

The Constellation

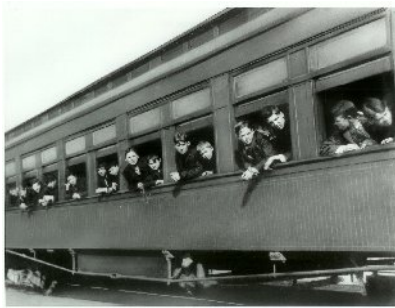
Summer 2008 Newsletter

In one way or another, we are all touched by adoption. Regardless of what role we play or the resources we've been given, each of us deserves a healthy lifelong adoption experience.

Interview with Adoption Historian Ellen Herman

By Livia Montana

Ellen Herman is a professor of modern U.S. history at the University of Oregon. She created the website *The Adoption History Project* which is a resource for understanding adoption in the U.S. in the twentieth century. Her book *Kinship by Design: A History of Adoption in the Modern United States* is forthcoming in Fall 2008.



1904 Orphan Train

Livia Montana: How did you become interested in the history of adoption?

Ellen Herman: There's a professional reason and there's a personal reason. I was a historian for quite a while before I started doing work on adoption history. My area of interest is the history of the human sciences, and I wrote a book on psychology a while ago. One issue that had always interested me was the history of the nature/nurture debate. The personal reason has to do with my own family situation. My partner and I were among the first people in the

state of Massachusetts who went through a legal procedure now called second parent adoption, where two people of the same sex (they don't have to be a same sex couple—they could be two sisters or two brothers, for instance) can legally and jointly adopt a child. This was back in the early 1990s. It gave me a personal experience of living on the legal frontier in terms of family life. That was very compelling.

LM: Is the interest in the history of adoption recent?

EH: There are historians who have always been interested in subjects that are very closely connected to adoption history—the history of working children, the history of orphanages, or the history of infertility, for instance. But the people who are interested in the history of adoption as an institution in its own right, especially in the 20th century, that's pretty recent. In some ways it's been harder to create a history of modern adoption than it was to, let's say, write the history of children moving between households and families in the 18th century or the 19th century. This difficulty has been due to the records issue. Historians depend on the documentary record. If we can't access records, we can't write history.

Continued on page 4



Honoring our Histories

Celebrating our Lives



At adoptionmosaic.org

- Adoption Dialogues -

- Interview Series -

&

- Blog -

<http://blog.adoptionmosaic.org>



What's Inside

Letter from the Executive Director: pg 2

Schedule overview pg 2

Ask Astrid: pg 3

Movie Review: pg 5

Book Review: pg 5

When to Seek Help... : pg 6

Contributors: pg 10

Food For Thought:

The First Day: pg 4

MaMa Omma, Come see the basket that I made : pg 6

Scarology: pg 7

The Perfect Mother: pg 7

Confronting Racism: pg 8

A Lesson From Obama: pg 8

Letter from the Executive Director

Recently, I took a friend of mine out for ice cream who is 11 years old, and like me, was also adopted transracially. Our focus was not to talk about adoption, in fact adoption only came up once in our time together, but to just hang out and be friends. Later I thought about what my life would have been like if I had had close relationships with adults who were both mentors of color and adopted, and how that might have helped me feel more comfortable talking about adoption when I had questions. I am excited Adoption Mosaic has a program which is similar in scope to that of my ice cream date with my friend. The mission of Adoption Mosaic's Youth Activity Groups (facilitated by adult adoptees), is to normalize the adoption experience for young adoptees. My friend and I enjoyed our ice cream and had a nice time just hanging out! It was a wonderful feeling to be a part of a full circle. I felt like I had something to offer my friend and I was reminded of how important relationships like these are for me as an adult.

There are many new and exciting things happening at Adoption Mosaic. And there are many people to thank for all they have contributed to help us move towards our goal of supporting the adoption community. In addition to our incredible Board of Directors, we have developed four new committees (finance, program, development and marketing) which support the innovative mission of Adoption Mosaic. We also have some wonderful volunteers who are contributing to these committees. Thanks to everyone for your support!



This summer (August 22-24th) Adoption Mosaic will have our first Garage Sale where 100% of the proceeds will benefit Adoption Mosaic. So, please stop by, browse and have a sip of some refreshing lemonade!



