

A high-angle photograph of a wooden suspension bridge crossing a river. The bridge's deck is made of parallel wooden planks, and its structure is supported by a network of dark ropes and cables. The river below is a vibrant greenish-blue, with white foam from rapids visible. The far bank is a rocky, light-colored gravel bar. The overall scene is rugged and natural.

The Adoption Constellation

September 2010 volume 1, issue 1

The Adoption Constellation

The Adoption Constellation is a publication of Adoption Mosaic



Honoring our Histories,
Celebrating our Lives

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Anne Sibley O'Brien (AnneSibleyOBrien.com) is a children's book writer and illustrator who grew up in South Korea. She is the mother of a grown son by birth and a grown daughter by adoption from Korea. She writes about race, culture and children's books on her blog, "Coloring Between the Lines."

Jennifer Lauck is the author of *Blackbird* (Pocket Books, 2000), *Skill Waters* (Pocket Books, 2001), & *Show Me the Way* (Atria, 2003). The essay *Real Simple* is an excerpt from her current memoir *Found* scheduled for release in March of 2011. Jennifer lives in Portland, Oregon, with her two children.



contributors

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Amy Drew is a member of Adoption Mosaic's program committee and is a transracial adoptive parent. She has a background in public relations, communications, and marketing. Amy is currently working on a young adult novel and a few children's stories. Amy blogs at <http://writergirlpdx.blogspot.com/>



Livia is a writer who has been active in the adoption community for several years. She currently helps Adoption Mosaic reach out to the community through social media and other projects. She's energized by her interviews with constellation members because she believes that hearing others' stories can help us to better understand our own. She was adopted from Portugal at the age of four and a half. Livia has been reunited with her original family since 2009.



The Adoption Constellation

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What is the adoption constellation?

At the core, adoption is about children. However it is also about their families before adoption and their families after adoption. Adoption is about adult adoptees, extended families, partners and support people. It's about a community of professionals. Adoption Mosaic was created to serve this large mosaic and has long ago replaced the term "adoption triad" with the more inclusive term the "adoption constellation." The adoption community extends much further than the triad of birth parents, adoptees, and adoptive parents and we believe the term adoption constellation reflects this.

At Adoption Mosaic, when we first imagined creating a magazine, our ambition was to create a magazine that was different than any other adoption-focused magazine. But it soon became apparent that we didn't just want to *be* different. We wanted to *make a difference*.

One needs only to take a cursory look at the adoption community and blogosphere (in many ways a microcosm of the broader adoption community) to see how polarized we have become. Many constellation members tend to stay in their own corners with tenuous, if any, bridges between them. The purpose of Adoption Mosaic's magazine *The Adoption Constellation* is to help build and support these bridges, with the ultimate goal of improving our adoption experiences.

As the Creative Director and Editor of *The Adoption Constellation*, it is my hope that each adoption constellation member will initially read our magazine because they feel, on some level, that it speaks to them, and then, by default, will be exposed to other articles and viewpoints they may not have been exposed to had they not picked up a copy of *The Adoption Constellation*.

A year ago, a new acquaintance of mine, an adoptive parent who has since become a respected friend and colleague, asked me, "What is this adoption constellation you've spoken of, and how do I become a part of it? It sounds wonderful." It is indeed wonderful. And joyously rich and complex, and, at times, heartbreakingly isolating and lonely. This mosaic of extremes, and everything in between, makes up the heart of Adoption Mosaic, and the essence of *The Adoption Constellation*.

In this pioneer issue of *The Adoption Constellation*, readers will be introduced to our three columnists Maureen, Shelise and Catherine, each writing from their perspective as a birth mother, adopted person, and adoptive mother. In "Professionally Speaking," two experts in the field of adoption address the same adoption issue. This is one of my favorite features of the magazine, not just because we get the opportunity to benefit from two different perspectives, but because it also illustrates how there is never only one right answer when it comes to adoption and adoption issues. I'm so proud to have Dr. John Raible and Dr. Joyce Maguire Pavao participating in this first issue as I know I am not alone in having a tremendous amount of respect and admiration for them both.

We have a beautiful essay from New York Times best-selling author Jennifer Lauck's forthcoming book *Found*, an interview with adoption pioneer Dr. Richard Boas, and back by popular demand, Adoption Mosaic Executive Director, Astrid Dabbeni will now take your questions in her much loved column "Ask Astrid." Also, throughout the magazine you will find the artwork of Kellie Marian Hill and Anne Sibley O'Brian, who have both graciously allowed us to include their work.

We begin the magazine with the feature "Multifacets" where we examine adoption issues from various angles. Sometimes it takes looking at alternate perspectives to be able to recognize the truth in both of them.

I want to thank all the amazing people who have contributed to *The Adoption Constellation*. It has been an honor to be amongst such talent; and to our readers, I hope you enjoy this magazine as much as I have enjoyed being a part of creating it.

Sincerely,



Tara Kim
Creative Director and Editor

multifacets

Seeing different viewpoints allows us to recognize the truth in them all

Changing Adopted Children's Birth Names

The original name is one of the few pieces of original identity many adoptees have. Changing it should not be taken lightly. Changing an adoptee's birth name could potentially be severing his/her only connection to her birth parents and/or birth culture/heritage.

Giving a child a beloved family name is a way of integrating them into the adoptive family's heritage in a meaningful way. Sometimes a child's original name is so unusual, it may create unnecessary barriers to opportunities and success.

The negative or positive connotation of the term "birth mother" is conceptual rather than intrinsic and thus "in the eye of the beholder."

The Adoption Lexicon "birth mother"

The term "birth mother" relegates the original mother to one point in time; pregnancy and birth. This may not be accurate in the case of reunited families or people who feel the term should include a broader relationship. Many believe the term "birth mother" equates "breeder."

The term "birth mother" is a neutral and honest term where as other possible terms such as "natural mother" are emotionally charged. The term "birth mother" has become standard use in the adoption community.

Open Adoption

Children in open adoptions are able to have answers to their questions about the circumstances surrounding their adoption. They have access to their heritage and ancestry, medical histories, and potentially an extended biological family. Adoptees in open adoptions grow up knowing much of the truth of their origins, without the unanswered questions many people in closed adoptions have to live with.

There is very little regulation of open adoptions, and contracts are difficult to enforce. When contracts are breached, parties on either side have little recourse without spending a fortune on legal fees. Sometimes the promise of open adoption is used as a carrot to encourage mothers to relinquish children they may otherwise have chosen to parent.

Humanizing Humanity

"Mom, please, please, make Dad change his mind. Please let me come home with my baby, just until I find a place of my own. I know I agreed to the adoption, but I just can't give her away. She is so beautiful. I need to keep her Mom. Please help me"

My father didn't change his mind. My mother was quietly powerless. I was not welcome to come home with my first born daughter. My social worker told me if I kept her, I would have to put her in foster care anyway, because I was going to have to find a job and wouldn't be able to look after her. Plus it would be a devastating disappointment to the family who planned to adopt my baby. I could think of no one to turn to. The biological father was touring Europe with friends and made it quite clear I was not in his future.

After a traumatic hospital birth, the physical pain my body experienced was soul numbing. A head crushing migraine near blinded me from an epidural overdose. Heat searing pain from a deep episiotomy tortured every movement, and my swollen breasts throbbed within the tightly bound cloth meant to assist in 'drying me up.' A memory remains vivid. Standing beside the hospital bed, attempting to unwrap and replace the milk drenched cloth around my swollen breasts, crying with pain and utter despair. Unwrapped, my milk let down, my uterus contracted, and tears, milk and blood pooled at my feet. No one was there. Something in me broke.

Against the advice of the professionals, I held my baby to give her a bottle for the five days I spent in the hospital. Those final moments looking into her little eyes, I saw a soul already bewildered. She seemed far away. Withdrawn into a place I couldn't reach. Both of us joyless, already sensing the inevitable. I was looking into my own eyes. I could only say goodbye, to both of us, and pray that there was a loving God in the universe that would allow me to meet my daughter again some day. Today is her forty-first birthday. We met again eighteen years ago. Thank you, God. Thank you, Life. Thank you, Love.

