowering energy, which will allow you to recreate your life in the present.

**Giving up hurt identity**

When you finally delve into who you truly are, you realize that you are a multi-faceted person. You are so much more than just a victimized remnant of a past injustice. However, once you forgive yourself and others and you let go of the locked-up emotions attached to the relinquishment, you will let go of a piece of your old identity. You can then use your new attitudes and insights to mold a new image. Through the recovery process, you will take on a stronger sense of self-worth, while you focus more on all the good things that you are. When you forgive yourself and others, you are allowing yourself to give up the side of your identity that was hurting. You are letting go of your resentments towards others. As a consequence *you will cease to operate out of the victim stage.*

**Release takes time**

You have to allow yourself to let go of the hurt, resentment, anger and sorrow from the past. Love, Acceptance and Forgiveness does not happen quickly. It may take much longer for one person than for another. Do not set a time limit on being able to forgive yourself as it is the end product of the on-going healing process in recovery. You are not being asked to forget what happened years ago because there is a lesson to be learned in what happened. That lesson was that *being victimized is like having your soul raped.* The relinquishment happened and can never be changed, but it changed your life forever. Now you must take all the negative energy left over from the event and turn it into positive, healing energy. Many do this by reaching out to help other birth mothers who are experiencing the same pain. Heather Carlini "Birth Mother Trauma' 1992 pp76-79

**Empathy not sympathy**

Instead of sympathy - which will foster victim status - what a hurting adoptive person needs is empathy, that will open the way to healing.

**Victimization the in thing**

Nowadays we are witnessing an ever-increasing number of victims of life's unfairness. Anyone who has had a bad experience, temporary or long-lasting, may lay claim to the title: anyone who has been sexually abused; who has been through a terrible divorce; who has a serious illness; whose parents were alcoholic or disturbed. People are being encouraged to respond to these misfortunes with anger— "Why me? It isn't fair"— and then to find security by wrapping themselves in the cloak of the victim. "I can't help how I am; look at all these horrible things that happened to me. I've *earned* my anger."

**Playing the victim role**

By all means, men and women need to identify and acknowledge the origins of their victimization and unhappiness. They need to understand that bad things can and do happen to good people, and to stop blaming themselves for "provoking" or "deserving" the bad things. But while the victim phase may be a *useful* part of recovery, it is not sufficient as a total approach to recovery. Too many people end up playing the role of victim to perfection.

**Most victims do recover**

Of course, there are real victims. There really are people who have had a lousy time of it. I don't want to underestimate their rage, sadness, or humiliation for a minute. But the ultimate issue is this: The event happened. How can people get beyond the sense of victimization? The heartening news is that most people do recover. Most of the people who have suffered even the most grotesque injustices manage to survive and transcend them'.

**What survivors have in common**

□ They do not accept the label or identity of victim. They do not say, "What happened to me is the worst thing in the world, and I'll never be free of it!" They say, "What happened to me was pretty bad, but other people are worse off and I won't let the bastards win"

□ They do not wallow around indefinitely, trying to answer the unanswerable "Why me?"

□ They don't blame themselves for bringing on disaster.

□ They get on with their lives.

□ None of this means that people must "forgive and forget." Forgiving has nothing to do with memory loss. There is no need to forget injustices and injuries, or pretend they never happened, and some events must never be forgotten. But that is quite different from letting them dominate one's life.

□ Anger, is an informal judiciary, a response to injustice. Prolonged anger is often a way for a person to feel that he or she is righting a wrong, simply by maintaining a punitive emotional state. For people who are using anger as a weapon of retaliation, therefore, the primary "cure" is to find a different symbol of justice.

**Being ready to let anger go**

The steps toward healing are generally known; the problem is that, as with methods for quitting smoking, a person must be ready for them. A person can try to stop smoking for ten years, and suddenly, one day, be ready to let it go. With anger too, the protective feeling of being a self-righteous victim can be hard to abandon. Suddenly, one day, the person is ready to let it go.

**Steps for letting go**

Some essential elements for letting anger go are—

□ *Inventing a healing ritual* that marks the restoration of justice and the end of anger. The specific ritual depends on what each person needs to do, drawing on symbols and events that are meaningful.

□ *Confessing*, which is good for the soul; not endless expression, but the confession of deepest fears and thoughts in order to gain distance from them and understanding.

□ *Forming a self-help group* with others who have been through the same experience. They know what you are feeling, and together you might come up with solutions. As the self-help research finds, meeting with others in the same boat helps people understand that they are not alone, not to blame, and not crazy to feel as they do.

□ *Taking action to help others*, which puts your own miseries in perspective.

□ *Seeking ways of breaking out* of your usual perspective. For years you have been rehearsing your "story," the reasons for your anger. Retelling the story from other participants' points of view will help you find routes to empathy, to seeing the world as the target of your anger may have seen it. ( If, say, you are angry at your father, you become his biographer. Interview members of your family who knew him. Why was he the way he was?)

**Successful therapeutic programs**

What all successful therapeutic programs share is the ability to teach people to recognize these perceptions, to communicate them without threatening others, and to solve the conflicts that produce them. They teach people that anger is only one tactic, and usually not a very happy one, in solving problems. Anger does not "go underground" when people learn these skills. The less they need to be angry, and more control they have over their anger, the less often they feel the emotion in the first place.

The ultimate purpose of thinking twice about anger is to enhance the long-term benefit of the relationship, not the short-term relief of the individual. If you are patient in one moment of anger, you will escape a hundred days of sorrow.

**Source** 'Anger the Misunderstood Emotion' Carol Tavris p313-319 Pub Touchstone 1989.

## WHOLENESS

### Realigning the Self

Lifton—Adopted persons are often perplexed after reunion: they thought that just the sight of the birth mother or father; or a member of the birth family, would render them whole. Instead, they may feel more fragmented than before. They have lost the self that they started off with and have not yet found the self for which they searched. The high peaks of transformation still lie ahead. In order to scale them, adopted persons must find a way to heal the split in the divided self. This means realigning the self, bringing together all the pieces to make it whole.

### Process of Self Integration

□ Adopted persons must weave a new self-narrative out of the fragments of what was, what might have been, and what is.

□ This means they must integrate their two selves: the regressed baby who was abandoned and the adult that baby has become.

□ They must make the Artificial Self real, and allow the Forbidden Self to come out of hiding.

□ They must integrate what is authentic in these two selves, and balance the power between them. It is during this period that the adopted person feels most vulnerable, because neither self is in charge.

□ They must integrate the internal and external birth mother (the fantasy and actual one) into a composite birth mother. They must accept her for what she is, with her strengths and weaknesses and find forgiveness for the past.

□ They must integrate the internal and external adoptive mother (the one they resisted and the one they can now claim) into a composite adoptive mother. They must accept and forgive her; too.

□ They must integrate the birth father and the adoptive father in the same way.

□ They must accept that they cannot be fully the birth parents' child any more than they could be fully the adoptive parents' child.

