

ADOPTION ADVOCATE

NO.
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The Impact of Adoption on Teen Identity Formation

BY CAM LEE SMALL, MS, LPCC

“Cam, you’re fired. I like you, I’m cheering for you, but you broke the rules and I have to fire you.”

It was mid-summer, the camp director and I were sitting at a picnic table on the edge of a hiker’s dream of a forest in northern Wisconsin in the 1990s. I was 16 years old, wondering how to tell my parents I just got fired from Boy Scout camp for underage drinking.

My parents had walked with me through many of these milestone “mistakes.” They were so patient with me. I cannot even remember how they heard the news, but I remember feeling safe with them on the four-hour drive home after they picked me up from this not-so-fabulous moment in my life.

In a season when I had been trying desperately to fit in with the others, along with figuring out who I was in the first place, my decision-making skills were clouded by isolation and confusion, fear and doubt. I think every parent wants their child to grow up and be able to make safe, healthy, pro-social decisions. Those were abstract concepts for me back then and all I wanted was to feel a sense of belonging. I’d do almost anything to get that.

To talk about how an identity is formed in later years we need to recognize how it was disrupted in the first years. My father died when I was around two years old, leaving my Omma and me alone in Korea in

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40 YEARS
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the 1980s. Although the stigma of becoming parents outside of marriage continues to intimidate families, it was even more intense back then. Omma tried hard to raise me by herself, but after much anguish she decided to relinquish me for adoption a couple of months later.

In her book, “The Primal Wound,”¹ Nancy Verrier shares an adoptee’s insight: “Being chosen by your adoptive parents doesn’t mean anything compared to being unchosen by your birth mother.” I think I felt this back then, and so did my Omma.

I navigated two foster placements until I was eventually adopted from Busan, South Korea, to Nekoosa, Wisconsin. My environment shrunk from around 3.5 million people to just over 2,000. Perhaps more importantly, my family shifted from my Korean biological mother to a white adoptive mother and father. I think that was the biggest adjustment for me back then—besides the loss of extended family, loss of culture, loss of language, loss of everything I knew as “home” for three and a half years.

It took me about 30 years to eventually return to Korea and reunite with my Omma face to face. A lot happened in between those moments, including the Boy Scout camp, and much has taken place since. I met role models, mentors, friends, adoptees, and folks in local church communities whom I consider brothers and sisters. I became interested in learning more about who Jesus was and how there might be more to it than what I had seen growing up in Nekoosa. In my personal experience, I found and received more than I ever could have expected. I especially gained insight about the role of identity formation in the adoption narrative.

My current work as a licensed professional clinical counselor is inspired largely by that journey of loss, trauma, identity, and healing that I received along the way. It’s an ongoing path though. Adoptees navigate adoption as a lifelong experience. My aim is to walk with them, to strengthen them and give them a voice with hope and tools to press on. Every adoptee’s story is unique and it is clinically appropriate to give space for them to share it.

Separation from biological parents can be traumatic for infants, youth, and teens. The psychological overwhelm can leave long-lasting imprints on the brain, body, and soul. For me, I feel fortunate to have escaped the tragedy that developmental trauma so often perpetrates against adoptees and their families. Not everyone escapes. This topic of the “teen years” especially resonates with me as I remember that time in my own life as tumultuous and confusing. By God’s grace I was somehow carried through to seasons of restoration and joy, but not without struggle and certainly with ongoing, normative needs for help and community.

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¹ Verrier, N. N. (2003). *The Primal Wound: Understanding the Adopted Child*.

If you are reading this, you might be an adoptive parent looking for ways to support your child/teen through a particularly stressful season. You might be a professional who serves adoptees in some capacity, either clinically or at some point in the child welfare system. You might even be at the beginning stages of considering adoption, conducting some preliminary research on your own before embarking fully on the journey. Whoever you are, whatever your role, I am glad you have taken the time to read, and I hope that you gain new insights to better equip you to understand and respond to the needs of adoptees during crucial periods of identity formation.