In Adoption Mosaic's summer newsletter, Shelley Dalmau shared an interesting point in



As a writer, researcher, organic gardener, and community activist, Maureen has spent the last forty years contributing to the humanizing of humanity. Upon the foundation of a strong marriage, a large extended family and a belief in the sacred purpose of the human soul, she continues to plant seeds of hope for our collective future

her essay "Thoughts on the Birth mother Panel Discussion." She wrote: "[during the panel] these women shared themselves. In doing so, they also humanized birth mothers, something that society and even the adoption community really struggle to do."

Shelley's observation shook me and triggered the hugeness of the multi-layered issues surrounding relinquishment and adoption from both spiritual and political perspectives. Giving up my first born daughter was a dehumanizing and soul tearing trauma. The ignoring of that trauma by both family and professionals

involved at the time made me question what human family even meant. I would like to suggest though, that all parties in the adoption constellation are dehumanized, as has become our entire society by two world wars and countless other regional wars in the last 100 years

During my last couple of months in the unwed mother's home, I read, *Man's Search for Meaning*, written by, Viktor E. Frankl who had endured years of unspeakable horror in the Nazi

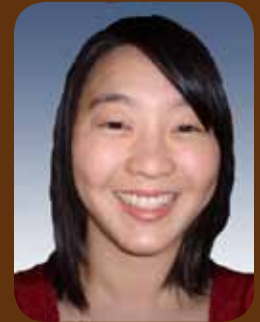
death camps. This book had a big impact on my seventeen year old soul searching. His story, his courage and vision, lifted my heart as I considered what meaning might be found in my own overwhelming loss

This book, among many, inspired me to spend the last four decades researching these ultimate questions. What is the quality or condition among our human species that supports or tolerates the surrender of individual children outside their biological kin or the relinquishment of one generation after the next to the killing fields of war? At what point did we individually and collectively lose our sense of the sacredness of all life? How might we become re-humanized?

My first born daughter asked me a couple of years ago why I had not become more involved in education and advocacy around adoption issues, particularly since I had been active in a number of other social causes. I remember no honest answer at the time, but I think the truth is I was just too afraid to say or write about what I really thought. Global peace, the end of world hunger and environmental degradation seemed much safer and popular causes. The raw and unhealed grief in me at the loss of my first born and my parents was just too painful and dangerous to come close to. After their decision, my parents never felt to me like I thought parents are supposed to feel—somewhere safe. Of course, I know they felt they had both my baby and my best interests at heart, but a fundamental trust was broken for each of us, and a sacred gift was lost from our family.

To humanize, means to see the whole picture, the full canvas, landscape, and soulscape of a human life, to see the wholeness and holiness within each human soul and every human family. Let's not stop with humanizing birth mothers. Let us move toward humanizing our species, and practicing love, not war. □

Necessity Not Luxury



Shelise is a Korean adoptee who was raised on a farm in southern Minnesota with three siblings who were not adopted. She is Adoption Mosaic's office administrator. Shelise loves the safe and open learning environment Adoption Mosaic creates and is especially interested in how to make lasting and meaningful connections among adoptees of all ages.

I am deeply honored to have the opportunity to be a regular contributor to *The Adoption Constellation*. Adoption Mosaic is many things to me, but I most appreciate it for being a champion and outlet for a diverse range of voices in the community, including mine.

My name is Shelise. I am a Korean adoptee. According to my adoption records, I was relinquished by a young, unmarried woman at birth. After giving birth to me, she requested I be adopted. She left me at the hospital. I was turned over to an adoption agency and then placed in foster care. I flew to the States with a bunch of other Korean adoptees when I was 7-months-old to live with my family in rural Minnesota. My parents are white, as are my three siblings who are my parents' biological children. Short story, I grew up with a lot of white people who loved me a lot.

I believe we adoptees are the best support for each other to help see each other through those tough times. Who better to help you carry a burden than someone who is familiar with the load you bear?

I also work at Adoption Mosaic. This means I am fortunate to have the chance to interact with many people in the adoption constellation, including adult adoptees. I realize now that I was lucky that I knew and socialized with a few other Korean adoptees in my childhood. However, we never talked about being adopted. In hindsight, I feel the lack of conversation was not due to lack of feelings about being an

adoptee, but because we didn't have the tools or the language or the freedom (real or imagined) to talk about our feelings. Being an adoptee comes with a lot of intense emotions, much of them buried in our subconscious, but when pieces of the emotions surface, they can be a heavy burden to bear and I believe we adoptees are the best support to help see each other through those tough times. Who better to help you carry a burden than someone who is familiar with the load you bear?

I also believe that having access to an adoptee community is a necessary component to every adult adoptee's life. We have spent so much of our lives isolated from one another or living in *fear* of one another! We must have a place where our "issues" are just normal; where no explanation is needed; where "I know" really means "I *know*." And yet, when we meet fellow adoptees and have a conversation about how hard it was to not be white like our families, how hard it is to not be Korean or Chinese or Latina like others who were not adopted, we view those encounters as luxuries; as novelties in which we should only indulge occasionally. This is an injustice to the well-being of our souls.

Adult adoptees deserve each other in the best possible meaning of those words. We deserve to have support, we deserve to have a voice, and we deserve to have adoption reflect our experiences as children and our thoughts on those experiences as adults. I have personally felt the power and healing of having a steady connection to other adult adoptees and it's a feeling of belonging, relief, joy, unity and love that every adoptee deserves to have. As adoptees, we may have come to this place by ourselves, but we can travel through this place together.

I hope that you read these words and are inspired to seek out someone like yourself. I hope that you see in these words a reflection you have secretly longed for. I hope that these six-hundred words help you realize that you are not alone and that we are looking for each other, because you are not a luxury; you are a necessity. □

It's All About The Hair

Amy K Drew

Like it or not, our children are a reflection of us. Naturally, we want that reflection to be positive regarding how a child behaves and treats others. But a child's appearance—or how their appearance reflects on us as parents—isn't something most people spend a lot of time thinking or worrying about. That is unless you're a transracial adoptive parent, and then appearance seems to move to the top of the list whether we want it to or not. For me, that means hair care.

There is a significant and deeply-rooted tradition behind hair care in the African culture. Braiding, and the like, was a tradition passed down from generation to generation, from people of Africa through their descendants in America. It was—and still is for many—a bonding time between grandparents, parents, and children. The cultural and historical significance should not be lost or ignored, and we should honor our child's culture. But we need to also keep it in perspective: If the hair is healthy, groomed and cared for, and the child is happy, well, we're doing okay and we can relax a little.

Our daughter is African American and my husband and I are white. For the most part, we have received positive comments from people regarding her hair, though, on more than one occasion, older African American women have stopped me to “suggest” my daughter's hair is not properly cared for. I say “older” because I've learned age has something to do with it, as younger African American women seem to love my daughter's hair. It is my assumption (right or wrong) that the women who have approached me with negative comments make the assumption that because I am white I don't know how to “do” my daughter's hair. My daughter has beautiful curly hair that she prefers to wear out (in other words, not braided, but free with a headband or in “puffs”).