□ They must claim their own child, become their own person, and belong to themselves. B F Lifton

It is a formidable undertaking and too late to turn back. At this stage of the journey, adopted persons often feel they are not in control. They feel naked, exposed, and frightened, as if they were in a rowboat out on the high seas, lashed by overpowering waves of emotion rising out of the deep. One wrong move and they could be pitched overboard. 'How do we heal?' Adopted persons ask. Behind the question is the unspoken fear: 'Can we heal?' Lifton 1994 pp258-259

### How can Adopted Persons Heal?

The trauma specialist Judith Herman tells us that just as helplessness and isolation are the core experiences of psychological trauma, so are empowerment and reconnection the core experiences of recovery. *Adopted persons must search for ways to find that empowerment and reconnection with the same energy they used in searching for their origins.* There is no other way; for healing, like life, is a process. As we have seen, the path to healing is the search for the missing pieces of the self. Lifton 1994 p260

#### 1 Search

The very idea of search is empowering, no matter what the outcome...For many adopted persons, the healing begins when they take control of their lives by making the decision to search, and it continues imperceptibly with each victory along the way, each name or address or telephone number...Adopted persons dance for the first time to their own tune. Adopted persons are empowered when they learn to confront very frightening emotions—such as the fear of being rejected by the birth mother—and find they are still alive after it. Lifton 1994 p260

#### 2 Therapy

The search, then, is ultimately healing, but, it creates new problems in that it requires a reordering of the self. Some adopted persons sail through this without outside help, but for others the journey is too difficult to make alone.

□ A therapist can be an invaluable traveling companion if empathic to the quest. It is difficult, however; to find therapists who know the way. Many professionals are in the same denial as the rest of society about the adopted persons invisible connection to the invisible birth parents.

□ A perceptive therapist can help the adopted person who has been through search and reunion to integrate the Artificial and Forbidden selves, so that an authentic core self can take over. During this period, when it seems that no self is in charge, the adopted person may despair that the emotional chaos will never end.

□ Gradually, the adopted persons core self will emerge—one that retains a sensibility for the needs of others that the Artificial Self so carefully honed, along with the ability to express one's own needs and to assert oneself.

□ The goal for the adopted person is to feel that they have a right to exist, and to stake the claims that come with such entitlement. It is not so much the kind of training as the sensibility of the therapist that is crucial. Some adopted persons are helped by traditional psychotherapy. Others by bioenergetics, which places stress on work with the body as a way of releasing the frozen feelings within. One woman was grateful to primal therapy for making it possible for her to feel and re-experience her unfelt pains, rather than having to act on them. One adopted person spoke of being cured by a hypnotherapist in one session. Lifton 1994 pp261-262

### 3 Becoming healers

“Adopted persons heal by becoming healers. We could say that they have always been healers. As babies, they healed the birth mother by going off to be raised by another clan. They healed the adoptive parents by sacrificing their own history and heritage so that the adoptive family line could be continued. By becoming replacement children for the child who never was or the child who died, they healed the adoptive parents’ infertility. Because as children they have to have empathy for their adoptive parents’ needs, adopted persons develop an enhanced sensitivity for the feelings of others. Some become mental health professionals, often working within the adoption system to change it. Lifton 1994 p263

### 4 Join Adoption Support Group

Sorrow shared is halved, joy shared is doubled. Adopted persons find this to be true when they join a support group...There they come into contact with other adopted persons who intuitively understand them. They have a lot in common, for; though they are not from the same family, they are from the same family system. They have experienced the same family dynamics and taboos. They are relieved to know that they are not crazy, that other people think and feel just as they do. Nothing is forbidden. They can express the anger that has been bottled up inside. And the grief. They are validated.

These meetings also give adopted persons the chance to meet birth mothers who have searched or been found. They gain insight into the birth mother experience, the forces at play that caused her to give up her child and the years of emptiness and anguish that followed. By listening to these birth mothers, adopted persons begin to glimpse the psychological complexities involved: a birth mother does not believe she is abandoning her child when she places it for adoption; she does not forget the child or forgive herself; she may not feel she is entitled to search for her child; and she worries about the feelings of the adoptive parents. Adopted persons also empower themselves by taking part in political and educational action organized by the support groups. Lifton 1994 p263-264

### 5 Reclaiming one’s name

It is impossible to describe how adopted persons feel when they learn that first or last name given them at birth. The birth name is a confirmation that you were born and that you exist. It is as integral a part of one today as it was in ancient times...Even when they cannot have a relationship with their birth parents, adopted persons may reclaim their names as a way of reclaiming their original identities. They may use the first name, or take it or the surname as a middle name. Sometimes they will use both their adoptive and their birth names, as if not sure which is the real one and which the impostor. Lifton 1994 p268

### 6 Seeing healing in those around you

As complex as reunion is for everyone, eventually some kind of healing is experienced by all the members of the triad adoption circle. Once the denial and secrecy are lifted,

everyone has a chance to be liberated. It is healing for the adopted person to see the birth mother; freed from the burden of her guilt and shame, continue her life from where it stopped at surrender. She may begin a new career; end a loveless marriage that had been entered as a place to hide, and reconcile with her own mother; as she resolves the unfinished business between them.

It is also healing to be able to share one’s feelings with one’s adoptive parents, after hiding them for so many years. To renegotiate the relationship as an adult child, and to be able to shed the old fear and guilt that one is being disloyal and ungrateful. Once they get over their initial shock and resistance, adoptive parents are often transformed, too. The lifting of secrecy frees them as well as the adopted person. Lifton 1994 p269-270

### 7 Staying in process

Reunion is not any one moment, or month, or year; but a process. In order not to get stuck in any one place, or time, not to obsess over what is or might have been, the adopted person must keep integrating and growing and living in the present, dipping back now and then to recapitulate, before moving on to the next stage of the process. Even a reunion that is going well can bring an unexpected cycle of depression in its wake because of the emotions it releases. An adopted person can still have occasional panic attacks and bouts of anger and grief, for issues are never completely resolved: they just get recycled and reappear when you least expect them. Lifton 1994 p270

### 8 Accepting our existential fate

One impulse behind search and reunion is the adopted persons desire to modify the past. To deny the loss. To restore the mother. To rewrite the script that might have been. One learns, however...one cannot annul the fact that one was given up by one clan and taken in by another; one can only see the consequences of that fact in a new light that illuminates what happened in a healing way. Part of the healing process takes place when adopted person is able to accept that what happened it was their existential fate to be surrendered by one mother at birth and raised by another. To accept that, with all the relief of finding out who they are, there will always be the pain of that special history...Adopted persons may never completely heal, but after search and reunion at least they have a potential for growth. There is the chance to move from the traumatized self to the revitalized and transformed self. Lifton 1994 p271

### 9 The eternal search

Adopted persons are often alarmed that they still want to go on searching for something after they have completed their search for mother; father; siblings, and extended family. They don’t realize that to be searching is to be alive; that the most healing thing that happens to adopted persons is that the search makes them into constant searchers. Having made their personal journey through time, space, and emotion, they are now ready to join others in the human condition on the Eternal Search to answer the great mysteries of life and death. Lifton 1994 p272

### Survivors and Thrivers

Adopted persons have, by the very act of adoption, gone through a lot. By the time adopted persons are adults, they have survived separation from their birth parents, have acclimated to a new family, have dealt with fantasy and fears, have confronted identity issues, and have navigated relationships. Being an adopted person means moving through some difficult stages and transitions. The awareness of having survived can give adopted persons strength and determination in various areas of their lives. The downside of this feeling of survival is that some adopted persons find it difficult to depend on others and instead are very independent. It is important for adopted persons to realize that healthy relationships involve interdependence—depending on one's self and depending on others. Russell 1996 p77

### Help, Healing and Support

Russell—**Acknowledge adoption is an issue** is the first step in the healing process for triad members. Some triad members go through much of their lives feeling that adoption is not an issue for them. Others report a vague sense of feeling unsettled but not really paying attention to it. On some level, adoption issues are present for all triad members and will emerge at one time or another.