Adoption Mosaic is proud to announce the completion of our new "Adoption in the Movies Booklet." Over the past 4 years we have held a monthly Adult Adoptee Movie Group, and have collected a long list of movies that are "dripping with adoption." Over the years many of you have asked for a list of movies and now we are able to provide not just a list of 27 movies but also plot summaries, points to consider, and questions to ask yourself while watching the movie. Hundreds of hours have been put into creating this 58 page booklet! A special thank you goes to Livia, and Tara, for their work writing reviews, Michael and John for designing and editing, and the Reynolds family for their financial support.

On behalf of the entire Board of Directors I would like to welcome Michael McGrorty to the board. Michael currently works at the Oregon Post Adoption Resource Center as the Training Coordinator. He is fluent in Spanish and brings trainings and materials to Spanish-speaking adoptive families. Welcome Michael. We are honored to have you on board!

(Continued on page 3)



At a Glance

July 08-October 08 Schedule Overview

Adoption Mosaic regularly adds new dates to our calendar, check adoptionmosaic.org for the most recent schedule

July

- July 8 – Movie Group – Open to Adoption Community
- July 12 – What and When: Talking About Adoption With Your Child

August

- August 9 – Transracial Parenting (part 'A')
- August 16 – Strengthening Attachment with Your Child
- August 22-24 - Adoption Mosaic Benefit Garage Sale

Sept.

- September 9 – Movie Group – Adult Adoptee only
- September 20 – All day Lifestory Book workshop (collaboration with NAFA)
- September 22 – Youth Activity Group (begins – 6 week series)
- September 22 – Adoption Readiness (begins – 4 week series)

Oct.

- October 4 – Transracial Parenting (part 'B')
- October 24th & 25th – Transracial Parenting (part A, B & C) – Seattle, WA



Ask Astrid

Quarterly we feature questions answered by Astrid Dabbeni, please submit your questions to tara@adoptionmosaic.org with “ask astrid” in the subject line

Dear Astrid,

Recently, I was asked where my daughter’s “real mom” lives. Over the years I have really struggled with this term “real” and have not found a comfortable way to respond. Do you have any suggestions of ways that I could respond that honor me, my daughter AND her first mother? ~ Amy

Hello Amy,

As an adoptee I am often asked, usually by people who do not have a personal connection to adoption, about my “real” mother, my “real” sister, if my brother is my “real” brother, and so on. I too have struggled with how to respond and whether or not to take it personally. I have come to accept that for the rest of my life I will have to be prepared to respond to questions and comments about my adoption. Therefore I have had to learn not to let these comments or questions effect how I feel about myself. From this perspective it is important to help teach your child to not feel hurt, sad or angry every time someone asks them a question about adoption. Because children learn so much from their parents about what is right and wrong, good and bad, it is important for parents to self reflect upon what emotions are coming up for them when answering questions regarding “real parents.” Remember your child is listening and learning from your response. Some questions to ask yourself that may help you decide how to respond:

1. Is the person who is using the term “real” doing so because they don’t know the latest politically correct term to use or are they purposefully trying to be condescending, mean or hurtful? If you feel the person is trying to be hurtful (which in my experience is rarely the case) you could respond with: “Thank you for asking but this is something I am not going to talk about with you.”
2. What is coming up for you that hurts or bothers you when someone uses the term “real”? Does such a comment threaten your “realness” as a parent?
3. If this question makes you feel uncomfortable and you respond negatively, what message is this sending to your child about how they came to be a part of your family?

I believe it is the parents’ responsibility to help children feel confident about adoption. Parents therefore need to teach by example and this takes practice. By asking yourself these questions and reflecting upon what comes up for you, you will be better prepared to embrace the question that is ACTUALLY being asked. This may be a great opportunity to talk about your child’s first family, culture, or country, without shifting the focus to yourself and the feeling of not being valued.

So, to answer your question, how about responding with...”I think my daughter’s first-mother lives somewhere in Bucaramanga, Colombia.”



(Letter From the Executive Director continued from page 2)

What’s new on the workshop front? We are thrilled to add three new workshop offerings by Ally Burr-Harris Ph.D. and Mina Bacigalupi. Ally is a clinical psychologist at Children’s Program, and she specializes in issues related to attachment, adoption, and trauma. Ally will be presenting *Strengthening Attachment with Your Child* this summer, and *Being a Family: Adjusting to Life After the Orphanage in the fall*. Mina has worked and volunteered in the field of adoption for over twelve years. Mina will be presenting *Thinking of a Homeland Tour?* this fall.

I hope you all are having a wonderful summer and we look forward to seeing many of you at our workshops!