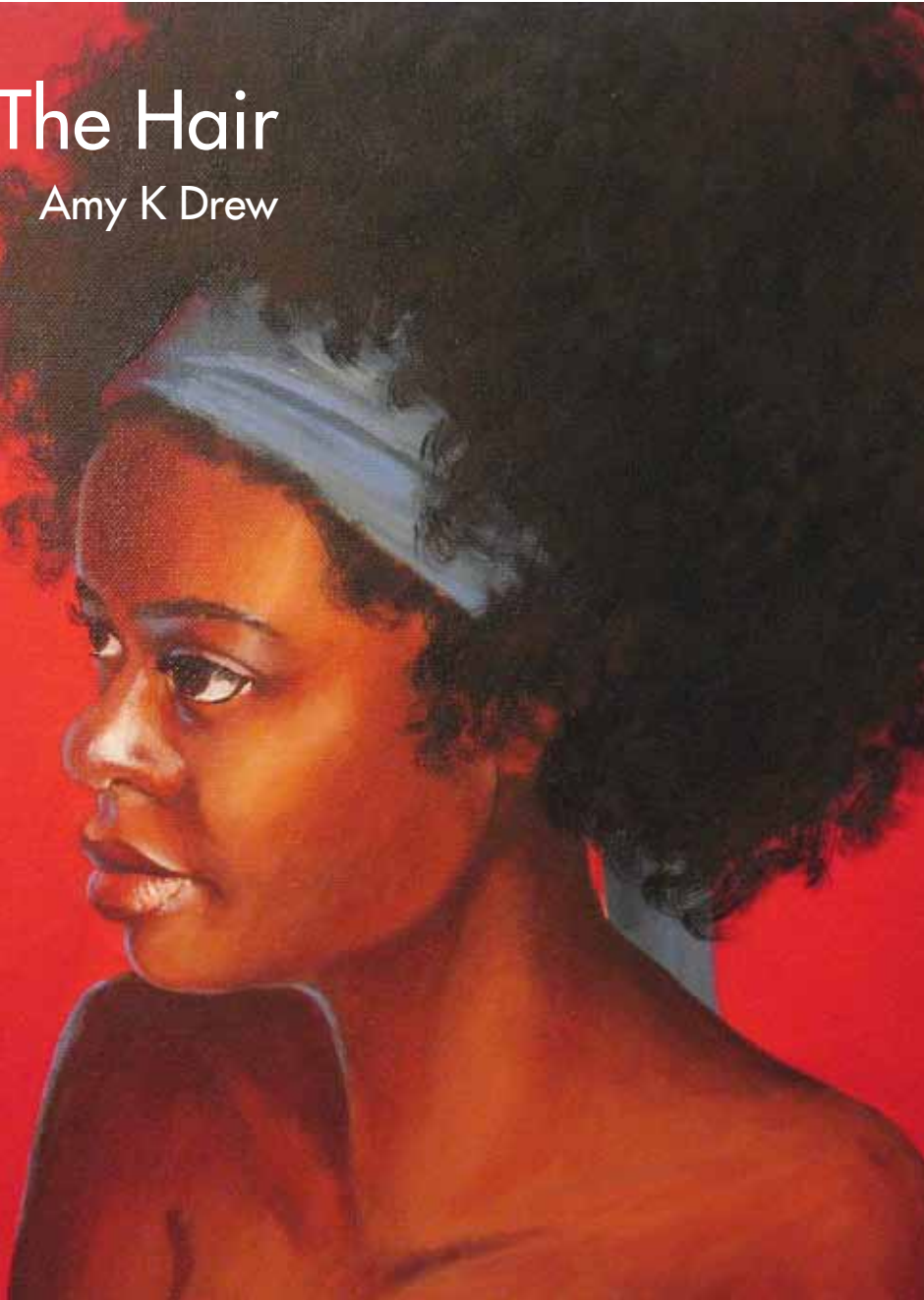
Most of the comments I've received

about my daughter's appearance are positive and helpful in nature, for which I am appreciative. In beauty supply shops (specializing in hair care products for African American women) women will approach me with all kinds of advice, sometimes speaking slower and louder, assuming I don't speak the hair care language. Though when they examine Ava's hair up close, they realize I do know how to care for her hair and I often get compliments, which makes me proud.

Nobody likes to be judged by their appearance. But the truth is, adoptive parents—especially transracially adoptive parents—are often held to a different standard. Not to say that same-race parents don't care whether or not their child's hair is combed and styled. But transracial adoptive parents are judged a little differently than others.

I have heard other adoptive parents confess they also feel they are scrutinized just a wee bit harsher than non-adoptive parents.

We will be watched, judged, and scrutinized. Not because anyone wants to see us fail, but because we are different, in a good way I believe. Yes, we may have to continually prove we're doing right by our children when it comes to cultural and ethnic differences. And yes, someone will always have something to say about something we aren't, or shouldn't be doing. However, I embrace the challenge, and look forward to exploring more about what it means to be a transracial family. □





Although adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents are closely connected under the umbrella of the adoption community, they often stand separate from one another. Would it benefit the community as a whole to bring these groups closer together? If so, what measures could be taken to do so?



Dr. John Raible has been educating audiences about transracial adoption for more than thirty years. Many people know him from the films “Struggle for Identity” and “A Conversation 10 Years Later.” As an adult adoptee and adoptive parent, John blends his personal experiences with the latest research literature and best practices in child welfare to deliver a timely and provocative perspective on issues facing transracial families in the 21st century. He blogs at <http://johnraible.wordpress.com/>.

Dr. Joyce Maguire Pavao is Founder and CEO of Center For Family Connections (CFFC) in Cambridge, MA. She is an adjunct faculty member at Harvard Medical School. Dr. Pavao has developed models for treatment and training using her systemic, intergenerational, developmental framework and her “brief-long-term therapy” model. She has done extensive training and consultation, both nationally and internationally, on issues in adoption and complex families and child welfare. Dr. Pavao is an adopted person and author of *The Family of Adoption*, Beacon Press 1998 and 2005.

While I support the notion of bringing the adoption community closer together in principle, I think it is quite difficult to do this at the present time, at least, in any meaningful way. I have written elsewhere about what needs to happen if we are serious about fixing what many of us view as the broken system of adoption. Namely, we have to level the playing field so that the voices of adoptive parents (APs) are not so dominant. Only when we do this can the voices and perspectives of birth family members and adoptees be elevated and respected.

I think the skewed relationships between the various members of the adoption community became so out of whack when adoption began to be seen as a service to parents, rather than to the children in need of adoption. Since parents have “problems” that they are attempting to resolve through adoption—e.g., infertility issues or unwanted pregnancies—the focus of agencies and adoption

professionals was to cater to the desires and needs of APs and birth parents. In this way, they forgot to keep the needs of children front and center. Because adults typically do not view the young as having any sense of autonomy or agency, younger voices were silenced and children became commoditized. Infantilization of adoptees continues, as if we are never allowed to grow up and speak for ourselves.

I am hopeful that balance can be restored, especially since more and more adult adoptees are speaking and writing about their experience and helping to create a new agenda for the adoption community. The people with the most power will be forced to share. The loudest voices will have to pause long enough to listen to the voices that we have not heard from so much until recently. This is a time of rebalancing and empowerment. It is an exciting time to be active in this growing community. □

Back when I started working in the community in the 1970s, groups were segmented into adoptee groups/birth parent groups/adoptive parent groups. Groups were also segmented in terms of private adoptions/public child welfare/international/ foster care/kinship/guardianship/ reproductive technologies (then primarily sperm donor). Each of these things was completely separate and distinct.

In retrospect, I think since so many people had no voice until then, it was legitimate and good to have a time to process and talk with others who had shared similar experiences.

Eventually I started doing mixed groups for all kinds of adopted people, not just for people who had been involved in traditional “stranger adoption” (as opposed to kinship adoption), as well as mixed groups for anyone in the adoption world. One of the reasons that PACT (Pre/Post Adoption Consulting Team) became the Center For Family Connections (CFFC) is because “stranger adoption” isn’t our only focus.

While CFFC still does work on issues that pertain to what’s traditionally thought of as adoption and there is still much need for reform in that area, we also believe there is much work to be done in what’s

called “emotional adoption”—that is, families formed by alternative reproductive technologies, children and families in foster care, kinship, and step-parenting. Though these are not stranger adoptions (and there may not even be any aspects of legal adoption involved), the situations do result in the same psychological and emotional issues. All suffer similar challenges and confront similar traumas. One of the benefits of bringing all aspects of adoption together is strength in numbers. I truly believe that we have opened up more avenues to education in schools, hospitals, churches, community mental health, legislation, courts and other larger systems that impact the lives of the individuals involved.

However, we still offer some separate groups for adult adopted persons only, for birth parents only, for adoptive parents only etc. because when people are beginning to confront their own issues and wake up to their own losses and challenges, I think they do benefit from a small group of people with shared experience.

What I’ve come to realize is that it’s not either/or. There is strength and power in numbers, and there is solace and healing in intimacy. Both are integral. □



Dr. Richard Boas is an adoptive and biological father of three adult children. Dr. Boas founded the Korean Unwed Mothers Support Network (KUMSN) which works to educate, inform and promote discussion about the difficulties facing unwed mothers and their children in order to elevate their economic, political and social potential in Korean society. KUMSN focuses on raising awareness in Korea and among Korean groups in the U.S.

Interview by Livia Montana

Livia Montana: How did you become a part of the adoption constellation?

Dr. Richard Boas: Twenty-three years ago, my wife and I adopted a baby girl from Korea and we named her Esther, and we love her dearly. Esther is a college student now.