### Validation of feelings

Validation of one's feelings is crucial in adoption. Many triad members feel isolated and don't talk about their adoption feelings or experiences. Hearing how other people feel and having your own feelings validated is comforting to triad members.

### Support and connection

Support and connection with others is very important for adoption triad members. To be with people who understand your feelings can be very comforting. Support can come in many forms, including support groups, adoption conferences, books, therapy, writing, and relationships. Some triad members find relationships with someone who is not involved in adoption but who can understand the vast range of emotions that go along with adoption issues. These relationships allow the triad member to heal in a safe and secure environment.

### Types of healing

It is important that triad members choose a method of healing that they will respond to and find useful. Some people may want to use imagery or writing or role playing. Others may find therapy, reading, or going to adoption conferences helpful. Different methods of healing may be effective at different times.

### Respect for other triad members

It is easy to judge from a distance. It is impossible to know another person's life as intimately as one's own. We all have ideas about how we would handle certain situations. However, we don't really know what we would actually do in a situation until we find ourselves in it. Adoption triad members owe it to themselves and to the other members of their personal triad to respect each other's point of view. Triad members come to adoption with some similar feelings and issues that can be shared and used to create a common ground for healing.

### Growth

Growth and strength can come from having to deal with difficult issues in one's life. All triad members have gone through a lot. Using and learning from the adoption experience is healing. There are many issues in adoption that cannot be fully resolved. The dualities of adoption force triad members to realistically work toward the goal of accepting and integrating adoption issues and feelings. Growth in adoption also involves forgiving oneself and the other triad members. Everyone involved in adoption did the best they could with the information they had at the time.

### Seeking help

Every adoption triad member will have issues and feelings about adoption. These feelings and issues present themselves differently from person to person, but one way of dealing with them is to seek out psychotherapy. Psychotherapists are trained to help people explore their feelings, communicate more effectively, and expand relationship skills.

### Choosing a Therapist

Clients need to feel comfortable in a therapeutic situation. It is appropriate to interview potential psychotherapists by asking questions, considering the therapist's responses, and by sensing one's own comfort level with the therapist. The way a therapist responds can be just as important as the content of what they say.

Triad members will have special needs in therapy. Because most therapists have not had formal training in adoption issues, clients need to ask questions about a therapist's education and experience in adoption. Therapy is for the client, not the therapist. It is not a triad member's duty to educate a therapist about adoption issues. Therapists are responsible for gathering the necessary information and education they need to help their clients. Ultimately, the client must decide if they are getting what they need out of therapy. There are various ways to get referrals to therapists who know about adoption issues. Some adoption organizations have referral lists for therapists in different areas. Ask other triad members for referrals or go to lectures and seminars where therapists are speaking on adoption issues.

### Therapy for your adopted child .

Children let us know how they're feeling by acting out behaviorally. Because they don't have the verbal skills to say what is wrong, they sometimes show parents and those around them that all is not right. Therapy can help a family interpret and understand what the child is trying to convey and can shed light on family dynamics. A child's emotions and behaviors can be addressed in therapy while parents can learn how to interact with the child more effectively. When interviewing therapists for an adopted child, make sure that the therapist specializes in child therapy and knows about adoption issues. These factors will be crucial to the outcome of the therapy. A therapist who is seeing a child will also want to talk with the parents and include them in part of the therapy. This is for the benefit of the child and helps the family to function more smoothly together. Russell 1996 pp165-171

**Humor?**

Humor is the highest defense mechanism. We were quick to learn whatever we needed to in order to survive. We learned this from our birth parents, and we learned this from our adoptive parents. We can laugh at ourselves (but don't you laugh at us). We can laugh at the world around us. We have the gift of play and fantasy because we have lived in a world of fantasy and of not-knowing for all of our lives. Pavao 1998 p92

**Adaptability of adopted persons**

We carry around some trauma associated with our first loss and with any additional moves and losses. But the thing that comes along with these losses is our adaptive qualities. We can get along anywhere as a result of our early experience with transplanting and replanting. Place us in a room with high society, we're fine. Our birth parents may have been kings and queens, after all. Place us in a room with junkies and low-life thieves, we'll be hanging out and talking trash with them in no time. Our birth parents could have been the lowest of the low. Place us in challenging schools and we'll either do just fine (aiming to please), or we'll be so busy trying to get the social thing down (we have to be accepted, after all) that we'll forget our assignments and do poorly academically. But we'll be working on something: We just adapt and adapt. We're actors trying on many roles, because we could be anyone, couldn't we? We started out as one person, after all, and then turned into another. We know how to act and how to get along just fine, anywhere and with anyone, thank you. Pavao 1998 p90

Some adopted children seem to adapt quickly to nearly any situation: it is a resilient skill. Internally, however, the transitions are very difficult. Pavao 1998 p52

**Healing Support groups**

Because adoption support groups mark the end of an individual's psychological isolation, substituting a social environment for what was solitary confinement, the groups begin to combat the damage that prolonged secrecy has inflicted. The groups are exhilarating to birth-mothers because they are an antidote to secrecy, and permit a unity and strength, which obviously helps people heal. Adopted persons who have searched for their birth-mothers frequently encourage their found mothers to come to support group meetings as a way of helping them deal with the emotional convulsions that accompany reunion and early post-reunion. Similarly, when we asked the women we interviewed if they had any advice for the unseen thousands who will be found by their sons and daughters in the next few years, one resounding suggestion was "get them into a group." Gediman & Brown 1991 p29

**Empowering support groups**

When people confess to previously concealed matters, the relief is enormous. In the support group setting, they are also getting reinforcements against forces which, in the past, were too powerful to combat alone. The sense of unity, and strength, is a healing experience. The groups clearly fill a void. If they had sought help from other sources prior, or during these reunions, what the birth-mothers would have discovered is that unless adoption has become a pro-

fessional specialty, those in the medical and the mental health professions frequently have little or no experience with the kinds of problems reunion can produce. Counselors of all types probably learned about adoption, if at all, when someone in the adoption triad appeared in their office. Gediman & Brown 1991 p30

**ADDITIONAL NOTES****Pain is a very real part of adoption**

The pain of adoption is sometimes overlooked by triad members and other people. It is expected that adoption is a happy event in which everyone gets their needs met and everything works out for the best. As wonderful as adoption can be, there will also be some painful feelings. Pain can take the form of feeling sad, lonely, angry, frustrated, or even suicidal. Some adopted persons experience a longing to fit in and belong. Some birth parents feel a sense of guilt and shame. Some adoptive parents feel frustrated and confused about their adopted children, and wonder what their own biological children would have been like.

**Acknowledging pain** Once the pain of adoption is acknowledged, it can be understood and the healing process can begin. You cannot heal something you do not admit exists. Acknowledging the pain can be as simple as allowing yourself to feel sad and not judging yourself for your feelings. Some people find the acknowledgment they need in support groups of other adopted persons, birth parents, or adoptive parents.

