

## *Connections*

*by Dianne Mathes, Re-united Adoptee & Therapist*

### *Understanding ourselves .... the lens of adoption*

*The longing to fit in,  
The need to belong.*

*The learning to watch,  
The way to adapt.*

*No way to know  
The cost to oneself*

We all come into the world with experiences. For adoptees it is a early experience of loss, the loss of birth family. With this comes , a need to understand and make sense of why this experience happened. Sometimes there is a nagging question of whether something is wrong with them. It is a natural fear that without knowing why or how this happened it could recur again and the fear of what it would be like to be alone. For birth mothers it is the loss of their child. With this comes a need to grieve this loss. Sometimes there is a question about whether they really decided. There may be fear that they did not but a shroud of secrecy about talking about it. Sometimes there can be a fear of telling or revealing the shame. There is often a need to know their child is OK and a need to know. For adoptive parents is the loss of the possibility of a biological child. With this comes a need to accept and resolve this reality. They have a desire to be a family and a fear that they do not know how to do it. There is often a need to be like other families and a knowledge that they are not and a question of how to be.

*Coping is the resolve that if even if it does not make sense one will protect oneself from further loss or being alone in their experience.*

*Adoption practice, in attempting to soften the loss experience has tried to alter the reality. It has tried to omit the harshness by focussing on the experience of being chosen by a new family. It has created beliefs that one could forget that early experience with enough love in a new family. It put forth a belief that children raised in an adoptive family would develop in the same way as children born into families. It said the early connection and role of the birth family could be ignored and that young, unwed mothers would be happier not attempting to parent babies. As the numbers of adult adoptees searching for their birth mothers increases and many birth mothers are stating that they did not feel they had any other options, we are slowly having to face the limitations of these beliefs.*

*The truth is that adoption is an opportunity for children who cannot be parented by their biological parents to be parented in another family and for adults who could not conceive to experience parenthood and family. Both the adoptive parents and the baby have experienced a loss in their lives prior to coming together to form a family. The newly formed family will be different from a family who has not come together with a loss. As a society we are unsure and sometimes uncomfortable about how to grieve losses and are uncomfortable with things which are different. The historic approach to adoption has tended to edit out the loss and difference and focus solely on the joy of the new family. The truth is that it is not possible to omit such powerful and important realities so they become secrets and unexpressed emotions which affect everyone involved.*

*This means that we need to rethink our basic premises in adoption*

***Adoption means that***

*When we lose someone very important to us at any time, it has some effects on us.*

*If it happens when we are really tiny, it's harder to understand the effects*

*Lack of connection with the missing connections and people.... adoptees with birth family, birth parents with children, adoptive parents and birth parents... means that you did not have the opportunities you needed to understand your loss and your experience*

### ***For adoptees***

*Missing this information and foundation can leave you guessing and trying on who you are and where or how you fit in the world*

*Without this "container", a solid understanding of yourself can be missing*

*Without this "container", your sense of where you fit and belong can be hard to achieve*

### ***For Birth parents***

*Missing acknowledgement and a context for understanding your experience can leave you disoriented, unsure of your reality*

*Without this "context & reality", a solid understanding of yourself & your experience can be missing*

*Without this "context & reality", a sense of where you fit and belong can be hard to achieve*

### ***For Adoptive Parents***

*Missing acknowledgement of the loss and the differences inherent in adoptive families can leave you uncertain and feeling isolated as a family*

*Without this context, a solid understanding of how to be a family formed through adoption can be missing*

*Without this context, your sense of your identity and growth as a family is hard to achieve*

*Distorting adoption means.... that you experienced this loss and then had to pretend that it did not happen*

*Keeping secrets, pretending something did not happen when it did, omitting parts of stories and truths can leave you with the feeling that something is missing or something is wrong*

*Your experience may not feel like it makes sense*

*Other things can feel that they do not make sense as a result*

*If this intuitive sense and your feelings are recognized and acknowledged, several things can happen:*

*Your feeling or experience is accepted and makes sense so*

*You learn to trust your perceptions, instincts and feelings*

*You learn to trust yourself*

*You develop ways of processing your experiences, growing in your understanding of yourself and your needs*

*This experience usually begins through two processes called mirroring and reflection*

## **1. Mirroring**

***Mirroring is the effortless experience of seeing and feeling the ways you are like other members of your kinship circle. It is further enhanced in healthy units by the experience of fitting in and belonging within the unit.***

Mirroring is predominately about seeing yourself through the ways you look like and are like other people in your family. From this experience which "just happens", children develop an internal sense of knowing about themselves, and in concrete ways, a sense of where they come from and how they belong. In healthy

units, this also develops a sense of inner safety and well being. From this place, children raised in kinship experience begin to look at the people and world around them and explore it.