LM: After you retired from medical practice, you began meeting with other adoptive parents in your area, and together you started The Adoption Foundation at Family and Children’s Agency (a non-profit family service agency), in 2005. What got you interested in forming that foundation?

RB: I wanted to help other families do what my wife and I had done—adopt—so I set up The Adoption Foundation to aid prospective adoptive parents. I devoted my energies to helping American families adopt Korean children, especially those with special needs and whose siblings had already been adopted.

LM: When did your views on how you wanted to be involved in the adoption community change?

RB: My perspective changed when I traveled to Korea in 2006. I was with the staff of Family and Children’s Agency, and their counterparts at Social Welfare Society in Seoul. I went (at my own expense) because I thought I wanted to expand and increase international adoption.

LM: You’ve said that on that trip you discovered the answer to a question that had bothered you ever since adopting your daughter. What was that question?

RB: “I love my child, yet what is it that makes me uncomfortable about adopting her?”

LM: Tell us a little about what happened.

RB: I met a group of pregnant women who had already signed away their unborn children. I had always believed in fairness and social justice, and had treated my medical patients with respect, educating them and actively involving them in decisions that affected their health and lives. But these women were powerless, marginalized, and stripped of motherhood before delivering. I also visited children who had been relinquished by their mothers, which brought all of that into focus more fully. Imagine holding an infant, days old, and realizing that this child’s mother is capable, loving, and not far away.

I discovered that most of these women did not want to give up their children for adoption. But they felt that they had to due to economic and societal pressures. It hit me hard that my daughter’s mother, years before, had done the same thing. She loved her child as much as I did, gave her up under pressure, and would likely never see her again. I realized that these adoptions were about the child and the adoptive parents. The mother was left out of the equation. This was a wrong I wanted to correct.

LM: Why do you think the mother is left out of the equation?

RB: I actually got the idea of the “adoption equation” from Marie Myung-Ok Lee, who is Korean American and teaches creative



writing at Brown University. Marie, who worked with Korean unwed moms, notes the usual equation:

Family + Adopted Korean Child = Happy Family.

However, the more realistic and balanced equation is:

Family + Adopted Korean Child = Happy Family + (Korean Birth mother - Child).

LM: So how is the mom made “invisible” in this equation?

RB: Very few people ask that question. It’s hard to wrap your mind around adoption and the child’s original mother at the same time. The adoptive family’s gain is the natural mother’s loss, a real, painful, devastating, permanent loss, which few »



Dr. Boas and Staff at KUMSN Offices

realize—and of course this permanently ruptures the mother-child bond. When I first realized this, on my first trip to Korea, I was stunned. How could I, an adoptive father for eighteen years, have missed this? How could I have marginalized my daughter's own original mom, who loved her child as much as I did?

Here I was, an ophthalmologist specializing in glaucoma, which causes blind spots—and I had found my own.

LM: Your shift has been described as “visceral.” It seems like such a huge shift in world view.

RB: My thinking was validated by seeing Marie Myung Ok Lee's “adoption equation” (and subsequently meeting her), by Korean adoptive parents and adoptees who had clearly thought about the matter, seeing the difficult situation of unwed Korean mothers as unjust—and unnecessary, and by listening to the painful stories of American birth moms who had given up their children.

LM: As you said, it's not common to ask how the mother is made invisible. Or to even realize that she's been made invisible. It's a “blind spot” for many.

RB: It's as if the original mother slips out of the picture, in the midst of exuberance over adoption, and the belief that one has done a wonderful thing, with the best of intentions (and much self-congratulation).

Call it cognitive dissonance, the very human discomfort of holding conflicting ideas simultaneously—and diminishing this by rationalizing, glorifying, explaining, defending, justifying, denying. But the mother is still there, and very real. And, given my experience and that of others, once you “get” this, it changes you. It underscores my work.

LM: Do you think there are ways in which this “blind spot” is reinforced?

RB: Yes, the adoption culture has incorporated various beliefs to bolster this blind spot toward the original mother, including the idea (which I myself held when adopting Esther) that one is saving a child from a bad fate (one of our Korean colleagues calls this the “savior complex”), that adoption is “love born in the heart,” and that an unwed mother, if she truly loves her child, will relinquish that child for a better life—to a

“*How could I, an adoptive father for eighteen years, have missed this? How could I have marginalized my daughter's own original mom, who loved her child as much as I did?*”

married couple financially better off than she is. The difficult situation of Korean unwed mothers, already in a weakened position due to lack of financial and emotional support, who are deemed to be irresponsible and incompetent, is framed as one to be solved by adoption. The possibility of helping that mother keep and raise her child is not even considered.

A note about legal orphans: The prevalent belief in the West is that an adopted child can have only one set of parents. In the US, a child's ties to his/her natural parents are legally severed prior to adoption, and the child is legally declared an orphan—with living parent(s).

LM: Can you tell us a little bit about the circumstances that unwed moms and unwed moms-to-be face in Korea?

RB: Unwed mothers are shunned by most of Korean society. They are subjected to strong social and family stigma, lack of government support, and discrimination—including even job and housing discrimination. The majority of these women feel forced to give up their children for adoption (or have an abortion) because of shame, fear, and lack of support.

LM: And what about unwed moms who raise their children?

RB: Their families often disown them. There is no central place for unwed mothers to go to learn about their rights. All too often an unwed mother receives insufficient information and available funding from the agencies that are supposed to help her. For instance, a social worker in a government office might discriminate and not sign up an unwed mom for benefits she is entitled to. In addition, an unwed mom's support from the government may be diminished if her own parents live nearby and are financially capable—even if she is estranged from them. Also, local governments have limited budgets and they might not have funding for unwed moms.

The vast majority, (68.3%) of unwed mothers in Korea give up their children for adoption. By comparison, in the US, 1% of unwed mothers give up their children for adoption.

LM: What keeps you committed to your work helping unwed moms?

RB: I believe that raising a child is a human right, worldwide. It is the way we are, and transcends politics, culture and geography. □

Catherine is a single parent, freelance writer, poet, and public school humanities teacher in Portland, Maine. Her poetry and essays have appeared in the magazines *Hip Mama*, and *Adoptive Families*, and many online venues. She blogs at www.mamacandtheboys.com.



You are not my Real mom

The following is an account of a dialogue I had with my soon to be five-year-old transracially and domestically adopted son, Sam, in December 2009. The night before his birth mother—whom I refer to as “Tea” when I write about her—had texted me to ask what Sam wanted for his approaching birthday. I had asked him what he wanted me to suggest. We brainstormed, and I wrote her back. We have an open adoption with his first mom which includes letters back and forth several times a year, and text messages. The other voice that chimes in at the end is Marcel, Sam’s younger brother, who came into our life through the assistance of an African American donor, and is my biological child.

The following is as verbatim a record of our conversation after dinner tonight as I could reconstruct. It begins with Sam.

<i>I want my real mom.</i>	<i>But, I want to live with her now.</i>	Why do you think that?	that he wrote at school today. It is taped to the wall, all alone looking regal.	<i>love you.</i>
I am your real mom.	[As the wrecking ball heaves itself out of the debris which was my heart, and gathers momentum for the next hit, I breathe and remember that this is all about him. I can do this. I can.]	<i>If you loved me everyday you wouldn't yell at me.</i>	The first letter he ever wrote:	It may feel like that sometimes.
<i>No, I want my real mom.</i>		I wish I wouldn't yell.	I U. I L U Mom. Sam. L=love he tells me.]	But the thing about love is you can love more than one person at a time.
<i>I want her to be here now.</i>		And I wish you would listen		
You mean your birth mother?		when I ask you the first three times.		
		And, I wish I wasn't so tired.	Sam, I know that you have so many feelings in your heart for her. I love her, too.	<i>Like I love you and Marcel and her?</i>
<i>No, I mean, my real mom.</i>		But you're right. Sometimes I do yell. I love you even when I am yelling.		Yes.
<i>She's my everyday mom, not you.</i>		[At this point Sam gets off the stool he is sitting on, and climbs into my lap, putting his head underneath my chin, and against my neck.	<i>You do?</i>	<i>Can you hold me in front of the Christmas tree now? I need a cuddle.</i>
It feels really hard to not have her here doesn't it?			Of course. Without her there would be no you, and no you and me.	
			I wouldn't be a mommy, you wouldn't be you.	Me too.
<i>Yes! I don't want to hurt your feelings.</i>	<i>You don't love me everyday.</i>			Marcel needs a cuddle, too! he screams.
Okay.	Now <i>that</i> is crazy talk. Of course I do.	I am looking up at the letter he gave me	<i>I love her more than I</i>	

A few days ago, a fat envelope of pictures of Tea, her parents, and her older children arrived in the mail. I left in on the table, and let Sam know it had arrived. When he wanted to take a look at it, I knew he'd ask. He asked later that night, before bed. It is now with so much ease that he and I explore her letters. It is amazing what a difference we have achieved in our collective family comfort level around Sam's birth family. It isn't always easy, but it is approaching a level of normalcy that I feel grateful for. □

White Mind

Anne Sibley O'Brian

Authors' Note: This article was adapted by request for Adoption Mosaic from a series of columns I wrote for the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, addressing the scarcity of children's books by and about people of color. In this piece I directly address white parents of children of color, though I hope it's useful for everyone.