**Understanding pain** Understanding pain means validating and accepting whatever feelings arise, whenever they arise. It is crucial to have a safe space to express feelings where there is no judgment. Feelings are neither right or wrong; they just are. Being a part of adoption means having feelings that may seem difficult to experience and understand. Russell 1996 pp23-24

**Dualities of Adoption**

Adoption is filled with dualities. Adopted persons are chosen while being rejected. Birth parents walk away from their children because they love them. Adoptive parents believe that adoption is positive while they mourn the possibility of biological children. The emotional feelings and issues in adoption are ever present and constantly reveal themselves. Resolving the dualities of adoption would be impossible. The best goal in dealing with these dualities is to acknowledge them and integrate them into one's life. Russell 1996 p61

## SPIRITUALITY

Spiritual awakening is about growth and expansion of awareness. Spirituality is about wholeness and completeness.

### Innate sense of spirit and spirituality

We have an innate sense of spirit and spirituality. It doesn't matter what religion our birth parents had, or what religion our adoptive parents practiced. It is not about organized religion or disorganized religion. It is about something much deeper and more personal. It is about the archetypal themes in our lives as adopted persons. We spend our life-times delving into who we are, and where we come from, and where we are going. We wonder why we are here and what we will leave behind- in the name of all of our fathers and all of our mothers. Pavao 1998 p92

### Role of spirituality

Spirituality is the last "stage" in our recovery. And paradoxically, it can never be a stage, since it is an ongoing process throughout suffering, healing and serenity.

### Beginning to define spirituality

In perhaps one of its briefest definitions spirituality is about the relationships that we have with our self, with others and with the universe. It is characterized by several key concepts and principles, one of which is that it is paradoxical. Otherwise seemingly opposite conditions, entities or experiences coexist comfortably together. For example, spirituality is both subtle and powerful. It is like our breath. We go about most of our day not even realizing that we are breathing. Yet our breathing is so powerful that if we stop, we die.

*Spirituality is personal.* Each of us has to discover it on our own, in our own way. It is highly useful, in that it deals with a spectrum of life issues, from learning basic trust to getting free of suffering.

*Spirituality is experiential.* To appreciate it, we use it, to realize it, we have to experience it. We cannot know it ultimately through our intellect or through reason. It is not knowable. It is only be-able.

*It is indescribable.* It is so vast, that even if we were to read all of the world's great holy books and listen to all of the great spiritual masters, we would still not fathom it. Spirituality is inclusive and supportive. It does not reject anything. And here is where organized religion may enter, because it is a part of spirituality. Thus, while *spirituality is not organized religion*, it includes it, supports it and then transcends it.

*It is healing and growth-inducing*, and ultimately fulfilling. The journey of discovery and healing is ultimately a spiritual journey, although we usually do not view it as such at its beginning. As we work through each healing stage...we transcend them. These levels of consciousness parallel several descriptions of our spiritual path.

**Source** C L Whitfield MD 'The Child Within' 1987 p127-8

### The Spiritual Bond

Many birth mothers speak of having a strong spiritual bond with their child. Perhaps, this is because the original bond that was established while the baby was still within the womb was spiritual in nature. This spirit is familiar to her

for they knew each other's spirit. This is a bond far greater than the mere physical entitles with which the adoption laws deal. It is a strange phenomenon, but birth mothers do tell of times when they had a sense of dread that something was the matter with their child at different times over the years. When she finds her child, she often finds that something had actually happened to the child at that specific time.

Many adopted persons have reported experiencing the same sense of dread about the birth mother, only to find later that something had happened to her at that time.

This spiritual bond also contributes to the recognition of mother and child at the first reunion. Both are better at sensing each other's feelings than communicating them. What is yet physically unfamiliar is better understood in a spiritual sense. I know that when our son came to visit us for the first time, a feeling of absolute peace and love fell over our home. We didn't have to say anything. Our feelings did it for us and it was beautiful! His return gave us all an immediate sense of completeness.

**Source** "Birth Mother Trauma" Heather Carlini 1997

### Love and unconditional love

Low self-esteem, a sense of inherent defectiveness and unworthiness, is a common experience among those of us who have been mistreated or feel like a victim. We believe we are simply not worthy of receiving love. Rather than believe we are unlovable, we can shift to believing that we do not need love. This translates into, "I don't want to be loved," and then finally to "I will reject love, no matter who gives it to me" We end up with "*frozen feelings*" or an inability to fully experience feelings and emotions especially including love.

It is often in recovery where we experience the unconditional love of a self-help group, a counsellor, or friend, that we begin to feel the healing effects of love. Indeed love is the most healing of our resources, and it takes several years of being so loved to get well and stay well. And then we can begin to love others in return.

A problem for many of us is that we often view love as a limited experience, such as "falling in love" or infatuation. In our recovery we learn that love is not simply a feeling. Rather it is an energy that is manifested by *a commitment and a will to extend oneself for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's total growth*, which includes physical, mental, emotional and spiritual dimensions. As we grow in recovery we begin to see that there are different kinds of love.

In the lower self, love is neediness, infatuation, possession, strong admiration. Many people become stuck at these lower levels or ways of experiencing love.

In healing we discover, work through and transcend to higher levels of love including caring through conflict, forgiveness, trust, unconditional empathy and acceptance. We gradually become open to the Love within each of us. Love is the ultimate healing in group therapy, counselling, and friendships. We no longer have to be afraid of love or to run away from it, because we know that it is inside us as the core and healing part of our Child Within. C L Whitfield 'Healing the Child Within' 1989 p133

**What is spirituality?**

I believe it has to do with our life-style. I believe that life is ever-unfolding and growing. So spirituality is about expansion and growth. It is about love, truth, goodness, beauty, giving and caring. Spirituality is about wholeness and completion. Spirituality is our ultimate human need. It pushes us to transcend ourselves, and to become grounded in the ultimate source of reality. Most call that source God. p9

**Serenity**

Serenity is characterized by “riding in harness”. With serenity, your life will become less problematic and more spontaneous. You will act without analysing everything and without ruminating. You will quit trying to figure it out. You will stop over-reacting; your hypervigilance will leave you. You will enjoy each and every moment as it comes along. You’ll quit believing in scarcity and give up your impulsiveness and instant gratification. You’ll accept the richness of life moment by moment. You’ll see what you see, bear what you hear, know what you want and need, and know that you can get your needs and wants met. Serenity changes life into a childlike vision where “meadow, stream and every common sight” take on a newness. Those who are serene, love the earth and all things. Life is its own splendid justification. p232

**Solitude**

Each of us is alone. This is the hard and fast boundary of our material condition. Aloneness is a fact of life. How we embrace our aloneness determines whether it will be toxic or nourishing. Toxic aloneness is fostered by toxic shame, it is a consequence of being self-ruptured. Nourishing aloneness is a fruit of blissful spirituality. It flows from the union with God, giving us immediate knowledge of our self. From such knowledge flows self-love, self-acceptance and self-valuing.