~ Astrid Dabbeni, Executive Director

The First Day

By Livia Montana

The little girl needs direction,
Needs more than she knows
How to pronounce in foreign living
Rooms one must believe
In strangers named “mother-father”
How transparent their need
More glaring, than the lamps in every corner

The girl stares at a bulb, touches the heat
In which she need not struggle to make sense
Of this new family. She can pretend blindness

If she is still, they may not notice
The sharp pulse in her hands
She clenches her fists, but relents
To touch the thin glass again
As she sees a face arriving
From that interior. Is it the sister
That was taken away
At the airport? Perhaps not

Yet, how familiar this face seems—
At these times, something may break
Inside such a girl. A shard
To grasp as she realizes—



Are mother-father watching? Should she
Turn away? Should she show them?

Wouldn't it hurt them
To see this face arriving
From an interior
They must not suspect still exists?

This interior must never be named
Not “country.” Nor “history.”
Nor “blood.” Instead,
It must be where
The little girl slices that face
Till her hands surge away
Wet with odd shapes and colors

When this story is told it will be told with laughter,
How she was so amazed by light bulbs on her first day in America

The little girl wipes her hands on the couch
But her palms still glisten

(Ellen Herman continued from page 1)

LM: Who was the pioneer in this field?

EH: The pioneering scholar who wrote the first book-length history is Wayne Carp who teaches at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, WA. He published a book called *Family Matters: Secrecy and Disclosure in the History of Adoption*. That was back in 1998. Now, all over the country, there are many more scholars and students writing books, research projects, articles, and dissertations that have to do with adoption history.

LM: You've created an online site called *The Adoption History Project*. What inspired that website?

EH: The internet has become such a presence in the adoption world for so many reasons and in so many ways. It seemed like a great idea to reach out, to translate the research that I had done into this format that was very democratic, accessible, and approachable.

LM: What would you say is the value of becoming familiar with the history of adoption?

EH: History puts our own thinking and our own practices into a larger perspective. For example, I think it's very helpful to people that are alive now and thinking about adoption to understand that the regime of closed, secretive, and anonymous adoption that so many reformers are trying to change is a relatively recent historical creation. It's not a primordial dimension of adoption. Before “the adoption closet” came into being, there were long periods of historical time where openness—the kinds of openness that reformers are interested in now—was more the norm.

LM: You've spoken about the idea of history building empathy. I found that very compelling. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

EH: By empathy I don't mean agreement; it's actually connected to making things a little more complicated. Knowing the larger perspective makes it harder to characterize the adoption world as one where you've got heroes and you've got villains. It's a little more complicated when you don't see the people you disagree with as villains. Then you have to try to figure out why the people who created the “adoption closet” believed very deeply that it was absolutely the best thing for adoption and for adopted children. And to really absorb why they thought that was a good thing, you have to put yourself in their time and in their heads. That's what I mean by empathy. It doesn't mean you should change your vote on the ballot measure that it's in your state about opening records now or in the future.

Read the rest of this interview in its entirety at adoptionmosaic.org (<http://www.adoptionmosaic.org/?p=153>) Where Ellen talks more about adoption history, adoption memoirs, and her upcoming book *Kinship by Design*

“the regime of closed, secretive, and anonymous adoption that so many reformers are trying to change is a relatively recent historical creation “

Adoption Mosaic Movie Review

Meet the Robinsons (2007) Review by Livia Montana



a journey to the future.

Points to Consider:

1. How did you feel about Lewis being rejected 124 times? Do you feel that this was done for comedic effect? In what ways might this seem insensitive to adoptees and foster children? How do you think you might have felt if you saw this movie as a child?

2. How do you feel about Lewis' decision regarding his birth mother at the very end of the movie? What do you think your own decision would be if you had a chance to see your birth mother's face? What did you think about Lewis' explanation of why he made the decision he did? If you could create a different ending to this movie, what would it be?

3. "Keep moving forward."- How do you feel about the message of this movie in regards to the adoptive experience? Do you think the desire to know more about one's history means that one is not "moving forward"? Why do you think this natural desire is pathologized when it comes to adoption?

"through the viewing of mainstream movies the adoption experience is shared and normalized"

Adoption Mosaic Movie Reviews are written with the intent of fostering conversation amongst movie viewers. Viewers are encouraged to use our "Points to Consider" to discuss the movie -OR- come join us for a movie and facilitated discussion at Adoption Mosaic's Movie night. Visit www.adoptionmosaic.org for more information!