Recently the internet has been alive with fierce exchanges as adult transracial adoptees eloquently critique their experiences of adoption, despite being raised in wonderful families. These adoptees highlight the inability of many white parents to understand how race impacts people of color in the U.S., and their lack of awareness of their own white privilege and bias.

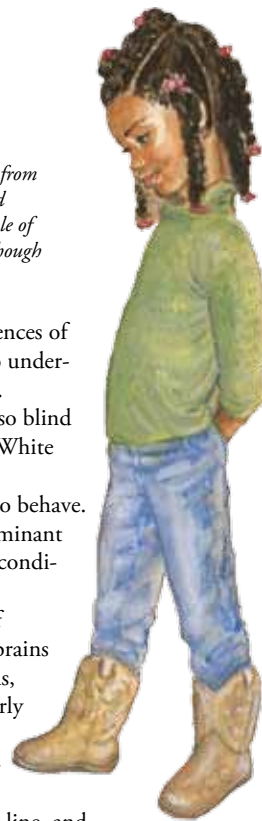
How can it be that so many loving and well-intentioned white people, passionate about the welfare of their children, are so blind to the realities those children face? I believe one cause is the patterns formed by white American socialization, which I'll call White Mind.

By White Mind, I do not mean what you believe, what you intend, the values you are committed to or how you choose to behave. I'm speaking instead of the unconscious patterns that result from being raised as a member of the racial majority. Being a dominant group member is like having a free pass that out-group members don't have, but with no awareness of having it. Given such conditioning, developing White Mind is pretty much inescapable.

Brain researchers such as Mahzarin Banaji of Harvard University (implicit.harvard.edu) have documented the presence of implicit bias as a universal human experience. When we think about people like ourselves, they report, a certain part of our brains light up; when we think about people different from us, a different part lights up. This kind of bias is completely unconscious, Banaji states, present in people who are absolutely positive they don't have it and who are committed to treating everyone fairly (and think they do). According to Banaji's studies, 80% of whites show bias for the white race; people of non-majority races do not show this bias for their race. These implicit biases can drive our behaviors without our awareness. White Mind is usually invisible to white people, though often quite visible to people of color.

In my first year of college as a Studio Art major, I remember an exercise in which we drew a still life, first as volume, then line, and finally, as white space. It was an electric moment as, for the first time, I saw, then drew, the shape of the space around the objects. It had been there all the time, invisible to me until my attention was drawn to it.

White Mind can be hidden in plain sight, too, and trying to catch a glimpse of its presence can be like tracking a ghost. Here are some ways to gather clues, learn its tricks and get your own mind back, and in the process, become your child(ren)'s best ally:



artwork by Anne Sibley O'Brian from the books Jamaica and Brianna and Brianna and Jamaica and the Dance of Spring by Juanita Havill

EXPLORE WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU

Learn about racial identity development. In Beverly Daniel Tatum's book, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, she posits that identity is formed by what is "made salient," the mirrors that are held up for us when we are young. Racial identity therefore develops differently for different groups. People of color tend to have racialized identities; white people, as the majority, don't.

Study the invisible pass that comes with white skin, as described in Peggy McIntosh's seminal essay, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack."

Tell your own story of growing up white. Investigating and expressing the truth of your experience around

race is a significant beginning and can be a lifelong journey. What were your mirrors?

Look for clues and identify patterns. What did adults around you say and do in relation to race when you were a child? What ideas did you internalize as a result? How do these unconscious ideas affect your behaviors?

CHANGE THE SCRIPT

Connect across racial difference in ways that stretch you. One piece of conditioning that white people can work to overcome is their own centrality. Choose books and blogs, movies and other materials to expose yourself to nonwhite voices and viewpoints. Step outside of your comfort zone; appreciate discomfort as growth pains. Ask

questions, but do your own homework; don't expect people of color to educate you.

Let go of defensiveness so you can listen deeply. The fact that you may have unconscious white bias is not your fault; you can take responsibility for it without needing to protect yourself. Don't waste time justifying your intention; it's the impact of words and actions that is critical. Trust people of color as the experts about their own experience. Become an ally.

CHANGE YOUR WORLD

Diversify your friendships. Frequent ethnic restaurants, groceries and cultural events. Follow up with people you meet there and get to know them. Look at who you invite to your home; include people

different from you (not just of your child's race).

Create a demand for books by and about people of color like the children's titles in Elizabeth Bluemle's "A World Full of Color." Fill your home library with these books, request them from libraries, purchase them as gifts and donate them to schools.

Get involved in actions that support communities of color. Educate yourself about the issues that concern people of color in your area or nationally. Support your local NAACP chapter, volunteer to teach English to new immigrants, or help welcome a refugee family. Make these issues your own, on behalf of yourself, your children, and the human family. □

Dear Astrid,
 Recently I attended Adoption Mosaic's Birth Mother Panel and heard from four women who had very different experiences with adoption. Hearing their stories I felt so many emotions I didn't even know I had. I am an adoptive father of a grown daughter and am just now learning these things! I don't feel I was completely ignorant of the issues the panelist were bringing up, but I don't understand why it has taken me so long to really hear their stories. What could I have done to bridge the gap of ignorance to better understand my daughter and her birth family's experience? Thank you. – Chris



Hello Chris,

As you have learned, it is never too late to wake up to new emotions around adoption, especially when you allow yourself to be in new "adoption circles." As I push myself to hear about other's experiences, I, too, find myself feeling new emotions all the time. So, what could you have done? It is really about practice and exposing yourself to various groups while leaving your personal defenses at the door. As you did! Allow yourself to hear, feel, listen and learn. I know firsthand how challenging this can be, however, I believe it is essential in order for us to move toward closing the gap of ignorance.

Recently my mother and I had a conversation that left me very proud. During a recent visit my mother mentioned that, when she attended a workshop of mine on transracial adoption, she heard me say something along the lines of "it is important to acknowledge your child's birth family and to remember that you are raising someone else's child." She said, "until that very moment I had never thought of it that way and I think this is one of the most important things that parents should hear." I couldn't believe my ears. I wanted to both hug her and shake her! Really, this was the first time she had ever thought of this, and wow, how wonderful that she was talking about it with me! I knew this didn't mean she had never thought about my birth mother before but, rather, this was a new way of thinking for her. She attended a workshop and was willing to step outside her box and listen to what I had to say as an adoption professional, not as her daughter.

So, Chris, keep doing what you are doing and allow yourself to learn from others. I thank you—adoptees, birth parents, adoptive parents, professionals, and anyone who is a part of the adoption constellation—for your willingness step outside the safe zone and help us come together for these and many more conversations that will allow us all to truly grow.

book review

By Shelley Dalmau



James Gritter is a winner of the Baron-Pannor Award for Outstanding Contributions in Open Adoption and

has also authored *Adoption without Fear* and *Hospitious Adoption*. In *Lifegivers: Framing the Birth Parent Experience in Open Adoption*, he focuses on the importance and value of birth parents to the well-being of children in open adoption. James Gritter looked straight into my soul in his book, *Lifegivers*. I found this book in the library but had ordered it on-line before I even completed the first chapter.