This essay is not meant to shame or guilt you into believing certain ideas. Instead, it is an invitation for you to consider how adoption-related themes might be unfolding in the lives of those you care about, whether personally in your family or vocationally as you serve adoptees in your community. You can decide how those themes might fit or map onto their experiences and be informed about how you might participate in a way that supports adoptive identity development and other positive mental health outcomes.

When I think about adolescence and adoption as concerns in my clinical practice, I often hear something like, “How can we tell if this behavior is just a teen thing, or if it is related to adoption in some way? And what can we do about it?” Have you ever wondered that?

Let’s take a look at this poem from Debbie Riley’s book, “Beneath the Mask,”² written by a teen adoptee.

“Your Fault” by Elyse (“Beneath the Mask,” 2006)

It’s your entire fault
For causing this pain
You destroyed my life
It’s not a game
It’s all your fault
I turned out this way
Now I’m stuck with this feeling day to day
It’s all your fault
It’s your entire fault for making me feel so sad

Not all teen adoptees feel stuck in that kind of narrative. Furthermore, my aim here is not to pathologize those who have been adopted. However, I do want those who are adopted, and do feel stuck, to know they are not alone. And for those who are supporting adoptees in this season, my hope

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² Riley, D., & Meeks, J. (2005). *Beneath the Mask*. C.A.S.E. Publications.

with this article is to support your recognition of adoption-related themes as the folks under your care navigate teen and young adult stages of the adoption journey.

My key message is: Adoption interacts with adolescence. One will shape the other.

The two are woven together and must be addressed in ways that are different from the way a biological family supports their children. Teen adoptees need us to recognize, respect, and respond to that lifelong dynamic.

As an adult adoptee and now a clinical counselor, I have been working to raise awareness about adoption-related issues for over a decade. Over the years, I have come to see themes and patterns of resistance from adoptive parents, particularly white adoptive parents who adopt transracially, in many forms but mainly iterations of these five statements:

“Why can’t you just be thankful for what you do have?”

“But aren’t you grateful your mother didn’t have an abortion?”

“They were adopted as infants, so everything should be fine.”

“We don’t see color. Everyone is the same on the inside.”

“Kids are resilient. These challenges are meant to make them better.”

There are more messages, certainly, but for the scope of this essay we will consider these as the launch pad for our discussion.

The previous five iterations are typically presented by adoption professionals and faith communities to support a very positive view of adoption. I am not against using language as a form of redirection and hope, but when we use it to silence or invalidate our family members’ stories, it becomes more of an oppressive tool rather than a connective process. Perhaps even worse, when we do not provide language for our family members, we deny them the life-giving experience of being seen, known, and embraced by another. When it comes to the individuals and communities who matter to us, we want them to be accepted and nurtured as they are rather than isolated into the distorted images society pushes on them.

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Regarding whether a person's struggle is a "teen" issue or an adoption-related issue, I will explore that process through the Stages of Change model, originally formulated by John C. Norcross, Paul M. Krebs, and James O. Prochaska.³ Within this framework, we can begin to understand some basic social terms and applications for adoptive families, based on where their teens are in that journey. I should add that these are broad sweeps and generalizations. I recommend you discuss your specific family context with a mental health professional before taking significant action based on the following vignettes.

Pre-contemplation: A teen adoptee in this stage may understand on a cognitive level she was adopted, almost as matter of fact, but has not taken time existentially to reflect on what it means for her or for others involved in the process (e.g., existence of a birth/first family, their feelings about her existence, individual and contextual conditions that led to her adoption in the first place, etc.). She also may not have been given the words or the space to do so. Additionally, transracial adoptees may see their picture on the wall at home, their smile in a sea of white faces, but are oblivious to the fact that being a person of color in a predominately white community could significantly shape the way they are treated.