Because you love and value yourself, you want to spend time with you alone. This is called solitude. When you know the joys of solitude, you want more of it; you also want it for the ones you love. Instead of your old shame-based possessiveness, you will become a protector of your own and your beloved’s solitude. p233

**Service**

Service means caring for others and giving back what you have received. All of us who have come out of hiding need to bring the light to others. Carrying the message is done by modelling, not by moralizing. It is done by those who “Walk the walk as they talk the talk”. This means that there are no gurus. There are only those who have walked a little further down the path. Service and love for others flows directly from service and love for ourselves. To hand on to others what you yourself have contemplated. p234

**Prayer**

Prayer can powerfully influence events in the natural order. Prayer depends on a higher level of spirituality. Prayer depends on God as we understand God. In prayer we let go and let God. We give up control and allow a childlike trust and faith to emerge. p231

**Meditation - creating the silence**

Meditation aims at enhancing your “beingness”. When you are in touch with your beingness, you are one with everything that is. There is no longer any separation. In meditation we simply let ourselves be. The more we stop thinking and doing, the more we just are. In this meditation you can begin to experience pure moments of just being here. Meditation can lead you to this larger sense of aliveness. Such a sense of aliveness is not about anything we do; it’s about who we are. p228

**Intimacy**

Intimacy requires the ability to be vulnerable. To be intimate is to risk exposing our inner selves to each other; to bare our deepest feelings, desires and thoughts. To be intimate is to be the very ones we are, and to love and accept each other unconditionally. This requires self-confidence and courage. Such courage creates a new space in our relationship, a true intimus. That space is not yours or mine; it is ours. p208

**Source.** Material on this page comes from “Healing the Shame the Binds You” John Bradshaw.

**CONTENTS DETAIL**

<b>NEW ZEALAND ADOPTION HISTORY</b>	3	Telling your child	8
George Waterhouse adoption law founder	3	Talking about adoption issues	8
Adoption of Children Act 1881	3	Handling questions about birth parents	9
Social background to adoption	3	Fears - Fears about birth parents	9
Baby farming 1880-1920	3	Adoptive parent perspective	9
Humiliation of unmarried mothers	3	What adoption means to an adoptive parent	9
Adoption Act 1955	3	<b>ANGER</b>	9
Complete Break Adoption 1950-1980	3	Adopted persons rage	9
Bonding theory	3	The angry self	9
Myths of complete break adoption	4	Four elements of anger	10
Decline of adopt caused by social changes	4	AP's and adopted persons up the wall	10
1980-1997 Opening up adoption	4	Anger barrier to positive relationships	10
Adult Adoption Information Act 1985	4	Histrionic anger	10
Where are we now?	4	Aggressive feelings	10
Statistics Adult Adoption Information Act	5	Anger source and political expression	10
Adoptive Healing Movement	5	Search may trigger anger	87
Law reform	5	<b>ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR</b>	11
Maori issues	5	Rejection	11
Other issues we now face	5	What are adopted persons seeking	11
Where are we going?	5	Disproportionate referrals	11
Suggested amendments to adoption law	5	Adoption syndrome	11
<b>HISTORICAL SOCIAL CONTEXT</b>	5A	Behavior continuum	11
We did what we were told	5A	Dislike special occasions	12
We kept it a secret	5A	Acting out	12
We made up a story	5A	Lying and stealing	12
Exposing the myth	5A	Stealing and hoarding	12
A model of the myth	5A	Running away	12
Parents feel betrayed	5A	Drug, alcohol, food addictions	12
Changes in family communication	5B	Suicidal self	12
A broad spectrum of emotions	5B	Adopted persons who kill	12
More willingness to resolve conflict	5B	Extreme end antisocial continuum	12
More readiness to solve family problems	5B	<b>BIRTH PARENTS</b>	13
<b>ABANDONMENT</b>	6	Name terminology	13
Abandonment a core issue	6	Pressured decision making	13
Clinicians underestimate trauma	6	Birth mothers	13
Disappearance as abandonment	6	Birth fathers	13
Abandonment complex	6	Birth mother / birth father relationship	13
Abandonment adoption experience	6	Stages birth parents go through	13
Who is the abandoner	6	Initial period	13
Abandonment splitting phenomenon	6	Forgiveness	14
Love and abandonment	6	Shame	14
Abandonment reality	7	Guilt	14
Fear of abandonment not fantasy	7	Relief	14
Abandonment greatest fear	7	Anger	14
Trauma of abandonment and adoption	7	Sadness	14
<b>ADOPTIVE PARENTS</b>	7	Depression	14
Decision to adopt	7	Relationships	14
Adoption a permanent decision	7	Sexuality	14
Expectations of adoptive parents	7	Scars	14
Acknowledgment of differences	7	Role confusion	14
Biological v adoptive parenting	7	Pregnancy Crisis	14
Infertility	8	Loss	15
Integrating infertility and adoption	8	Pregnancy result of rape	15
Second choice	8	Treatment of birth mothers	15
Role as parent	8	Relinquishment	15
Bonding versus attachment	8	Post-relinquishment experience	15
Loving your child	8	Support then and now	15
Acknowledging birth parents	8	Future children	15
Birth mothers and birth fathers	8	Birth parents never lose birth role	15
Whose child?	8	Also See Reunion- Birth Parents	58-65
Honesty versus secrecy	8	Also See Search- Rejection	83-84
		<b>BONDING &amp; ATTACHMENT</b>	16
		Bonding and Attachment	16
		Genetic bonding	16

Complexity of adoption bonding	16	Fictional blood relationships	24
Difference- bonding and attachment	16	Conclusion	24
Baby specific needs	16	<b>FORGIVENESS</b>	24
Bonding programmed	16	Who do I forgive?	24
Stage specific bonding	17	Self	24
Effects of broken bond	17	Birth mother	24
Multi-sensory connection	17	Adoptive parents	24
Difficulty receiving hugs	17	Let resentments go	24
Attachment?	17	Accepting the past	25
<b>BOUNDARIES</b>	18	Giving up old tapes	25
Complex adopted persons boundaries	18	Takes time	25
<b>CONTROL</b>	18	Love released	25
Control aspects of adoption	18	Closing the wound	25
Mastery and control	18	Why we choose not to forgive	25
Control	18	Stories of forgiveness	25
Need for control- key issue	19	<b>GHOST KINGDOM</b>	26
Need to be in control at all times	19	Hereditary ghost	26
Control foil for abandonment	19	Ghost mothers and fathers	26
Desperate need of control	19	Adopted persons ghosts from the past	26
Battle for control	19	Ghosts of adoption and exorcism	26
Not in control of life- Life isn't fair!	19	Who are these ghosts?	26
Poor frustration or impulse control	19	The Ghost Kingdom	26
If they are compliant	20	<b>GRIEF</b>	27
Reluctant job applications	20	Definition	27
Dilemma pushing a child out	20	Grieving in adoption	27
Dual control	20	Every loss in adoption must be grieved	27
<b>DEFENCE MECHANISM</b>	20	Adoption created through loss	27
Needs trigger defense mechanisms	20	Grief issues for adopted persons	27
Basic defense mechanisms	20	Need to mourn	27
Repression	20	Unacknowledged grief	28
Disassociation	20	Impact of unconscious memories	28
Denial	20	Psychosomatic response to loss	28
Intellectualizing	21	Stages of Grief	28
Projecting	21	Shock	28
Disowning	21	Denial	28
Isolation	21	Anger	29
Avoidance	21	Bargaining	29
Reaction formation	21	Remorse	29
Numbing	21	Depression	29
<b>FANTASY</b>	21	Acceptance	29
Reality/Fantasy	21	Survival	29
Fantasy important aspect of life	21	Recovery	29
Fantasy in adoption triangle	21	Integration	29
The Family Romance	21	Stages of infant grief	29
Fantasy structure of adopted self	22	Protest	29
Positive fantasies	22	Despair	29
Negative fantasies	22	Also See LOSS	40-41
Mystery of reality	22	<b>GUILT SHAME &amp; BLAME</b>	30
Adolescent fantasies	22	Feelings of guilt and shame	30
Answer to fantasy is facts	22	Guilt and shame	30
Adoption fantasy starts about age eight	23	Justifiable guilt	30
Daydreaming	23	Neurotic guilt	30
Other parents not a fantasy	23	Shame different from guilt.	30
Fear of abandonment not a fantasy	23	Healing guilt and shame	30
<b>FICTION</b>	23	Guilt and shame for adopted persons	30
Definition	23	Guilt may be appropriate	30
Legal fiction	23	Shame at being a reject	31
Legal fiction became general fiction	23	Healing rests with the adopted person	31
Why use legal fiction?	23	Needing to blame	31
Difficulties of legal fiction	23	Shame and defectives	31
Fictional relations in non relative adoptions	24	Source of shame in adopted persons	31
False birth certificate	24	Overcoming feelings of shame	31