Adoption Mosaic Book Review

Nurturing Adoptions: Creating Resilience after Neglect and Trauma (2007)

By Deborah D. Gray



Review by Ally Burr-Harris

Deborah Gray may be the premier expert on attachment and adoption in this country. Whereas others have a command of the research on attachment and child development, Deborah Gray has the rare gift of being able to take up-to-date research and translate it into relevant, practical advice for everyday parents. For those of you who have read Deborah Gray's first book, *Attaching in Adoption: Practical Tools for Today's Parents*, you will know what I mean by this. In both *Attaching in Adoption* and *Nurturing Adoptions*,

Gray provides countless strategies and tools for parents that she has learned first-hand as a former foster parent and as a therapist. She often uses rich case examples to illustrate these tools, and this format makes it easier to translate the tools from the book to real life.

Some of the material in *Nurturing Adoptions* will be familiar to readers of Gray's first book. Gray emphasizes the importance of attachment as the springboard and scaffolding for development in children. She explains how a child's ability to trust her caregiver to take care of her during early childhood transcends all elements of subsequent development. This includes a child's cognitive, social, moral, and emotional/behavioral development. In *Nurturing Adoptions*, Gray integrates attachment literature with child trauma literature in her effort to explain how disrupted attachment and trauma such as abuse or neglect can have a cumulative effect on a child's development. This has become increasingly relevant over the last decade as the face of adoption has changed. With more adoptions of children with histories of abuse, institutional care, or disrupted placements, there is a growing recognition of the impact of trauma, grief, and attachment on children. In spite of some of the daunting risk factors that many of these children carry, Gray leaves the reader feeling inspired. Just as she instructs parents and professionals to instill hope in children, Gray also gives adoptive parents hope. She does this by helping parents and professionals see the numerous opportunities available to help children in their healing.

Readers should be forewarned, *Nurturing Adoptions* is geared toward the target audience of adoption professionals. Some of the research reviewed in the first half of the book can be quite technical and dense for someone looking for an easy read. In the second half of the book, much of the treatment-focused material is intended for placement specialists, social workers, and psychologists. It is my hope that this forewarning does not deter the motivated parent from reading this book. For the parent who is not deterred by terminology such as "glucocorticoids," *Nurturing Adoptions* equips the adoptive parent with vital information. In addition, the adoptive parents who read this book will have everything they need to know in order to keep an adop-

(Continued on page 6)

tion professional on his or her toes. I recommend this book for parents who intend to seek psychiatric or psychological services for their child or family. I can assure you that you will close the book knowing the questions that you need to ask a mental health professional at the onset of treatment.

As a psychologist who specializes in adoption issues, I want to add that I am skeptical of many attachment-focused remedies. Historically, some attachment interventions have included coercive techniques such as forcing a child to be held. In addition, it has been my observation that adoption professionals are sometimes too quick to diagnose attachment-related disorders. I can assure the reader that the tools and techniques promoted by Gray are ethical, respectful to the child and family, and highly effective. That said, I would suggest *Attaching in Adoption* for the parent who prefers a no-nonsense, practical resource book on attachment, adoption, and parenting. I would suggest *Nurturing Adoptions* for Gray fans who want to read more, for professionals who are working with foster children and adopted children, and for savvy parents who are eager to understand and advocate for their children.

When to Seek Help for Your Adoptive Family

By Nina Yates M.S. Couples, Marriage, and Family Therapist

All adopted children and their families deserve support and guidance to help them grow and develop secure, life-long relationships. Any adoptive family can benefit from therapist/mental health support, provided that they are working with an adoption competent counselor.

Adoptive families may benefit from help if **parents** are experiencing:

- Confusion distinguishing between adoption related concerns, mental health concerns, typical developmental issues and transracial issues
- Unresolved grief or loss related to infertility or not having given birth
- Difficulty accepting and valuing characteristics of their child that are different than the rest of the family i.e. feeling like there has been a "mismatch"
- Discomfort or avoidance of talking about adoption with their child
- Anxiety or confusion on how to talk about adoption with their child or how to adapt adoption conversation to children at different ages when there is challenging information to convey
- Insecurity or fears about being regarded as their child's "real" parent
- A need for support mediating contact with their child's birth family
- Concern that a strong parent-child attachment has yet to develop

Adoptive Families may benefit from support if a **child** is experiencing:

- Fear of hurting their adoptive parents feelings by talking about adoption related feelings and curiosities
- Difficulty developing trust and feeling secure in the family
- Difficulty developing a strong parent-child attachment
- Post-traumatic stress or unresolved grief related to pre and post adoption traumas and losses
- Feeling abandoned, rejected or confused about identity
- Distress or confusion related to birth family
- Confusion or lack of support related to racial and cultural identity
- New adoption concerns brought on by entering a new stage of development and therefore a new level of understanding about what adoption means
- Developmental delays in speech, language, cognition or motor skills which impact social and emotional functioning
- Academic problems which impact self-esteem and motivation

MaMa Omma, Come see the basket that I made

By Sally Moon Lee

"What am I", You ask.
What-What-WHAT
I'm not a breed, a country
a 1 - word - answer

WHO I Am - you did not ask, You
did not think,
when all I do is think and see and
feel.
Answers - answering who, not what
or where

Aware of EVERYTHING
there is sound without language
incomplete & unanswered,
it is me - without answer

Remembering her, there's no
memory.
And still I see her - somewhere
imprinted
- the lines on my hand & eye.
Sitting underneath a tree like God,
She is there, abstract not tactile
- I am left still embraced

And now its time to weave
something new
handle that heals
gathering me,
the representation of me
translucent like child

Colors I wear
- its not what I am
but what I choose.
Song, name & favorite things,
gathering self, collecting self.
For this is me, in progress of me
~ inside one's own
spiritual basket.



Food for Thought

Thoughts from the Adoption Constellation

The Perfect Mother

By Marta Barton

I placed my son for adoption at birth, almost five years ago. Since then, I have married and had another son who is almost one. During my second pregnancy, I had the need to read every book on parenting that had ever been written and to subscribe to many parenting magazines. My husband and I took every class we could find - parenting classes, newborn care, breast feeding, sibling issues - you name it we took it. I'm sure many parents take similar classes, but I felt that I had to take these classes or else....

Back then, I didn't know why I felt this need. But after reading *Birthmothers: Women Who Have Relinquished Babies for Adoption Tell Their Stories*, a book by Merry Bloch Jones about birth mothers and their stories of relinquishment, I understood. The book forced me to look at my life in a different light. One section in particular struck me with shock. I was so amazed at the similarities with my life story, I could have sworn that the author was talking about me. It was about motherhood and the need to be perfect. Reading it, I realized that I, like the mother in the book, had to be sure I was going to be the perfect mother. I still have that need.

Since I work in the area of adoption, most of the people I come into contact with daily are aware that I am a birth mother. At work, when I'm talking to people on the phone, I wonder in the back of my mind what they must think about me, what assumptions and judgments are they making because they know that I am a birth mother. Do they think I'm a bad person because I "gave my baby away"? Do they wonder if I am a recovering drug addict, or an irresponsible teenager who didn't have enough sense not to get pregnant in first place? Maybe I should just start out my conversations by answering these questions, even though no one asked them!

But then again, that wouldn't make sense. So I do the next best thing I can: I present myself as confident, knowledgeable, and I try to make sure I don't say the wrong thing. When I am conducting workshops or conferences, I always make sure to let people know that I am married and I am parenting an infant son. Somehow this makes me feel better. It's like I'm gaining acceptance as a person. In society's eyes, marriage is acceptable; relinquishing a child is not. According to that "common wisdom," adopted people are the victims, adoptive parents are the saviors, and birth parents are irresponsible people who can't parent the children they birth. These are some harsh assumptions. Many of those who read this may not hold these views, but many people who have had no adoption education certainly do.

At home, I am the perfect mother - or at least I try to be. I am also the perfect wife and perfect hostess. Many times, I go out of my way to make things happen exactly as they should. My husband tries to point these things out in a diplomatic manner, but these are evidence of my need to feel accepted. If I do more than I have to, there is no room for mistakes. My need to take precise control over every aspect of my life sometimes feels obsessive. I have a hard time leaving my son at daycare, not just because of the common fears about daycare but because I have special reasons to hate leaving him. Once a week, my husband and I force ourselves to go out without our son. This is more difficult than it sounds; each time, I replay the day I left the hospital without my first son.

In my personal life, many people with whom I come into contact, including a substantial number of my family and friends, have no idea I am a birth

Scarology

By anonymous adoptee, age 11

"Sticks and stones may break your bones but cars and bars may bring you scars."

You may think of scars as big things on people's bodies. But mine aren't like that.

Mine come from the inside. Example: One time I got in a fight, the kid called me names. Then I started crying. Then everyone laughed at me. Then that left a big scar.