In missing the opportunity to see how their children are like them, birth parents often experience a void in their lives. They may feel disoriented or disconnected from others around them as they struggle to carry on with their lives while not having a sense or way of knowing their child.

Adoptive parents are usually aware that their adopted child looks different or is different from them. They experience the reverse of mirroring, the knowing they are not mirrors in the same way birth families are. Adoptive parents need to be able to acknowledge this reality and talk about it openly, between themselves and with their adopted child(ren). If this does not occur, reality is not acknowledged and everyone has to create secrets about the situation and pretend similarities that do not exist. This begins an experience together as a family which is based on illusions not truths and everyone will be affected. The family unit will be less solid, adopted children will not feel able to talk about their differences and may become ashamed of them as well.

One of the realities of adoption is that the normal mirroring process is affected. Adopted children often do not look like their families. Even if physical resemblances exist, the "intuitive sense of fitting and belonging" often does not occur naturally. This sense of fitting and belonging is necessary .... it creates a foundation which eventually forms the basis of self-love and the beginnings of self-esteem. Adoptive families can lessen the impact by having contact or stories and pictures of the child's birth family and kinship ties available for them to augment this process. Adult adoptees who did not have these opportunities will feel that they have never fit and in adult life will have some work to do around how to belong, what belongs to them and the effect these questions have on their sense of self.

## 2. Reflection

*Reflecting is the process that occurs as we put our thoughts and intuition into words, questions and experiences and await the validation which shines back. This process creates and validates an intuitive sense of ourselves and our perception of reality.*

*For adoptees*

### *Developing an Intuitive Sense of Self*

Each child has instincts and an intuitive sense about themselves. Small children colour, play and speak with unconstrained pleasure and await the responses of adults. If adults are able to understand and validate these early expressions of identity, a child's confidence grows and they will share more of themselves. In a climate of acceptance and validation, a child's sense of themselves increases as the process unfolds many times. If there is no acceptance or validation, a child, unable to create this validation for themselves may shy away from spontaneous expressions of self. Children may begin to adapt their interests and expressions to the activities and behaviours which gain acceptance. Without explanations for why acceptance and validation do not exist, they may develop a sense that there is something fundamentally wrong with the way they are.

In adoptive families this can happen quite innocently. Interests and personality traits which would be accepted and understood in a birth family because others share them or have them may not exist in an adoptive family. In biological families, the early learning and validations are often wordless and occur as a child senses the same traits or watches Uncle Jim paint and senses the same artistic and creative ability in himself. The adoptive family who rock climbs on week-ends will not offer the same painting experience for the child unless they have enough information or connection with the birth family to know and understand the importance of these experiences.

### *Building Reality*

Reflection also occurs as children attempt to understand their families, relationships and to make sense of the world they live in. A child's world of family is reflected to them as they begin to comprehend how babies are born, and how families come into being.

By age 6 or 7, most children are able to understand that they are adopted. They are also able to understand that being adopted is somehow different than the ways babies are born into families. And they are beginning to have thoughts and feelings about it. A child knows the way he came into his family is different. In knowing about the difference, children know that their beginnings are different. And they know that the mommy whose tummy they grew in is not the mommy who is parenting and raising them. Different can be just different or different can be bad. Children need to have ways to understand their families which accept the differences and validates the child's thoughts and feelings.

If the stories don't fit the child's knowledge he will doubt his own experience. If we tell adopted children that they were chosen so they will feel loved, we are omitting the reality that to be chosen one must be given up. The child is left with no way to understand, make sense of or integrate the "being given up". If we don't give adopted children real information about their birth parents, they will make it up.

Reality is further developed as children test their perceptions of the world.

For example: A child learns early in life to detect colours. This ability is taken into life and he is able to tell that the sky is blue, the sun is yellow and so on. His ability to detect this is based on what he was taught and experience. Now if someone comes along and says no the sky is gold and the sun is black, this child will disagree and hold firm to his belief .... unless enough people tell him the sky is gold and the sun is black. He'll eventually agree but his trust in his experience and ability to detect will be harmed unless ... someone or something gives him a way to make sense out of what happened. So if the Prime Minister appears on television and explains why that the understanding of primary colours needs to change to support nature, this will make sense and he will again trust himself. However if there is no explanation and no way to make sense of why things were one way and now are another, he will doubt and question his own judgements and perceptions.