<b>IDENTITY</b>	32		
'Who am I?'	32	Being and not being	35
Centre of personality	32	Abandonment	35
Self includes several components	32	Luck of the Draw	35
Self esteem	32	Re-integration of Self-Search & Reunion	35
Search for self universal ongoing	32	Identity formation a life long process	35
All adopted persons have a divided self	32	Identity formation series of "I's"	35
Complete break legacy	32	Teenage identity formation	36
Complete break adoption	32	Resolving teenage identity crisis	36
Adult Adoption Information Act 1985	32	Identity achievement	36
Open adoption	32	Moratorium	36
When does Self begin?	32	Identity foreclosure	36
Baby merged with mother	32	Identity diffusion	36
Dual unity with mother	32	True self / False self	36
Separate Self	32	Identity issues	36
Dual identity of adopted persons	33	Lifelong impact of adoption	36
The Original Self	33		
Repression of original self	33	<b>INTIMACY</b>	37
Abandonment of original self	33	Factors that impede intimacy	37
Premature Self development	33	Difficulty with intimacy	37
The survival bind	33	Difficulty giving and receiving love	37
The Adoptive Self	34	The Impostor: fear of intimacy	37
Exclusive Adopted Self	34	Impostor identity	37
Artificial	34	Seeking mother in lover	38
Compliant	34	Love in the Ghost Kingdom	38
Avoids confrontation	34	Primal grief reaction	38
Feelings	34	Trust and intimacy	38
Denial	34	Distrust of the feminine	38
Perfect child	34	Difficulties in separating	38
Inner void	34	Distrusting the self	38
Protective walls	34	Loyalty - Divided loyalty	38
Reverse role model	34	Loneliness	39
Inclusive Adopted Self	34	Fear of homelessness	39
Self Identity Structure	34	Adopted persons as transients	39
Physical	34	Homelessness is abandonment	39
Genetic	34	Yearning for connection	39
Sexual	34	Loss of parents	39
Medical	34	Relationships	39
Social	34	Being alone	39
Cultural	34		
Psychic/religious	34	<b>LOSS</b>	40
Dual identity- two worlds	34	Adoption is created through loss	40
Two people	34	Effect of loss on adopted persons	40
Two sets of parents	34	Adopted person grieving for lost family	40
Two mothers	34	Loss affects whole adoption circle	41
Two fathers	34	Consequences of loss and repressed grief	41
Two names	34	Grandparent losses	41
Two birth certificates	34	Phantom children	41
Two family trees	34	Losses of whole triad	41
Two cultures	34	Consequences of failure to resolve loss	41
Two clans	34	Journey of loss resolution	41
Dualities of adoption	35	Also See GRIEF	27-29
Effects of impaired self identity	35		
Confusion	35	<b>MARRIAGE</b>	42
Anxiety	35	Adopted persons as parents	42
Detachment	35	Adopted persons fears	42
Lostness	35	Double bind	42
Emotions	35	First blood relation	42
Effects of dual identity	35	Authority and self-esteem	42
Alienation	35	Insecurity and distancing	42
Isolation	35	Sensitive to insecurity	42
Diffusion	35	Some decide not to have children	42
Dissociation	35	Abortion	42
Disavowal	35	Also See INTIMACY	37-39
Splitting	35		
Ambivalence	35		
Numbing	35		

**MYTHS**

Five myths of adoption 43  
 Adoption Myths 43  
 Adoption is laced with myths 43  
 Six basic adoption Myths 43  
 Demystify adoptive family 44  
 Acknowledge of difference 44  
 Myths re consents 44  
 BM myth of putting it behind you 44  
 Pandora's box myth 44  
 Myth adopted persons psycho-ceramics 44  
 Demythologising adoption 44

**NUMBING**

Another state of consciousness 45  
 Intrusion and constriction 45  
 Numb out 45

**REJECTION**

Rejection defined 45  
 Whole Triad experiences rejection 45  
 Fear of rejection 46  
 Rejecting others before they reject you 46  
 Rejection and work 46  
 Sensitivity to criticism 46  
 False self to avoid rejection 46  
 Natural fear 46  
 Neurotic fear 46  
 Neurotic fear of what might happen 46  
 Both chosen and rejected 47  
 Feeling unwanted 47  
 Self-understanding of rejection 47  
 Abandonment and Rejection 47  
 Pervasive rejection fears 47  
 Rejection 47  
 Fear of rejection getting hurt 47  
*Also see* Search rejection 63-64

**REUNION**

Changes life forever 48  
 Preparation 48  
 Adjusting 48  
 Some adopted persons wait to be found 48  
 Searching versus being found 48  
 Fear being found 48  
 Non-searchers fear being found 48  
 Reunion emotions 48  
 Search emotions flow into reunion 48  
 Difficult for adopted and birthmother 49  
 Range of reunions 49  
 Going Away Again 49  
 Walking on eggshells 49  
 Communication skills 49  
 Using "I" statements 49  
 Acknowledge feeling 49  
 Checking in 49  
 Adopted person response 49  
 Stages of reunion 49  
 Honeymoon period—infancy stage 49  
 Chaos revisited 49  
 Grief 50  
 Anger 50  
 Male difficulty with anger 50  
 Bastard 50  
 The bastard moment 50  
 Adopted person demeaned 50

Reclaiming lost emotions 50  
 Reclaiming lost experiences 50  
 Growing up fast 50  
 Clinging to birthmother 51  
 Denial 51  
 Fantasy meets reality 51  
 Demolishing BM fantasy 51  
 Regression 51  
 The 'let down' 51  
 Emotional overload 51  
 Breaking-down to reemerge 51  
 Stages of resolution 52  
     Refableizing the birthmother 52  
     Connection-Disconnection-Reconnection 52  
     Spouse resentment 52  
     Reconnecting siblings and grandparents 52  
     In limbo 52  
     Shuffling the stages 52  
 Navigating the reunion relationship 52  
 Post-reunion feelings 52  
 Reunion realities 52  
 Beyond the Triad 53  
 Closing the reunion relationship 53  
 Reunions demolish adopted person fantasy 53  
 Almost all applicants seek reunion 53