Gritter first paints a picture of birth parents through the perceptions of others. The picture isn't very pretty. All

birth parents can relate to these stereotypes; I expect honest readers will relate to one or more of the images as part of their own personal perception, too. This accounting of public perception begins with a simple fact: birth parents have kept themselves largely invisible, so there is nothing to counter the misconceptions. We (birth parents) are stigmatized by societal reaction to us which, in turn, causes us to hide this aspect of our lives further, and the cycle continues.

The second portion of the book is dedicated to the common experiences birth parents face. We must balance untimely, awkward and/or unsupported pregnancy and a wide range of circumstances along with strong convictions about the importance of parenting. Ultimately we reach the conclusion that,

for various reasons, it is in our children's best interest to share everyday care with another. Gritter does an exceptional job verbalizing the ambivalent feelings associated with evaluating and executing such a decision. He explains the various types of loss, grief and regret that birth parents in open adoption face.

This is not just another book of sad stories about relinquishing children in adoption. The point is made succinctly and factually that birth parents can, and should, fit into the on-going parenting of the adopted child. Continuance of biological connections is inherently meaningful. Beyond ensuring effective care giving through the selection of the adoptive family, birth parents can create continuity in the child's life in a variety of tangible ways. Adoptive and birth parents are challenged to

foster a sense of teamwork for the benefit of all.

Adoption industry professionals can do a lot to facilitate this teamwork. The sections of the book directed to them are a little more technical and even includes a trouble-shooting guide of sorts when facing reluctant birth parents.

The final chapters of the book are directed toward adoptive and birth parents; Gritter offers hope, suggestions and encouragement. The title of his final chapter sums up the entire experience of birth parents in open adoption: "Pretty Much Regular People, Do the Best They Can in Difficult Circumstance, Who Are of Great and Never-Ending Interest to their Children." Then again, doesn't that pretty much sum up all parenting experiences?

Shelley is an account executive at Propel, and sits on the board of directors for Diverse Gatherings, a community-based nature awareness movement. She is a birth mother in an open adoption who was able to select the parents of her relinquished daughter. She is very proud of the relationships forged between her 10-year-old relinquished daughter and her 15-year-old son, as well as everyone else in their adoption triad.

Reforming Oregon's Adoption Laws

Jane Edwards

Oregon adoption laws are biased toward separating mothers and children. Yes, this is a blanket statement, however, an examination of these laws in practice shows how they facilitate the unnecessary and damaging separation of mothers and children because they allow mothers to sign irrevocable consents without accurate information and sufficient time to make informed decisions about their newborn babies—decisions that will affect both of them dramatically for the rest of their lives.

Ashley

When Leticia learned her 15-year-old daughter, Ashley, was pregnant, she went to her pastor for advice. He referred her to his wife's adoption agency. Over the next several months, Leticia and Ashley met with a social worker and a couple interested in adopting Ashley's child. Ashley never committed to giving up her baby and on June 16, 2010, she gave birth to a daughter, Caileen, via caesarian section. Five days later, physically and emotionally exhausted and under pressure from family, friends, church members, the prospective adoptive parents, and the agency social worker, Ashley signed an irrevocable surrender. Because she still had pain from the caesarian, she was taking oxycodone, a painkiller, that causes lightheadedness, drowsiness, and mood changes. The next day Leticia contacted the social worker to revoke Ashley's consent but she would not accept the revocation.

Ashley sought help from an attorney who filed a lawsuit in Multnomah County on June 23rd to revoke her consent. The attorney for the adoptive parents filed an adoption petition in Washington County the next day, forcing Ashley to pursue legal actions in two counties.

Neither Ashley nor her family has funds to pay an attorney. Ashley's attorney generously agreed to commence the case but cannot afford to continue pro bono.

Janette

Janette gave birth to a son, Gabriel, on June 3, 2005. Two days later she signed an irrevocable surrender to an adoption agency which placed Gabriel with adoptive parents the same day. According to Janette, the adoptive parents were with her during her hospital stay and made her feel guilty if she didn't go ahead with the "adoption plan." The agency representative told her she had to sign the papers in the hospital. The day after she left the hospital, she called the adoption agency, begging to have her son back. She was told to get over it and stop calling. Although Janette had an open adoption agreement, the adoptive parents limited Janette's visits with her son, telling her that the promised visits would not work.

It took Janette two months to find an attorney. He filed an action in Marion County to open the adoption records. The court never responded to it, either because of administrative confusion resulting from the need to relocate records from the courthouse after a fire or because the attorney did not pursue the request. Eleven months after she signed the surrender papers, her attorney filed an action to set aside the adoption based on fraud and duress. The judge dismissed her case, and she appealed. The Court of Appeals upheld the dismissal, ruling that the nearly year-long delay, during which the "adoptive parents bonded with Gabriel," was unreasonable. The Court reached this decision in spite of an Oregon statute which set a year as the outside limit for contesting an adoption.

Heidi

Heidi gave birth October 8, 1995, three weeks prematurely. The next day she signed an irrevocable surrender to an open adoption agency which failed to explain the irrevocability provision as required by statute. This agency placed her child with prospective adoptive parents. Nine days later, on October 18th, Heidi handed the agency a document revoking her consent. Her attorney filed an objection to the adoption in Lane County where the child was born. The court dismissed the case because the adoption was not pending there. The attorney tried Deschutes County where the prospective adoptive parents lived. No luck. Finally Heidi's attorney learned that the adoption was pending in Multnomah County where the adoption agency had its headquarters. The Multnomah County Court dismissed Heidi's case on procedural grounds. The Court of Appeals reversed, sending the case back to the trial court for further action. By this time, the child was two-and-a-half years old. »

How Oregon Laws Failed these Mothers

None of these mothers received the counseling that would have helped them to make an informed decision, for or against adoption, for their babies. Adoption experts -- the Child Welfare League of America, the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, and social worker and author Anne Babb -- unanimously agree that women considering adoption need counseling to inform them of resources which would help them keep their children, their intrinsic value to their children, the benefits of kinship care if they cannot care for their children, and the consequences of giving their children to genetic strangers.

The Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) requires that licensed adoption agencies provide some counseling, but adoption agencies handle less than half of Oregon's 400 domestic infant adoptions each year. A statute requires prospective adoptive parents to pay for three pre- and three post-adoption counseling sessions—but does not specify the content of the counseling. Social workers, employed by adoption agencies, typically do the counseling. Since agencies are financed primarily by fees paid by prospective adoptive parents, the social workers may lean towards pro-adoption messages. Social workers may have a greater incentive to guide mothers toward surrendering their children than giving them clear options for nurturing their children. Both the DHS rule and the statute refer to the women as “birth mothers” suggesting the adoption is a “fait accompli,” even though they have not surrendered their children (in fact, haven't even given birth). In any event, failure to comply with the DHS rule or the statute does not invalidate the consent.

None of these mothers had legal advice before signing the consent, which is typically the case in agency adoptions. Mothers in independent (non-agency adoptions) usually do have attorneys, but their attorney is often referred by the attorney for the prospective adoptive parents and paid for by the prospective adoptive parents.

None of these mothers had sufficient time to decide. Unlike most states, Oregon allows mothers to sign consents upon leaving the delivery room where the prospective adoptive parents may have attended the birth and cut the cord, symbolizing to the mother that the child is theirs. Mothers almost certainly sign consents before they have had time to internalize the consequences of surrendering their children and while they may still be groggy from drugs or suffering from postpartum hormones.

Consents in agency adoptions are irrevocable when the child is placed with the prospective adoptive parents, usually within a day. Consents in independent adoptions are irrevocable when the child is placed with the prospective adoptive parents and legal proceedings are begun. Consents may be set aside only upon a showing of coercion or fraud.

Mothers have fewer rights than consumers in commercial transactions where failure of the seller to make full disclosure nullifies the transaction and purchasers may cancel the contract within a specified period of time.

All of these mothers encountered barriers to bringing their cases to court. They did not have copies of the papers they signed and had no information about the status of the adoption proceedings. Because they had little money, and attorneys shy away from contested adoption cases, they had difficulty obtaining legal representation. Once in court, confusing and conflicting procedures consumed time and money, and in Janette's case, barred her case from being heard at all. Delays work to the disadvantage of mothers because courts are reluctant to take a child “from the only family he has ever known.”