Contemplation: A teen adoptee in this stage begins to notice something does not feel right, but can't quite put his finger on it. He feels uncomfortable when others ask him about his adoption story. They might make a reference to the cost of adoption (e.g., "How much did you cost?"). They might even ask him why he was adopted. For transracial adoptees, friends or classmates might make jokes about his skin color or give him nicknames based on race, but at this stage he lacks the resources or language to articulate why he feels uncomfortable. He ignores his feelings or tries to mask them using sometimes maladaptive coping strategies (e.g., excessive perfectionism, people pleasing, internalized racism, self-medicating through substance abuse, self-harm). This stage might be paired with the perspective-taking model proposed by Lee and Quintana (2005)⁴. In their study of 50 transracially adopted Korean children, adoptees were found to progress through a sequence of perspectives as they understood race and ethnicity. The findings highlighted three levels of perspective taking:

Level 1: In this *literal perspective*, children make sense of racial status through considering the role of ancestry. (e.g., "To be Korean means your parents were Korean. But just because you're Korean on the outside [does not mean] that you're not American on the inside.")

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³ Norcross, J. C., Krebs, P. M., & Prochaska, J. O. (2011). Stages of change. *Journal of Clinical Psychology: In Session*, 67(2), 143-154.

⁴ Lee, D. C., & Quintana, S. M. (2005). Benefits of cultural exposure and development of Korean perspective-taking ability for transracially adopted Korean children. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 11(2), 130-143.

Level 2: In this *social perspective*, children can imagine themselves through others' eyes and can articulate social consequences of group membership, including racial prejudice. (e.g., "I guess I'm different [from white people] because they treat me differently.")

Level 3: In this *collective group consciousness perspective*, the focus is less on objective features (e.g., racial status) and more on subjective features such as psychological or emotional connection to other group members. (e.g., "I believe [what makes me Korean] is the way you feel about it... it's more what you know about your culture and how much you believe in it.")

Through those levels, adoptees might contemplate their sense of identity and belonging in a new family as well as within their new culture.

Preparation: A teen adoptee in this stage has begun to understand the depth of her adoption. She has done some emotional processing related to what it means to her and to the folks around her, subtly and overtly, and is deciding to take action to either decrease the amount of stressors in her environment or to adapt to them, externally and/or internally.

Action: A teen adoptee in this stage is making moves, regularly or sporadically, to reconcile her feelings of isolation, confusion, loss, and/or anger. She participates in behaviors that explain, confirm, or validate her experiences. She also seeks connection with others who share elements of her narrative in some way. That could be through social media, reading, engaging in film, music, poetry, theater, or other creative outlets in person or from a distance.

Maintenance: This teen is actively involved and committed to a continual learning and exploration process of self-in-the-making. They've connected to and may even be taking leading roles/positions in the community, or at least they are regularly involved in a way that leads to sustained, long-term relationships with people and causes in their immediate and surrounding circles of influence. This stage might be likened to the Achievement stage in the classic identity model proposed by James Marcia in 1980 (i.e., Diffusion/foreclosure, Search/moratorium, Identity achievement).⁵

Circling back to our question, "How can we tell if this behavior is just a teen thing, or if it is related to adoption in some way?" It is important to understand that sometimes there is overlap, or sometimes one particular aspect of a situation could have an interaction with another aspect of our adoption journey. In other words, it is both. And teen adoptees may need

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⁵ Marcia, J. E. (1980). Identity in adolescence. In J. Adelson (Ed.), *Handbook of adolescent psychology* (pp. 159-187). New York: Wiley.

our help in different ways, depending on where they are in the stages of change, and the pain-points they are holding at any given time.

“Nothing hurts like relinquishment hurts.”⁶

During adolescence, our brains and bodies are going through massive changes, and entire emotion regulation systems are undergoing major development. This can be scary for pretty much everyone involved. A parent’s hard and sacred job is to walk with their teen through that complexity. It is what Circle of Security International calls “Being With.”