**ADOPTIVE PARENTS REUNION ISSUES**

Adoption triangle tensions 53  
 Impact on the adoptive family 53  
 Adoptive parents threatened 53  
 Threatened by search 54  
 AP adversarial thoughts re BM 54  
 Some adoptive parents don't think of the BM 54  
 Some friend of APs may object to reunion 54  
 Denial exposed 54  
 Infertility a key issue 54  
 Fear of losing the child 54  
 Fear of losing the adopted person 54  
 New relationship a threat 55  
 Adoptive parents may be in disagreement 55  
 Some accept and join in 55  
 Fear of losing the parents 55  
 Between two mothers 55  
 Littered with regrets 55  
 Each mother threatened by the other 55  
 The two mothers: fights and rituals 55  
 Testing alternate reality 55  
 First meetings often difficult 56  
 First meetings often superficial and formal 56  
 Adoptive parents sidelined 56  
 First meeting of two mothers not easy 56  
 A mother's gift 56  
 Reunion etiquette 56  
 Weddings 56  
 Grandchildren 56  
 Mother's Day 56  
 Reclaiming the adoptive parents 56  
 Fear of hurting adoptive parents 57  
 Adoptive parents fears 57  
 Post-reunion a frightening unknown. 57  
 Research reassuring 57  
 Adoptive parents quest for security 57  
 Learning of the birthmothers pain 57  
 Acknowledgment of difference 57  
 Adoption not necessarily better or worse 57  
 Adoptive parents have more difficult task 58  
 Adoption reunions once a non issue 58

<b>BIRTH MOTHER REUNION ISSUES</b>	58	No such thing as a bad reunion?	66
Not easy for birth mothers to search	58	Reunion as a closure	66
Birth mother search triggers	58	Post-Reunion turbulence	66
Birth mothers who awaken to their grief	58	Emotional indigestion 'roller coaster'	66
Birth mother's joy bittersweet	58	Ricochets of heights of joy and despair	66
Birth mother's search confusion	58	Being thrust back into the past	66
Birthmother response	58	Reworking the past	67
The rejected self	58	Volatility of reunion- a precarious perch	67
BM emotionally aborts child	59	How comfortable can you be?	67
Adopted person aborted from clan	59	Absence of the usual props	67
Does BM have right to shut AP out?	59	Comfortableness	67
Reconciling two mothers	59	Factors that affect the post-reunion course	67
Who is the real mother?	59	Search mechanism pattern	67
Triggers	60	Post-union firsts	67
Where was she?	60	There are also the emotional firsts	68
When BM contacts young adopted child	60	Strangers no more	68
Birth mother source of BF information	60	Two periods in post-reunion	68
Why Birthmothers seek Reunions	60	Don't shove under carpet	68
Birthmother Realities	60	Life long process for all	68
Most stressful unresolved event	60	Patterns of Post-Reunion Experience	68
Time did deminish the pain	60	Uncharted course	68
Loss and failure to grieve	60	Reunions with teenagers.	68
Suffered Ailments	61	Reunions with persons in their twenties	68
Counseling	61	Reunions with mid-age adults.	68
Forgiveness and abandonment	61	Reunions with daughters versus sons	68
Not knowing	61	Feelings of familial identification	69
What is the child thinking	61	A member of two families	69
Effect on relationships	61	The pleasure-pain ratio overall	69
Wanting to Connect	61	Extremely happy situations.	69
Need for information	61	Happy in spite of problems	69
Process birth mothers go through	61	Mainly uncomfortable situations	69
Birth mother advice	61		
 		<b>THE FIRST MEETING</b>	70
<b>BIRTH FATHER REUNION ISSUES</b>	62	Unique high experience	70
Wide range of birthfather situations	62	Pre-meeting period	70
Father roles	62	Fears of reunion	70
Birthfathers not in decision making	62	Location	70
Birthfathers are in deeper closets	62	Third parties?	70
Birthfathers cultural and emotional bias	62	First meeting never comfortable	70
How do I know the child is mine?	63	Eyeing each other	70
Birth father double abandoner	63	Conversation	70
Adopted person has choices—	63	Duration	70
Fathers and daughters	63	What future	70
Fathers and sons	63	Plans for second meeting	70
Adopted persons secondary search	63		
Provides second chance	63	<b>HOW POST-REUNION DEVELOPS</b>	71
Touchy subject— asking BM about BF	63	First meeting omen	71
When birth parents marry each other	64	Whats going on in your life	71
Birthfathers normally gone own way	64	Begins with disjointed relationships	71
Birthfathers response to contact	64	Stranger who's not a stranger	71
Birth parents have shared history	64	Making reconnection	71
Birthmother responses to BF	64	Frequent, intense contact	71
When birthfather has died	64	Difficult good-byes	71
Social changes re fatherhood	65	Rebonding feeling	71
Birth father survey	65	Connect but not merge	71
Birth fathers breaking silence	65	The honeymoon and after	71
Working with birthfathers	65	Both on best behaviour	71
CYPS Local Placements Manual 1995	65	End of honeymoon	71
Rights of birthfather	65	Integrate realities- give up fantasies	72
Search for birthfathers	65	Negative feelings and fights	72
		Anger and fear	72
<b>POST REUNION</b>	66	Testing	72
Post-Reunion Basics	66	Retreat and 'back offs'	72
Search becomes an entity in itself	66	Therapeutic work process	72
No one wants to be rejected	66		
Rejection by BM and acceptance by others	66		
No such thing as complete rejection	66		

<b>POST-REUNION THEMES</b>	73	Searching adopted persons are in peril	81
Genetics at a glance	73	Waiting to be found	81
Genetic bridge of commonality	73	Treatment of those who search	81
Birthmothers perceptions	73	Internal searching	81
Importance of photographs	73	External searching	81
Delights of similarity	73	Search is empowering	81
Emotional commonality	73	The power of searching	81
Processing information:	73	Intrusion	81
Filling the information vacuum	73	Intuition	81
Can't fix the past	73	Obsessiveness of searching	82
Birthmothers cop more unpleasant truths	74	Pinocchio syndrome	82
Information-processing task	74	The crossroads	82
Adopted persons info catch-up	74	Three roads intersect.	82
Benefits to adopted persons	74	Crossing over	82
Birthmother results	74	Adoptive parents and the search	82
Synchronicities	74	Search and support groups	82
Should I Call You Mother?	74	Search Rejection	83
		Initial rejection <> agreement to meet	83
<b>POST REUNION BM NETWORK</b>	74	Results of search rejection	83
Birth family	75	Why birth mothers reject	83
Husbands	75	Mothers who carry shame	83
Birth Grandparents	75	Mothers fear letting secret out	83
Extended family	75	Fear is the key element	83
Friends	75	Some women never told parents	83
		What to do if rejection occurs	83
<b>SEARCH</b>	77	Letter	83
The journey toward your unknown parents and your unknown self.	77	Phone	83
Normality of searching	77	Time	83
A universal quest	77	Siblings	83
Call to search	77	Perspective	83
The hero's journey	77	Share	83
Crossing the threshold	77	Right to demand a relationship?	83
What are you searching for?	77	Healing of search rejection	84
Great expectations	77	Search End	84
Wanting to find the truth	77	Finding dead ends is very hard.	84
The right to know	78	Death of a dream	84
Knowing versus not knowing	78	Moving toward resolution	84
Filling in the blanks	78	Dead end search	84
Synchronicity	78	When to give up searching?	84
Feeling the connection	78	Death at the end of a search	84
Retrieving lost connection	78	Is it worth it?	84
Evidence of cellular knowledge	78	Some encounter angry birth mothers	85
Regressed self	78	Therapeutic value of making contact	85
Medical information	78	Public acceptance of search in NZ	85
When to Start	79	Dual search	85
Deciding to search	79	Communicating with adoptive parents--	85
Internal timing	79	Crossing a rickety bridge	85
Where to Start	79	Perils of the rickety bridge	85
Where to start	79	Search as therapy	86
Teenage Searchers	79	Why some don't search	86
Adopted adolescents	79	Validation searchers and non searching	86
Search issues for teens and families	79	Is there a right time to search?	86
Involve supportive, objective individual	79	Parental response to searching	86
Talk about the stages of the search	79	Making the search decision	86
Different search levels	79	Emotional roller coaster	87
Parental help	79	Why females search more than males	87
Mid Life Searchers	80	Search may trigger anger	87
Five challenges for 40s- 50s	80	Adopted persons drive to search	87
Reasons why some wait to search	80	<b>SECRECY</b>	88
Concerns for mid-life searchers	80	Conspiracy of silence	88
Impediments to search	80	Secrecy disavows reality	88
Not wanting to be found	80	Adoptive family's secret motors	88
Fears	80	Family secrets	88
Fear of knowing	80	Family conspiracy	88
Non-searchers	80	Family secrets kept from adopted person	88
The peril	81		