Why it Matters

Child welfare experts agree that the natural family constitutes the preferred means of providing family life for children. The United States Supreme Court has held repeatedly that the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution protects “the fundamental liberty interest of natural parents in the care, custody, and management of their child,” (Troxel v. Granville 2000).

Many adoptive parents I have known are loving people who are committed to the well-being of their children. If families cannot, with help, care for their children, adoption is obviously the better alternative to growing up in foster care. However, the adoption industry today, and the legal system surrounding it, fails to protect vulnerable mothers and mothers-to-be, and thrusts too many children into the adoption mill when they need not be there. Oregon laws need to be changed to assure unbiased counseling for women considering adoption, truly independent legal counsel, ample time after birth to appreciate the significance of their decision, and recourse to the courts if their rights are violated. □

The Coalition to Reform Oregon's Adoption Laws is an ad hoc group of birth parents, adoptees, adoptive parents, and others supporting reform.

The Coalition's proposed legislation requires:

- Counseling covering the grief and loss inherent in adoption, resources which would enable mothers to nurture their child, the desirability of keeping children in the original family if mothers are unable to care for the children, and the benefits of continuing contact between mothers and children.
- A minimum of 192 hours after birth before mothers may consent to adoption and 30 days to revoke consent. These times are consistent with recommendations of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute.
- An independent attorney, paid by a surcharge on adoption petition filing fees, to advise mothers of their legal rights before they consent to adoption.
- Clear procedures including a one year time limit to file an action contesting an adoption, assuring quick resolution for mothers, prospective adoptive parents, and most importantly, for children.
- Recovery of attorney fees if a mother prevails.
- Return of the child if the mother prevails. Return has not been shown to have a negative impact on children. In fact, both “Baby Jessica” and “Baby Richard,” whose cases caused a national outcry, have done well with their first families.

Jane Edwards, J.D., is a graduate of the University of Oregon School of Law, an inactive member of the Oregon State Bar, and a retired State of Oregon administrator. She is a reunited birth mother and writes for First Mother Forum, www.firstmotherforum.com. The Coalition to Reform Oregon's Adoption Laws is an ad hoc group of birth parents, adoptees, adoptive parents, and others supporting reform. To learn more, contact Jane at jane_edwards@comcast.net.

Real Simple

Jennifer Lauck

My story went like this: My mother was seventeen and pregnant. She was yanked out of school, locked in her room and banned from seeing her boyfriend. It was 1963.

I never thought I'd know anything about my mother—not even her name—but when I was forty-four years old an investigator unearthed the hidden treasures of her phone number, her address and best of all, her name.

Catherine.

As a small child, I had used that name for dolls, rocks and driftwood boats. As a woman, I named my own daughter Catherine.

My office is like a favorite living room with a velvet sofa, fresh flowers on a low pewter table and silk pillows. A hand painted desk from France is positioned in the bay window. Overhead is a chandelier of draping crystals.

My daughter calls my office The Princess Palace. To her eyes, it's a fairy wonderland. She is devoted to her belief in magic.

My own girlhood couldn't hold such fantasies. My adoptive parents died by the time I was nine—my mother of cancer and my father of heart failure. At ten I was homeless. At twelve I was adopted again but the bond didn't take.

To backfill the void of family, ambition became my comfort. I put myself through college and evolved into an investigative reporter.

Finally, I stepped into motherhood and had a son and a daughter. As my lighthearted girl grew to be resplendent in tiaras and silk gowns, I couldn't help but try on her princess perspective now and again. I must admit she softened me enough to believe in the divine.

As I sit at my desk and dial Catherine's telephone number for the first time, I close my eyes tight like my daughter taught me. I let myself imagine fairies racing through the line until they reach my mother's world and soften her heart enough to answer my call.

Catherine's number rings several times and then her answering machine clicks in. "No one is here to take your call. Leave a number and we'll call you right back."

The r's and k's on the recorded voice are clipped »





and quick, like my own t's and k's.

She has my voice!

I leave a short message but when I am done speaking, I cannot close the phone. I exist in the silence of the open line.

Terrified she will not call me back and empowered by a list of contact telephone numbers for her family, I forge ahead and call a 36-year-old woman who shares a name with Catherine. A daughter?

This time, a woman answers and her voice sounds like my own.

I manage to ask if she knows Catherine.

"She's my mother," the woman says. "Who is this?"

"I think she's my mother too," I blurt out.

"What?"

I ask for her email address and she gives it without hesitation. I send photos of myself via the Internet. Five seconds later her computer beeps.

"Oh my God," she says. "Is this you?"

"I hope I'm not freaking you out."

"You are totally freaking me out," she says.

"Wow!"

Her name is Jessica Catherine but she says she just goes by Jessie. Jessie is fast to process what is happening. It's both surprising and wonderful.

"You really look like us," Jessie says, as she studies my photos. "And, my mom married a guy when she was really young, just after high school. They had my brother Daniel but they got divorced. She married my father and oh my God, your dad—his name was Bill—he died a couple years ago. I'm so sorry but I guess you should know."

Her words glance off me, unable to penetrate. Did she say my mother married my father? I have a brother—a one hundred percent brother? Did she say my father is dead?

"I'm your sister," Jessie says.

We both laugh, in the same way, at the same tempo. A sister.

"Do you know where she is?" I ask.

"At work, I just talked to her, like an hour ago." she says. "I talk to her every day, sometimes three times a day."

A sting enters my body and catches my breath. She talks to her mother three times a day?

"I thought I knew everything about her—" Jessie says, her voice trailing into silence.

"I hope I haven't upset you."

"No, it's okay. I'm just so surprised," she says.

"I get it and you know what—I just want to find my mother."

"Of course you do," she agrees. This immediate understanding catches me by surprise.

"Can you do me a favor and call your mother? Can you break the news gently? Can you let her know I want to talk, tonight, as soon as possible?"

"Our mother," Jessie interrupts.

"What?"

"She's our mother," she insists. "You're just going to have to get used to saying that."

An hour passes as I wait for our mother to call. It is summer and well over ninety degrees outside but

I become so cold I must wrap myself in a blanket. A therapist will later say this is the shock I experienced as a baby when I realized my mother was not coming to get me. I didn't know babies went into shock.

My phone finally rings and I drop the blanket.

"Jennifer?" the woman asks.

"Yes," I manage.

"This is your mother," Catherine says in a weak and delicate voice. "I want you to know that not a day has gone by that I haven't thought about you."

I sag in my chair and her voice floods my senses with warm, soothing relief.

Catherine rushes into the silence to tell the story of being crazy in love with a boy her mother did not approve of.

"My mother, your grandmother, had a good heart. She meant well," she explains. "She died a couple years ago. Today is actually the anniversary of her death. I just realized that."

"I'm sorry," I say.

"Thank you," Catherine says. "I miss her. Every day I feel like crying. She was my whole life."

I am divided into two parts. On one side, I am a baby again and the content of her story doesn't matter. A baby requires only sensory confirmation, which is part of the hormonal code that links her to her mother. My mother sounds exactly right and that becomes the primary comfort. On the other side, I am also a hardened survivor who wants to tell Catherine that I know, full well, what it is to miss a mother.

Catherine, oblivious to this division, goes on to say she can't remember her pregnancy.

"Isn't that funny?" she asks.

I want to say, "No. That is not funny. It is tragic." Still, I cannot speak.

"And I don't remember having you either," she continues. "I just remember going into the hospital, being drugged, having a doctor come in, take you out and then you were gone."

I begin to cry. She weeps too.

"I never even got to hold you," Catherine says.

"And that was it. Whenever I thought about you or even about looking for you, my mother would tell me 'Forget it, she has her own life.'"

Finally, she stops talking and the quiet is like wind spiraling through a canyon.

Her story—my beginning—is so sad.