Another example is one time when I was a baby my mom left me. I got really sad. She got very sad too. I will never forget that moment in my life. I wish I could make it happen that she could come to me right now. That left a big scar too.

parent. I choose to keep it a secret because I can't go through 'judgment day' every day. I don't want to go through my story again and again, explaining why I relinquished my son. When I recently told a friend that I had placed my son for adoption, she was obviously shocked. Telling her even that small bit of information drained me. Her first words were, "I could never do that." I couldn't respond to her statement. I shut down, and it was obvious to her that I did not want to talk about it anymore. So instead I began talking about the Gymboree class we had just left and about how wonderfully our children play together.

Many birth mothers probably have such experiences; I am sure I am not alone. Coming to terms with relinquishment is a life-long journey with new obstacles for us to face each day. Life presents birth parents with constant reminders - some negative, some positive - of the relinquishment. Many birth parents never have other children and never marry; many have secondary infertility. It is seldom the case that a birth parent can walk away from an adoption with no lingering legacies. But despite these reminders, challenges and difficult resolutions, I feel positive that I, along with other birth parents, can make our lives work in a way that is comfortable.

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Further reading: *Birthmothers: Women Who Have Relinquished Babies for Adoption Tell Their Stories* by Mary Bloch Jones



Confronting Racism

By Tara Kim

When I was young I used to watch Sesame Street. There was a learning game on it that taught similarities and differences. Three similar objects were shown along with one that was different. The purpose was to choose the one that didn't belong. The song would play: "which one of these is not like the other ones, which one of these just doesn't belong". I thought about this game when my family and I were out in public together. The song would play in my head. Being a Korean adoptee in a white family with a brother who was born to my parents, I always knew which one didn't belong. I personally identified with that piece of fruit amongst furniture, the lone sock amid a trio of shoes.

When my mother was young she had an in-turned eye. She later corrected it with surgery, but for 23 years of her life her eye gave her the appearance of being permanently cross-eyed. She used to tell me about the constant teasing and strange looks. My father and my brother both have cleft palates. The insults and questions they receive still make me cringe. But as a kid, when I finally realized our connectedness I felt calm. I was no longer the banana, or... well, scratch that... ALWAYS the banana, but I was no longer the sock. I fit into this family. My mother had an in turned eye, my brother and father had cleft palates, and I was Korean.

When I think about confronting racism, an image comes to mind of me approaching a shadowy figure, tapping it on the shoulder and saying "I've got a bone to pick with you." If only it could be so easy. Because I've spent a heck of a lot more time in my life being confronted by racism than the other way around. Yes, racism has confronted me. As a youth: at school, on the playground and T-Ball field. As an adult: in the workplace, in restaurants and grocery stores. That shadowy figure has a 24-7 pass. It has entry where ever I go. It has a passport and a fake ID, plays baseball, goes hiking, and occasionally hijacks well meaning friends.

Racism is demonstrated both overtly and covertly. But whether racism manifests directly or flanks you from the side, the internalization of it is exactly the same.

When I was a pre-teen I came across a poem. It was about the Vietnam War. In verse the poem described the Vietnamese villagers' eyes. It called them sloes². I was amazed. Imagine! An official word for Chinky eyes. Who would have thought? I tasted the word. I rolled it over my tongue. I imagined using it in sentences such as "she could barely see through her brown sloes" or "His eyes like Korean sloes." Later I would come across the term "double lidded eyes," which simply sounded bizarre. I never knew that I had more than two eyelids. Now they're telling me I have four! To the mirror I went. I examined my sloes. I moved the skin around; I squinted and widened, and widened and squinted at the same time. I searched for more eyelids until my eyes were bloodshot and sore. As an adult I've learned there is a cure for it. It's called blepharoplasty, upper eyelid surgery. Apparently among Asian women in America, and worldwide, it's all the rage.

(Continued on page 9)

A Lesson from Obama

Anonymous submission by an adoptive mother



As I walked down the hall of my son's elementary school, his homeroom teacher pulled me aside with a look of concern on her face. She told me that Sam was upset because another child had said something hurtful during music class. She said that she did not have the full story yet from the music teacher, but the other child said something about how "black people used to be slaves." Before she could fill me in further, the line of first grade students came around the corner. Sam ran towards me, and I bent down to scoop him up. He folded into my arms and buried his face in my chest. I found a quiet spot in the hallway. I held him, stroked his hair, and waited for his sobs to slow down. My mind was racing. I thought, "Here we go...his first racial incident at school." I ached over the fact that I couldn't protect him from such hurts. Then, his words started to tumble out.