Let us take a look at a case study: A family attends a routine visit to the doctor’s office. The family is asked questions about medical history. In that moment the teen reflects on the idea they are biologically connected to another set of parents, parents who exist outside of their adoptive family constellation, perhaps even outside of the community or country. They are beginning to sit with deeper meanings and implications of being adopted. On the car ride home, they become quiet, they turn inward and wonder about themes of identity, family, their origins, the “what ifs,” and maybe even a yearning of some kind for their past. The parent notices and begins asking the teen some questions: “You’re quiet, what’s up? Tell me what’s going on?” The teen doesn’t know what to say, so they respond, “Nothing.” Tone of voice might be a trigger for the parent, and now instead of realizing there could be more to it, they feel disrespected by the “rude” comment. This escalates into a heated argument. The teen’s executive functioning skills are not yet strong enough to regulate the urges of their limbic system (those fight, flight, freeze responses), and so they begin yelling. The parent assumes something is wrong with the teen. This kind of conflict is common for families, but when we are able to step back and recognize the dual processes (teen development and adoption), parents will be in a better position to offer empathetic support as both unfold.

I think about my own journey through those stages as a Korean adoptee growing up in central Wisconsin in the 1980s. My parents did everything they could to support my identity through adolescence, but now as a clinician I look back and realize there were steps that I wish we could have taken together. Here are a few:

1. Reflect on ambiguous loss.

Identity can be a fluid term. For many adoptees, myself included, we need to figure out, “Who am I?” “What do people like me do?” “Who do I relate to?” “How do I exist, internally and externally?” “What’s my purpose?” “Who’s important to me?” “Who cares about me?” “Where do I belong?”

When we are able to step back and recognize the dual processes (teen development and adoption), parents will be in a better position to offer empathetic support as both unfold.

⁶ Nydam, R. J. *Adoptees Come of Age: Living Within Two Families*. Westminster John Knox Press, Jan 1, 1999.

We must recognize that identity has as much to do with “Who isn’t here?” as it does with “Who is?” Allow birth family into conversations about “Who am I?” and “Who do I want to become?” “Ambiguous loss” is the notion that someone can be physically absent, yet psychologically present. Give space for that as adoptees hold common and appropriate curiosities over what could have been, who could have been, where are they, and why are they not here, etc.

Jae Ran Kim’s article “Ambiguous Loss”⁷ explains this well. “For most, the ritual of finalizing an adoption is a ‘joyous’ time; however, not all adopted youth understand or feel happy about the finalization—especially if the child is older at the time of the adoption. For children who remember their first parents, finalization day may actually be a reminder of their loss. The ‘gotcha’ day, or anniversary of the adoption, may be a sad reminder of what the adoptee has lost rather than a celebration of what they have gained.”

For me, ambiguous loss is about acknowledging and honoring those in our lives who enjoy and were designed to hold precious real estate in our hearts, minds, and stories; whether here and now or there and then. Please do not ask or teach us to let that go.

We have not been called to forget one another, but to love one another. Understanding ambiguous loss can support that process as we navigate our adoption stories. Withholding these opportunities can (intentionally or unintentionally) cause harm to both the child/youth and their relationship with their adoptive parents.

It can feel intimidating at times, but it doesn’t need to be a scary thing to allow space for an adoptee to recognize the loss. To sit with children/youth in their loss can actually strengthen the parent/child relationship. Trust is actually weakened when those losses are either ignored or invalidated. Even if and even when information about biological parents is uncomfortable, adoptees still face and must process that loss.

Darla Henry’s 3-5-7 model for helping children through grief has been helpful for me as I continue to process my own story and support others in theirs. Henry clarifies this journey with five questions:

“What happened to me?”

“Who am I?”

“Where am I going?”

“How will I get there?”

“When will I know when I belong?”

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⁷ Kim, J. (n.d.) *Ambiguous Loss*. Pact’s Point of View <https://www.pactadopt.org/app/servlet/documentapp.DisplayDocument?DocID=56>

Katie Naftzger, in “Parenting in the Eye of the Storm: the Adoptive Parent’s Guide to Navigating the Teen Years,”⁸ shares four skill sets that will help parents meet these unique needs of their adopted teens:

1. Un-rescue your teen (skill building)
2. Set adoption-sensitive limits
3. Have connected conversations
4. Help your teen envision their future

The next two sections will lean toward those connected conversations and envisioning the future.