If this child is sad because the sky is gold and the sun is black (all his pictures from public school have the wrong colours), he will cry, be upset and perhaps tell someone how he is feeling. If the feelings are not accepted and recognized, or he is told that these colours are a good thing and not something to be sad about, his ability to trust his feelings and to know how to put feelings and experiences together could also be affected.

If mirroring and reflection experiences did not exist for you it would be natural to feel that you do not fit or belong. It would make sense that you feel different and yet may not have words or ways to understand the differences or that they are confused. These are normal feelings and reactions when the necessary mirroring and reflection of your experience has not occurred. .

*For birth parents  
A sense of self...*

When we are upset, hurt, saddened by a loss, confused and even ashamed or overwhelmed, we need people and situations who accept, understand and validate our feelings. In that reflection, we, over time and with support feel and work through the feelings. As it happens the experience is integrated into our lives and we move forward and on with our lives. This would not mean that a birth mother would forget her child but her internal feelings and experiences would be recognized and supported to the point that she could "take it with her" and on occasions and in situations such as birthdays she would be able to feel her sadness but not be overwhelmed or terrified of it.

If any of those opportunities for reflection do not occur, this natural process of resolution is affected. Like adoptees, if adoption does not give them a way to understand their feelings and provide these needed reflections, they may believe it has something to do with them. So a birth mother, left with no way to understand or make sense of this experience, begins to doubt herself, her abilities, perceptions and judgements. This can leave them doubting their intuitive sense of themselves and given that many birth mothers are quite young, this intuitive sense is still vulnerable and being formed. Birth mothers may blame or criticize themselves both for becoming pregnant and for their inability put this experience and their feelings behind them. This can result in feelings of guilt and shame in addition to the impacts of their vulnerable self.

The combination of not having a natural resolution and the questioning of themselves means that birth mothers carry on with their lives leaving that part of themselves behind. This can leave them feeling numb or unable to process other emotional experiences in their lives. This inability can continue to affect their sense of themselves as they become more and more unsure but less able to understand or make sense of why they do not have more trust or confidence in themselves.

### *Effect on Reality*

In addition, birth mothers experience similar feelings when they have to keep quiet and secret the fact and reality of their pregnancy, placement and child. While not being able to talk about these events makes it impossible to resolve them it also alters way they have to be in their lives and in their world. They cannot talk about their thoughts about their child, they have to invent other reasons if they are affected by seeing a child of the same age as theirs, they have to pretend that

they did have a child for family and their friends to the point that if they give birth to another child later in their lives, they are often expected to say that this is their first child.

Keeping secrets is hard work but when living the secret alters reality, it can easily affect one's sense of reality and what is real. Pretending that one event did not occur eventually filters into many other places in one's life until pretending is no longer about one situation but a way of being in your life. If you are altering reality and pretending about so many important parts, can become easier to live in the pretense than to be constantly trying to remember when to be real and when not. This can contribute to feeling isolated and disconnected from yourself and from others as you hide information about yourself and your life and you put more and more energy into pretending rather than into the reality of your life and who you are. Opportunities to understand yourself and the ways that you are different are lost.

### *For adoptive parents*

The effect on the intuitive sense of self for adoptees and birth parents becomes an effect on the intuitive sense of family for the adoptive parents. Each family must share and evolve into who they are together, the same natural process which I described earlier. If adoptive parents acknowledge and work with the loss that has brought them together and provide ways to name and celebrate the differences, then the family reflects itself in its differences and uniqueness. It will likely not look like or be like other biological families but it will have opportunities to grow and strengthen in its own natural way. But if the expectation is to be like and look like other families or the adoptive parents are not willing or able to deal with their losses and embrace the ways their adopted child is different, then the natural process is affected.

This pressure to conform will stilt the needs of individuals and the family unit and just as adoptees and birth parents learn to doubt and question themselves, adoptive parents will question their abilities as they are trying to do and be something that is not real or true to their needs or the experience and way they have come together. The family as a unit has to be able to take in information and experiences and find its own reflection in them and if the form is more important then reflection will not occur and in time only the form will exist and the family may have difficulty either as individuals or as a unit taking in and integrating experience.