"Matthew laughed at me. He said 'black people used to be slaves,' and he pointed at me and laughed." Gradually, more of the story came out. The music teacher was talking about the presidential primaries. She said that this was an exciting time for our country. She shared that there was a time in our country's history when black people were slaves and also when women could not vote. She told her students that we are living in a time when there is a woman candidate and an African American candidate running for president. Apparently, Matthew's comment to Sam came on the heels of this class discussion as the students were lining up. Based on my brief fact-finding, it appeared that a teacher had yet to respond to the aftermath that had occurred between my son and his friend.

My first task was to help Sam shore up, and my second task was to figure out how such a teachable moment had thus far managed to slip through the teacher's fingertips. As far as the shoring up part goes, I confess that I struggled. I'm sure I'm editing it a bit as I retell it. I recall telling him that slavery is a sad part of our history and many, many people of all colors feel ashamed about it. Sam said he was afraid to go back into his classroom because the other kids might laugh at him. Somewhere in there, I told Sam, "You are a strong, proud African American boy. Hold your head up high." I said some stupid things

(Continued on page 9)

(Confronting Racism continued from page 8)

There is a physical norm in America. And that norm is white. Images outside this norm are devalued. Is this racism? Absolutely. Is it confrontable? Perhaps. But frankly, I just don't have the time.

Many well meaning people (often who don't experience racism themselves) think every racist act, allusion, or situation is a glowing opportunity to educate and shed light. Each clever retort or well worded speech will plant seeds of knowledge and equality throughout the land. Good for them. I'm no gardener, but even I know you can't grow a seed in infertile soil. Not that I haven't tried. I've lectured about offensive jokes, I've done my share of educating, retaliating and soul searching. I own a soap box. I just don't spend time on it anymore.

Healing those psychic scars is where my energy lies. In identifying the internalization of racism, and giving it a name. In this way that shadowy figure gains mass. Just enough so I can tap it on the shoulder and Kung-Fu kick it out of my life. It's not perfect. Now and then it comes back. But most of the time, it's just enough.

I no longer believe that I am less because I am Asian. I no longer believe that my eyes are deformed, or that my skin color is sallow and wrong. I don't believe that my male counterparts are asexual nerds. Yes, I get pissed off when someone asks me for my green card, when I'm searched five times at an airport when all the white folks walk on by. I get angry when I am unheard and underestimated (because an Asian woman shouldn't have power and couldn't possibly know how to lead.) I'm annoyed when the five millionth person asks me where I come from and then stops me from answering so they can guess; "wait don't tell me", as if my ethnicity is a game for them to play. Yes, I get pissed off, who wouldn't? But I no longer internalize it. I no longer swallow it and allow it to make me less. I no longer wish I was blond.

Further reading: *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* by Frank Wu



(A Lesson From Obama continued from page 8)

too. For example, I said that it was white people who forced black people to be slaves, so Matthew (a white boy) is the one who should feel embarrassed by this part of our history. As his white mother, I think this comment just accentuated racial divisions rather than helping Sam see solutions. Sam was able to practice with me what he wanted to tell Matthew. He planned to tell him, "I'm proud to be black. Slavery is a sad thing that happened. I don't like it when you laugh about it." Task one was more or less accomplished, and Sam tentatively reentered his classroom.

Now, here's where it broke down for me. When I went to Sam's homeroom teacher to discuss what had happened, she responded emphatically, "I want you to know that I *never* told the class that black people used to be slaves." I was stunned that she thought this was what I might be upset about. I knew that maybe this was my teachable moment for her. I said that it would have been okay with me if she had discussed slavery because it is part of our history. I added, "Maybe the kids would get some practice at discussing such sensitive issues if we modeled for them *how* to discuss it more often." As I said this, I realized that many adults don't know how to model this to children. It's awkward for them as well, and they also fear making a child feel uncomfortable or singled out. Yet, how else can children learn to discuss racial differences and truths about racism in our country unless we teach them? Matthew is one of Sam's best friends. I believe he had no idea how hurtful his words were to Sam. In his mind, it was probably no different than your typical first-grade insult. While he was trying to get a rise out of his friend, he did not know how loaded his words were for Sam (and me).