2. Speak truth with dignity and respect, use strengths-based language.

Identity is also formed by the way we talk about it. And especially in the teen years, adoptees in the contemplation stage are tasked with figuring out who they are in the context of who their birth parents might have been.

“Why did they give me up?”

“What if I had been able to stay?”

“What were their interests?”

“Who were their friends?”

“Where did they work?”

“What did they do for fun?”

“How well did they do in school?”

“What was important to them?”

“Why did they choose to keep my siblings?”

“How would they feel if I searched for them?”

“Would they want to meet me?”

Strengths-based language assumes folks are doing the best they can with the tools they have at any given moment. It seeks to draw upon a person’s strengths and assets rather than their shortcomings and failures. It also gives space to hold others within their local and environmental context accountable. In other words, instead of blaming birth mothers for their decisions, how can we as a culture challenge the systems in which we live?

⁸ Naftzger, K. (2017). *Parenting in the Eye of the Storm: the Adoptive Parent’s Guide to Navigating the Teen Years*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

In “The Girls Who Went Away: The Hidden History of Women Who Surrendered Children for Adoption in the Decades Before Roe v. Wade,”⁹ author Ann Fessler shares the account of Margaret as she prepared to deliver her baby at St. Anne’s infant and maternity home: “They said, ‘Write down on this side of the paper what you can give your baby. Write down on the other side what the adoptive parents have to offer.’” Margaret recalls how they told her, “You know, he’ll not have the nice clothes that the other children are going to have and on the playground, they’ll call him a bastard.” She continues to remember, “And I believed that. I remember writing down they had money, they had a father, they had a house, and they had clothes and food. And on my side I only put down love. That’s all I did have... I signed the papers and they never told me I had thirty days to change my mind.”

The way we speak can heavily influence an adoptee’s ability to make or embrace meanings about their identity. It can be a struggle for adoptees to make sense of their situation when their adoptive family constellation (including extended family and friends) are comfortable with demonizing, dehumanizing, or objectifying their birth family. “Your birth mom was a [fill in the blank] and that’s why she couldn’t take care of you.” For adoptive parents, it helps to ask, “How does the way I talk about birth family influence the way my child feels?” A mother shared with me how a stranger once commented, “Oh thank goodness, he would have grown up godless,” upon learning the child had been adopted. The child was right there, and could hear the stranger talk about his birth mother.

Feeling “saved” solely because they were adopted is a dangerous place for both child and parent. Living as a god (or hero?) among adoptees is too much for any adoptive parent to fulfill and it crushes the adoptee. It also doesn’t leave room for the birth parents’ inherent value, worth, and potential as precious people. For the adoptee, the pressure to feel grateful can sometimes block the grieving process.

Especially in transracial adoption, there are longstanding inequities that plague communities of color, in the U.S. and around the globe, which often marginalize and disrupt families without re-evaluating the unchecked institutional values and patterns that create such hardship. Because societal institutions typically outlast the individuals within those institutions, we should ensure that adoption professionals and government policy makers understand the way social discrimination, prejudices, privileges, racism, poverty, and other injustices exert power and control over the lives of children and families. Of course, the dialogue surrounding all those layers is complex with endless nuances that exist

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⁹ Fessler, A. (2007). *The Girls Who Went Away: The Hidden History of Women Who Surrendered Children for Adoption in the Decades Before Roe V. Wade*. Penguin Publishers.

beyond the scope of this article. However, there are still actions we can take together.

One way to do that is to ask more of our adoption professionals and policymakers, so that we can ensure we have transparency on the ethics beneath their operations, appropriate and equitable fee structures, accurate information on medical and social history, aggressive efforts to avoid deceit and fraud, pre- and post-support for birth families, better training resources for adoptive parents, and more guidance and support for adoptees post-adoption. Legislatively, we can advocate for policies that benefit adoptees. For example, the *Adoptee Citizenship Act* has been introduced multiple times to the House of Representatives and Senate. The bill would grant automatic United States citizenship to international adoptees who did not obtain citizenship from the *Child Citizenship Act of 2000*—a much needed reform in the aftermath of too many adoptees being deported due to lack of citizenship.