Skeletons in the closet	88	<b>TRAUMA</b>	98
The secret in today's adoptive family	89	Psychic trauma	98
Secrecy disrupts emotional development	89	Accepting traumatic dimension	98
Background to conspiracy of secrecy	89	Four Traumas Create Divided Self	98
Original purpose of legal secrecy	89	Cumulative adoption trauma	98
Adoptive secrecy unique in law	89	Misunderstanding adoption trauma	98
Secrecy hides ambivalence and shame	89	Clothier 1940	98
Agents of secrecy know their mother	89	Infant splitting	99
When secrecy breaks in adulthood	89	The survival bind	99
Out into the wilderness	90	Birth mother trauma	99
Hope for resolution	90	Suppressed trauma and depression	99
Adopted persons cant stand secrecy	90	Post-traumatic stress disorder	99
Truth and deception	90	Other signs of trauma	99
Privacy in adoption	90	Adopted persons have no pre-traumatic self	99
Erection of the secrecy barriers	90	Self identity trauma	99
Secrecy barriers coming down	90		
Consequences of secrecy for birthmothers	91	<b>TRUST</b>	100
Finding out as an adult	91	Basic trust a ground of our being	100
Secrecy versus privacy	91	Impaired trust	100
		Source of impaired trust	100
<b>SEXUALITY</b>	92	Effects of trust impairment	100
Focus on sex	92	Hyper-vigilance	100
Homosexual adopted persons	92	Fear of homelessness	100
Genetic plus adoption impact	92	Trust and intimacy	100
Lesbian adopted persons	92	Difficulty giving and receiving love	100
Male homosexual adopted persons	92	Distrusting self	100
Sexual origin fantasy	92	Opt-outs	100
Genetic Sexual attraction	93	Healing options—	100
Taboo	93	Creating a climate of trust	100
How do we explain it?	93	Trust relationships	100
Siblings	93	Risking	101
Battering down the hatches	93	Trust pivots on acceptance or rejection	101
Is it incest?	93	Trust includes feelings	101
Questions	93	Trust empathy	101
Defensive strategies	93	Trust a two-way street	101
Repeating the pattern	94	Trust requires truth	101
Genetic sexual attraction in NZ	94	Trust with your eyes open	101
Reunion sexual attraction	94	Support group risk and trusting	101
Current hypotheses	94	Distrust behaviour	101
Physical bonding theory	94	Trustful behaviour	101
Emotional intimacy theory	95	Two basic elements in trust building	101
Mirroring theory	95	To engage in trust I need to accept—	101
		Impaired trust	101
<b>SIBLINGS</b>	95	Rejection and basic trust	101
Can be significant as finding a parent	95	Trust-birth link; Lack of trust	101
Desire to connect with siblings	95		
Sibling pre-adoptive memories	95	<b>VICTIM</b>	102
Not reunions but meeting for first time	95	Blaming the victim	102
Sibling reunions are less complicated	96	Adopted person as victim	102
BMs dread of telling siblings	96	Shunning victim role	102
BMs never anticipate 'no big deal'	96	Victimization	102
BMs stay on the side lines	96	Operating out of victim stage	102
Sibling relationships less problematic	96	Victim auto responses	102
Sensitivity and awkwardness	96	Victimization damages self-esteem	102
Many birth siblings don't understand adopt	96	Letting go the hurt	102
Older siblings more perceptive	96	Non-victim behaviors	103
Bringing in new histories	96	Breaking the victim cycle	103
Challenge to household tranquility	96	Empathy not sympathy	104
Upsets pecking order	97	Victimization the in thing	104
Range of relationships	97	Playing the victim role	104
Determining the new relationship	97	Most victims do recover	104
Siblings by nurture	97	What survivors have in common	104
Adoptive sibling may split roles	97	Being ready to let anger go	104
Inter sibling reactions to searching	97	Steps in letting go	104
Sexual issues	97	Successful therapeutic programs	104
Equality issue	97		
Changing boundaries	97		
Dramatic shift in birth order	97		

**CONTENTS**

<b>WHOLENESS</b>	105
Realigning the Self	105
Process of Self Integration	105
How can Adopted Persons Heal?	105
Search	105
Therapy	105
Becoming healers	106
Join Adoption Support Group	106
Reclaiming one's name	106
Seeing healing in those around you	106
Staying in process	106
Accepting our existential fate	106
The eternal search	106
Survivors and Thrivers	107
Help, Healing and Support	107
Acknowledge adoption is an issue	107
Validation of feelings	107
Support and connection	107
Types of healing	107
Respect for other triad members	107
Growth	107
Seeking help	107
Choosing a Therapist	107
Therapy for your adopted child	107
Humor?	108
Adaptability of adopted persons	108
Healing Support groups	108
Empowering support groups	108
Pain is a very real part of adoption	108
Acknowledging pain	108
Understanding pain	108
Dualities of Adoption	108
Spirituality	109
Innate sense and spirituality	109
Role of spirituality	109
Beginning to define spirituality	109
The Spiritual Bond	109
Love and unconditional love	109
What is spirituality?	110
Serenity	110
Solitude	110
Services	110
Prayer	110
Meditation- creating the silence	110
Intimacy	110

---

## **Statistics Adult Adoption Information Act 1985**

### **Applications to 30th April 2000**

#### *Adult adopted persons applications*

Male = 10,853      Female = 16,873      Total = 27,726

#### *Birth parent applications*

BFather = 785      BMothers = 6,820      Total = 7,605

Total Applicants = **35,331**

### **Adult adopted persons knowledge of origins at 2000**

Adult adopted persons population 1999	92,084
Approx 50% know origins without 1985 Act	46,042
Adult adopted persons not knowing origins approx 50%	45,042
Applications Adult adopted persons or BP per 1985 Act	35,331
Deduct 10% applicants who applied but already had identifying information -3533	31798
Deduct 31798 from 46042 balance not knowing origins	14244

### **Adult adopted persons Population 2000**

Have no identifying information	14,244 = 15.5%
Have identifying information	77,840 = 84.5%
Total adult adopted persons at 1995	92,084 = 100.0%

### **Active Vetos at 30th April 2000**

Vetos placed by Adult Adopted persons	223
Vetos placed by Birth parents	785
Total active vetos	1008