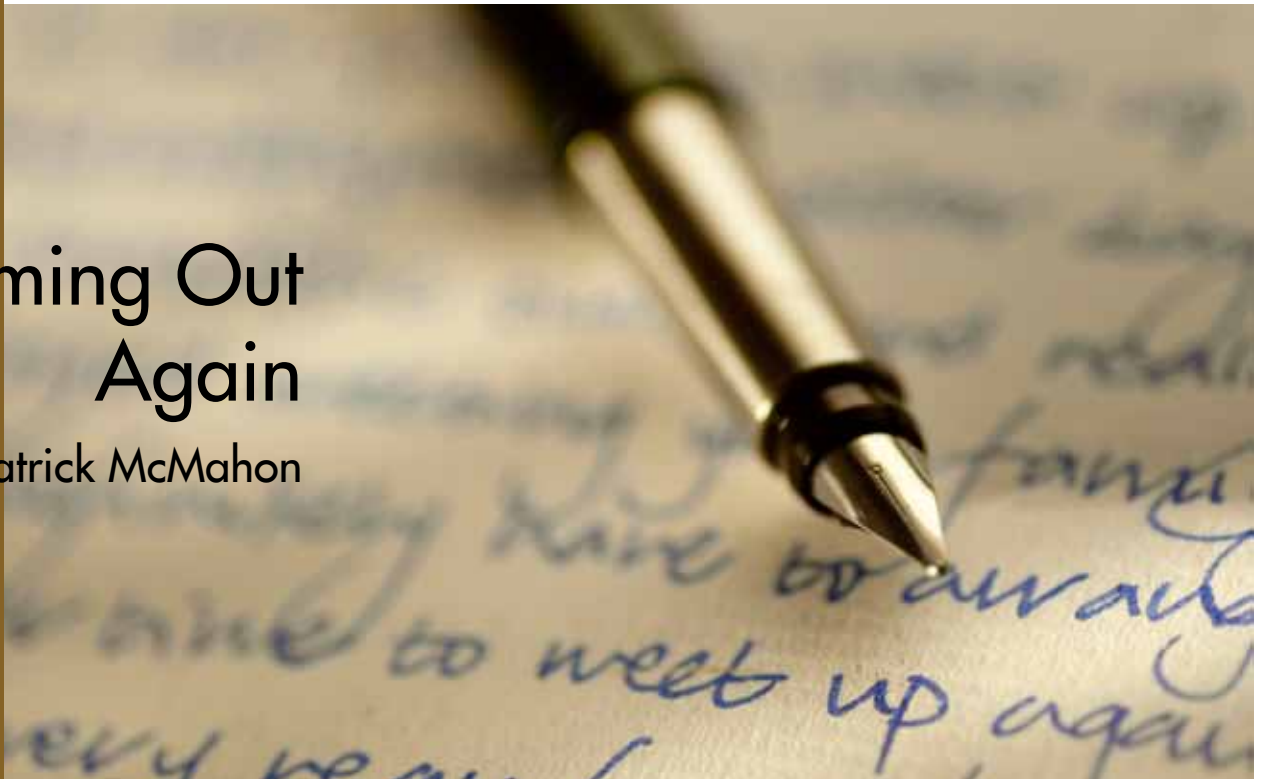
As the silence between us widens, I know I must say something but I also realize this could be the only chance I get to speak to my mother. I have exploded into her life. I have forced out her deepest secret. It's a very real possibility that she will vanish as she did in 1963.

I think hard. I think about what matters most. I think about the good things—my daughter, magic and my own survival due to sheer will and perseverance. I also think about how I've known, all my life, my mother's real name and how miraculous it is to be on the phone with her at this moment. Finally, I clear my throat.

"Thank you," I tell my mother. "Thank you for my life." □

Coming Out Again

Patrick McMahon



What I do while driving is think, and lately all I'm thinking about is writing to my birth mother again. We haven't talked on the phone since those first three calls in June, almost four months ago.

I need and want to write to her, and yet, this nagging resistance to telling her that I'm gay is maddening. She has all but invited it and thrown the door wide open. I decide yes, it's time

I sit down at my desk on a Saturday morning with my drawing pad and write 'October 12, 1991.' The date rings a bell. I check the gay newspaper on the end table. Yesterday was National Coming Out Day. I begin the letter with three newsy, rambling paragraphs. I get up, go out on the deck, feel the warm sun, and affirm that I want this relationship to be based on honesty. After several deep breaths, I return to the desk. I explain again how I never expected the depth of sadness, resentment, confusion, and anger unearthed by

finding her, and stress again that I have no regrets. I write:

The sadness comes from just beginning to understand what I've been living without. A feeling of connection, of family that is not possible with adoptive parents, no matter the circumstances, no matter how much love and acceptance there is. The resentment comes from having had to live with society's attitudes and the ever-present implicit shame of being adopted. It is subtle. It does not come directly from family members, friends, acquaintances. It comes from growing up hearing people talk about adopted children and absorbing their responses, sometimes feeling like an object of pity, sympathy or rescue. The confusion as a child comes from my parents telling me I'm special, I'm chosen, I'm wanted, yet knowing that two people had me and chose not to keep me. The anger is the most difficult. Having recently gotten more in touch with this, it is hard for me to separate, so I'm not going to try and write about it now.

I also feel a lot of joy about having found you and slowly getting to

know you. When I made the decision to search, I knew in my heart it was the right thing for me to do. Sometimes when I'm looking at the pictures or the genealogy or the journal I kept during the search, I get excited like a little kid. It's a great feeling. And sometimes I feel the beginning of a sense of resolution.

I come up for air, but only for a few minutes. I want to keep going and get to the questions. Ones which I think any adopted person would want to ask.

Sometimes I try to imagine all this from your perspective. It's still difficult. I think I need more information. I get the sense that it's hard for you to recall the circumstances and events around my birth. I'll ask some questions. Please answer what you can.

How did you feel when you found out you were pregnant with me? What were your living arrangements at the time? Did anything change as a result of being pregnant? I know you said you didn't consider abortion, but when and how did you decide to put me up for adoption and who was involved in »



that decision? Do you remember anything about the hospital stay? How did you feel afterwards?

Now I have to stop. I look over the charts and family trees I've made copies of to send her. I begin writing again with questions about the blanks on those charts. I tell her I'd rather be doing this in person, then finally, the *pièce de résistance*. My jaw firms up. My hand grips the pen just a little more tightly.

Among the many other things I want to tell you about me, one is that I'm gay. It's important to me that you know that because it's something I've had to come to terms with and now feel someone who knows me must know. I first came to terms with it in 1978, at age 21 and since then have had a couple of close relationships. I don't make my orientation the center of my life, it is simply a part of who I am. I'll say no more now because I don't know your perceptions of, exposure to, or attitudes toward gay people.

I put down the pen and read this paragraph over a couple of times. Yes, that's fine. Short. To the point. I lean back and stare out the window, through the reddish gold maple leaves, trying to get a handle on

why my stomach has taken up gymnastics again.

For crying out loud, I'm a gay man who has lived as such for fifteen years. I've demonstrated in national marches on Washington, sued a property management company for discrimination after an eviction attempt when my lover moved into my one-bedroom apartment. I've come out to the mother who raised me. Why do I feel so damn anxious? The flip side begins playing. What's also true is that I've not come out to many people individually. Not to my father or brother or anyone else in my adoptive family. I just assume everyone who pays attention has figured it out. I rarely see them anyway.

Maybe it's like so much else that has been thrown up into the storm of 'where does all this really come from?' Am I really a McMahon or a Shields? Am I a product of a white, middle-class Chicago suburb, or a clan that seems to have been more transient and unsettled? Am I really gay? Is it in the genes? I sure as hell am not straight, but even when living in San Francisco, I never really meshed with the gay community. It might be said that I've never really

meshed with any community.

I flinch and stand. Time for another break. On the way to the shower, I pause at the mirror. For just a moment, I see my face as if I were someone else looking at it. Objective, not connected to self-image, self-love or self-loathing. It's outside, painted on a plane of glass, not melded with the person who has lived in this body for thirty-three years. It takes concentration to detach and see this face without preconception, without judgment. Who is this person? Who is he really?

Freshly showered I sit back down and write a couple of newsy concluding paragraphs, closing with, "Be in touch soon, Patrick." I like the double meaning. One, I will be in touch soon. Two, I've just laid out my feelings and told you I'm gay so I'll be in a heightened state of anxiety and irrational fear until I hear from you.

In a loopy state of relief and verve, I address and seal the envelope, drive it to the post office, feel it slip from my fingers into the mailbox. I think about all the other people coming out around National Coming Out Day, and feeling lighter, drive on. □

“Like adoption, a mosaic is a picture created of bits and pieces. The spaces between remind us that each piece has a history of its own.”



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