### *Effect on Reality*

Adoptive parents need to be able to talk about the ways that being an adoptive family is hard and different. If they don't they are pretending to have intuitive abilities and knowings that they don't and this pretense will disconnect them from their strengths and what they do know and are good and strong at.

Over the life of a family, this can mean that individuals do not share other losses, questions and doubts about themselves. This can result in individuals and the family as a whole missing opportunities for connection and learning about how individuals grow and families work together.

This can disconnect individuals within a family and the family from other families.

If the experience of being adopted, placing a child or being an adopted family does not provide a way to accept and work with the feelings, loss and connected experiences, then the clear message is that it is not adoption that is creating the questions, and differences. In the absence of being able to look to the adoption experience for answers adoptees, birth parents and adoptive parents walk into a vicious circle. They have to find a way to cope and make sense of this. And when they cannot find acceptance or reasons in adoption, they look to themselves. They begin to believe that there is something wrong with them. This is supposed to work and it does not feel right, I do not feel that I fit so the question and possibility begins to form that the problem is with them.

### *Being Different Becomes Being Strange Experience of Strangers in Adoption*

The original assumption in adoption was that fitting or feeling that you belonged would occur automatically if you were placed in a loving family that wanted a child. Belonging would create a way for a child to fit in and feel a part of ... not different or strange.

Adoption has the effect of removing one from one's original family. Given that all families or "tribes" have specific similarities, some obvious and some subtle, adoption also removes one from this experience and the existence of mirroring and may leave in its place an experience of strangeness or being different.

It was assumed that birth mothers would place their babies and return to and reconnect with their lives. That they would be unaffected by the experience and would return to their lives in the same way as before the pregnancy ... not different or strange

Pregnancy and birth change a young girl or woman in profound ways. Placement of a baby is a life altering event. These experiences remove a young woman from her peers and their interests and focus yet as she returns to this life she will often realize how different she now is, she also does not have a reference point in a world that shares her experience for the experience is secret and hidden, thus denying her access to women who are bearing children. Even if she was allowed this connection, she might not feel she belonged there as these would be women keeping babies and planning families

It was assumed that adoptive families would easily and seamlessly mesh together and become connected with each ... not different or strange

More recent recognition confirms that all members of the constellation can experience feeling different from others and different from other families. They can have an experience of strangeness where connectedness and belonging was assumed.

Given that the removal of the birth family is total and permanent, there may not be an opportunity for the adopted child or adult to reconnect or realign with their kinship circle. This opportunity would enable them to have a reference point or way of understanding their sense of strangeness or differentness as most likely the genetic and tribal ties would provide the previously absent mirroring. While this would not necessarily create a sense of belonging in the adoptive family, it would provide the required sense of fit and perhaps, as important, would provide a way of understanding the experience of strangeness. It would also provide a way for the birth family to be a part of the experience and share their mirrors and heritage while strengthening the adoptive family through access to this information and experience. This could decrease both families experience of strangeness as together they began to understand the reasons for the differences in their child and the ways the families could support both the child and each other.

No where else does there exist such a profound experience of being different juxtaposed against the complete lack of a reference point or way of understand the experience. Gays and lesbians are sometimes viewed with fear and are seen as different. But they have a community where they can turn to for support and validation and they have a word for people who cannot accept their differences ... homophobia. New immigrants, minorities and certain racial and cultural groups are sometimes viewed with fear and seen as different. But they have a community where they can turn to for support and validation and they have a word for people who cannot accept their differences ... racist. None of that minimizes or removes the pain of being different in a world that can be fearful of that which is different but it provides two things which adoption does not

1. It places the responsibility (or attempts to ...) for the lack of understanding on the "other"
2. It names the experience and in doing so provides validation that it is not the one who is different that is the problem and that there is a way to make sense of the experience of being different

In the absence of these factors, adoptees are left to create a reference point where none exists.

Birth parents feel out of step with their peer group but have no access to a group which would provide a reference point for their experience. Adoptive families have no context for understanding their lack of seamless connectedness and no reference point to build connections upon.

Given that a sense of belonging and connectedness is fundamental to development of a strong identity and strong families, its absence is serious. Equally serious is the absence of a way to understand the strangeness and experience of not belonging, either as individuals or as families. And given its importance, if it cannot be created in one way, it must be created in another.

It is vital that we support individuals in adoption in creating the connections they need ... within themselves, within their families and in the world.