This whole incident started because the music teacher was discussing the history-making presidential primaries. I applaud her for having the courage to discuss it with her class. She modeled positive, empowering language. I'm sad that she did not get the opportunity to intervene in Sam and Matthew's conversation and to assist them with the emotional fallout. That was a golden opportunity for learning as well. I'm also sad that Sam's homeroom teacher thought it best to avoid such discussion with children altogether. She had the opportunity to help Sam and Matthew resolve their disagreement but felt that it was not appropriate to go there with them. It's the homeroom teacher's response that drove me to write about this experience. I wanted to understand our discomfort as adults with discussing sad parts of our history and potentially divisive topics of conversation.

Right now, we have an opportunity in this country for adults to get comfortable talking about race and to also equip our next generation with the skills to have sensitive, constructive conversations about race. We have an African American can-

(Continued on page 10)



(A Lesson From Obama continued from page 9)

didate for the President of the United States of America. This is something to talk about with children, and children are listening. Children are interested in this presidential election. I have never had so many difficult questions posed to me by children about delegates, superdelegates, primaries, caucuses, and black ministers. As adults, it is my hope that we seize the opportunity of having interested, listening little ears. Maybe for those adults who have traditionally skirted away from such sensitive topics with children, this can be a time to take that risk. If we cannot discuss racial issues with our children, we cannot raise them to learn from our history, to understand and tolerate racial differences, or to feel pride in their racial heritage.

Barack Obama's story is an inspiration for all of us, and it is ripe with material for those white adoptive parents out there who are struggling with how to send positive racial messages to their black children. For most of Barack's childhood, he grew up with his white mother and grandparents. As a biracial child, he struggled to figure out where he belonged. He longed for a connection with his father in Kenya- with his African heritage. (Note the parallels in the adoption experience with longing for one's birthparents). He felt out of place in white circles and in black circles. Ultimately, Barack came to identify as a black man, but he also realized that he had a gift in his ability to unite people from different backgrounds.

When Barack Obama's autobiography, *Dreams from My Father*, was re-released in 2004, he wrote a preface for the new edition. In it, he commented that his mother died shortly after the publication of the book. He spoke of how she was "the kindest, most generous spirit...and that what is best in me I owe to her." He said, "I think sometimes that had I known she would not survive her illness, I might have written a different book – less a meditation on the absent parent, more a celebration of the one who was the single constant in my life" (pp. xii). Personally, I am glad that he wrote about the parent who was absent. It helped me to appreciate just how important this story (and connection) was for him. It also was comforting to know just how much his mother mattered to him. I do not have fantasies that my son will write a book about me someday. I do hope that he knows that I was there for him to wipe away the tears and lift his chin up when he was hurt by others in ways that I could not stop, nor fully understand. I also hope that I can do my part to help others to understand.

Further Reading: *Inside Transracial Adoption* by Gail Steinberg and Beth Hall



Contributors

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Ally Burr-Harris, Ph.D. - Ally is a clinical psychologist at Children's Program, and she specializes in issues related to attachment, adoption, and trauma. She is the mother of three children, two of whom were adopted transracially.

Astrid Dabbeni, - Astrid has a degree in sociology with an emphasis in adoption. She travels the country to lead youth groups, present workshops on transracial parenting, talking with children about adoption and various other workshops focusing on adoption. Astrid has worked in adoptions for over 14 years. Her life-long interest in adoption is rooted in her own adoption at the age of four with her older sister from Colombia. Astrid is the Executive Director and co-founder of Adoption Mosaic.

Tara Kim- Editor -Tara has been active in the adoption community for over 7 years. She has founded and lead adoptee community groups, lead adoptee youth groups, and served on the board of Adoption Mosaic for three and a half years. Tara was adopted from Korea at the age of two.

Sally Moon Lee - Sally is a trans-racial adoptee from South Korea. Raised into an Italian American family from Long Island, NY. She is an artist, poet and Postpartum Doula. Sally lives in Portland, Oregon with her daughter.

Livia Montana - Livia is a writer currently working on a novel and collection of poetry. Her study of literature and philosophy intensified her interest in how the adoptive experience affects triad members. She was adopted from Portugal when she was four and a half years old.

Nina Yates - Nina is a relationship and adoption counselor. She supports people who have already been working hard to feel closeness and comfort with partners, parents, children and friends yet still feel isolated or frustrated. Nina was adopted as an infant and has known her birth family for 17 years. She is a former board member of Adoption Mosaic and teacher of Adoption Readiness classes for parents planning adoption. Nina's website is www.portlandadoptioncounseling.com