Beliefs and related attitudes about who belongs here in the United States typically come from mediating narratives. In the book “Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery,”¹⁰ theology professor Dr. Soong-Chan Rah and 2020 independent U.S. presidential candidate Mark Charles assert, “*Because mediating narratives provide fuel for dysfunctional systems, they can hold a power that we can oftentimes overlook. For instance, there is an overriding narrative of white supremacy that fuels a dysfunctional system, the demise of that system does not necessarily mean the end of that narrative. In the United States, the narrative of white supremacy is a central theme that fuels our dysfunctional systems. The horrid institution of slavery fulfilled the narrative of white supremacy. Yet even after the institution of slavery was abolished, the dysfunctional narrative of white supremacy continued; therefore a new dysfunctional system of Jim Crow laws took the place of slavery.*”

Charles and Soong-Chan in their book go on to consider how those mediating narratives have led to the New Jim Crow, the current system of mass incarceration and disenfranchisement, which allows white supremacy to continue. We can vote. We can initiate conversations with family, friends, colleagues, and community members. We can call out racism when we see it. Those are just a few tangible steps we can take to advocate for our children as they make sense of their identity and interact with a world that seeks to minimize their identity. Strengths-based language is a practical step toward deconstructing that world, and building something better for its citizens.

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¹⁰ Charles, M. & Rah, S. (2019) *Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery*. InterVarsity Press.

For more discourse on racial identity, I strongly recommend reading “Seven Tasks for Parents: Developing Positive Racial Identity”¹¹ by Joseph Crumbley, D.S.W.

3. Identity formation includes separating from birth and adoptive family.

One of the main tasks of a teen is to differentiate from their immediate family constellation.¹² This means there is a life stage in which it is appropriate to individuate, separate, and become independent from family, while simultaneously remaining connected to some degree. Problems often arise if parents’ expectations about this period are different from the child’s expectations. With adoption, children face the additional complicated task of individuating from their birth family.

In “The Primal Wound,” Nancy Verrier writes, “During adolescence, when everyone is searching for his own identity, it becomes more difficult for the adoptee to deny the fact that he has no long-term history with the people by whom he is being reared. Not only does he find it difficult to identify his own personal history with that of his family, but he experiences a great deal of conflict around the idea of searching for that personal history.”

Even more tension could arise if transracial adoptive parents insist race does not matter. In “Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging,” Eleana J. Kim writes, “This crucial stage in the adoptee journey is one marked by disidentification in which they recognize that they fit neither the dominant mono-racial constructions of America as white nor ethnocentric constructions of Koreanness, whether among South Koreans or Korean Americans.”

Teens might need to wrestle with race, relinquishment, thinking more about their birth family, holding multiple feelings at once (e.g., anger at birth family, yearning for them, sad at their loss, confusion about information), and fearing intimacy in current and future relationships. The process of differentiation can feel overwhelming when questions come up such as “Were my birth parents in love?” “Should I have sex before marriage?” “How am I different from my birth parents?” “How am I the same?” “How does this all fit together with my adoptive family?”

I had a client who went through a season, before we started working together, in which she preferred to be called by her birth name, because it

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¹¹ Crumbley, J. Seven tasks for Parents: Developing Positive Racial Identity. Retrieved from <https://www.nacac.org/resource/seven-tasks-for-parents/>

¹² Nichols, M. *The Essentials of Family Therapy*. Pearson, 2014.

connected her to her birth family. After a while, though, she developed for herself a third name, one she created on her own, because she no longer wanted to be associated with her adoptive family or her birth family. Her thought was, "It's time for me to just be me, and I want to decide that for myself." She disclosed that everyone she ever met during that time of her life only knows her by that third name. For our sessions, she decided she wanted me to call her by her birth name, saying, "I feel like it's time to reconnect with my birth mom... and our culture."

The ebb and flow of identity formation can look and feel as diverse as the number of adoptees in the world. Once parents recognize that process, they can think of creative ways to honor and support that exploration and formation.

Poem by Lynn, age 19 ("Beneath the Mask," p 70)

I am Lucky
The Lucky Girl
Is Me
Someone who has two families
In the past and the Future
One family is Gone
And the other family is alive
I am lucky
The Lucky girl is me
Someone who has love in my heart and mind
How kind... How kind
I have cousins
I have uncles
I have aunts
I have mom and dad
And also Grandma and Grandpa
This family is still living with me
But the other family
Who is in the past
Will always be in my heart
And that memory will never fall apart
I am lucky
The lucky Girl
Is me
I have people who love me

We might feel lucky someday. We might never feel lucky. Both happen. Both are normative responses to the process of adoption.

I would never ask a couple struggling with infertility to “just be thankful.” I would never ridicule or pathologize a widow crying at the funeral. Adoptees do not get a funeral for the ones they have missed. Likewise, we should not ask adoptees to “just be thankful” or stop missing family members who are important to them. Too often adoptees get an adoption announcement or a *gotcha* day without any real meaningful recognition of the life and lives they have lost.

Adoption has a significant impact on the important stages of development not only during the teen years but throughout the lifespan.

In her book “All You Can Ever Know,” transracial adoptee Nicole Chung recalls her experience through pregnancy: “As we left the birth center, I couldn’t shake the overwhelming feeling that our baby was destined to inherit a half-empty family tree. I wasn’t even a mother yet, and already the best I could offer was far from good enough.”

Adoptees need to carve meaning into their stories so that they can feel confident, satisfied, and hopeful about who they are and where they belong in this world, from womb to tomb. That need is expressed in a thousand different ways, behaviors, tones, and intensities.

We need not feel worried or intimidated about supporting youth and adult adoptees through loss, birth family/culture, and identity formation. It is part of the story. And in that story, when we can offer unceasing, thoughtful, adoptee-centric, warm, and compassionate care, just doing the best we can day by day, they are more likely to embrace their adoption experience, practice independent living skills, and feel empowered to truly live within it, not just in their teen years but throughout their lifespan.

4. Practice patience.

There were so many ways my parents could have responded to my getting fired from Boy Scout camp—countless angles to take and any one of them could have been justified. I was struck by this one particularly because they didn’t yell. I wasn’t grounded. There were no “consequences” (apart from the real world one of getting fired). They sat with me so graciously in the afterward-seasons as I wrestled with what I learned (or hadn’t). Especially during my teen years they knew I was holding so much, as an adoptee and simply as a person trying to figure himself out.

Were there times for limits and warnings? Certainly. But without their patience it would have just been noise.

Of course there will be situational layers that prevent us from fully relating to our children with empathy and understanding. So, we ask what

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can we do? In the midst of all the loss, grief, complexity, and confusion we can demonstrate the human qualities of patience, kindness, respect, truth, gentleness, coaching, and self-control. We can do what we can to enter these conversations with our heart rate as low as possible. Developmental psychologist and early childhood expert Dr. Becky Bailey has some fun examples on YouTube¹³. Our hope is to raise adults who know how to make good decisions in the midst of stressful seasons and circumstances. Your calming presence will help them feel calm and present, so that they can work these ideas out with you, and ultimately in their own meaningful and satisfying relationships as adults.

As a teen just fired for underage drinking, I think that is what I needed. And I am thankful my parents were able to provide it.

What does that look like for you in this specific season of your parenting and practice? You get to decide. Keep trying to figure it out even when the fruit of your patience feels years or decades away. Regardless of whether or not we thank you or feel lucky for it, I'm convinced it will matter more than you can imagine.

¹³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xs7OWBj_GiE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cameron Lee Small, MS, LPCC has been working to raise consciousness about faith, child welfare, and mental health since 2012, after meeting his biological mother in Korea. He currently provides [two-night](#) and [12-week virtual workshops](#), [online counseling options](#), and a [digital workbook](#) as methods to support communities in that process.

Find Cam's daily adoption-related dialogue on Instagram at [@therapyredeemed](#)



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CELEBRATING
40 YEARS
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