

## A Gift that Only Adoptees Can Give

Adoptalk, Spring 2003  
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I'll never forget sitting next to an adoptive mom at an adoption carnival where I was speaking. At the end of the day the time came for the children and teens to come on stage and show the parents an adoption art project they had been working on.

When all the kids were in place one of the therapists yelled, "Who's adopted here?"

Everyone's hands flew up and squeals of delight burst forth from the little ones.

"Me!" they yelled in unison.

The mom leaned over and said, "I've never seen that expression on my daughter's face. Look at her! When she said 'me,' her face absolutely glowed!"

Something unique happened to her daughter that day. What was it? Was it the excitement of being with kids the same age? Was it a sense of pride about her artwork or love of the spotlight?

I don't believe so. I believe it was because she had been given a gift that was brand new to her.

The psychological drive that makes this gift so special is that it involves our basic need for connection. Drs. Brodzinsky and Schechter, adoption specialists with 30 years of combined experience, say that connection to an adoptee is like food to a starving man.

But connection to what or whom?

As an adoptee, I would guess it involves something to do with our lost heritage.

For those adopted at infancy or a young age, any connection to our heritage helps satisfy that need. Original birth certificates. A name or photo of our parents. An adoption story that included our birth parents. A reunion with our birth parents.

If we were foster kids and adopted at an older age because of troubled parents, that need for connection may manifest in an unexplainable loyalty based on vestiges of fantasy of what life might have been like had we had nurturing parents and remained in their home.

Many times this connection with our birth families is not an option. International adoptions often make it impossible. Sealed records keep vital information irretrievable. And abusive homes may make us *not want* to re-connect.

So how do we get this need for connection met?

This brings me to the second aspect of the gift. It's a gift adoptive parents can't give, birth parents can't give, or adoption professionals can't give. *Only* other adoptees can give it to one another. It's the gift of fellow adoptees and foster kids--we are a gift to one another!

In my newly released book, *Twenty Life-Transforming Choices Adoptees Need to Make*, more than 70 adoptees shared the results of connection with one another. Here's a few:

- **We Are Like Family.** Richard, a middle-aged man, says that we share a common bond that unites us across all ages, generations, races, and religions. Proof? A seven-year-old adoptee said, "With my adopted friends, it seems like we're related in some way." Susan says that adopted people are 'her people,' the way others might identify with an ethnic group. She strongly believes that connecting

with other adoptees has been just as important as finding her birth relatives. She can't imagine life without both! Kim says that fellow adoptees are some of the most compassionate and understanding people she knows. She says she feels a certain "kinship" with them. Linda says that knowing adoptees has created a wonderful bond because there is a kind of "sisterhood" and "brotherhood" amongst us that has filled some of the void of not knowing her heritage.

- **We Are Drawn to One Another.**

Not only are we like family, we are drawn together, like bees to honey! Gary said that his young daughter seemed to gravitate to other adoptees in her preschool class. Of course she didn't know they were adoptees, but there was that pull.

Sharon became good friends with another adoptee, unknowingly. When they got to be good enough friends to share secrets, guess what the secret was? You've got it! They were both adopted!

Kimberly says that her best friend is a fellow Korean and that she participates in three Korean adoptee support groups. Her first group was a group for first-generation adoptees from Korea. She says it was such a joy to find so many people with commonality as well as diversity.

- **We Have a Unique Emotional Language.**

I remember when my husband's family hosted a German foreign exchange student for a year. He couldn't speak a word of English and you wouldn't believe the extent we went to in trying to communicate. Charades. Talking louder, then louder, but nothing seemed to work.

Remember the need for connection we talked about earlier? Well, this unique language of adoptee relationships helps fill the void. If you sit in an all-adoptee support group and an adoptee bares his soul, you will notice that it is so quiet you could hear a pin drop and if you look around the circle, you will see heads nodding in agreement and tears flowing in empathy.

It's so wonderful to be with people who have "been there" and walked down a similar path. I remember one male adoptee coming into our support group for the first time. Later he confessed that he had tried many other support groups previous to joining ours and that because he didn't really have a sense of who he was, he would become like a chameleon and act like everyone else in the group. He said when he entered our group, it was as if he was looking at himself and it scared him to death!

Sherry says that adoptees can "read" each other from just a few words or their body language, which she says makes adoptees feel like they belong to each other.

- **We Can Freely Vent Our Feelings.**

I (Sherrie) have been in many different kinds of support groups, but nothing compares to the experience of being in an all-adoptee support group. There is such transparency and honesty. If we are in an adoption support with other members of the adoption triad, we are guarded, for we don't want to hurt anyone by sharing our innermost thoughts. But with all adoptees, it's wide open.

I remember one twenty-something male adoptee who blurted out, "Adoption sucks!" Bless his heart! That was what he was feeling at the time and

how wonderful that he had the freedom and courage to say it. Others laughed because we have all felt that way at one time or another.

It says in the Bible that “iron sharpens iron” and that is another aspect of venting our feeling freely. In the dynamics of a support group it only takes one member to say exactly what they are feeling and that seems to be a signal to others that they can do the same.

- **We Don’t Need to Explain Ourselves.**

Fellow adoptee, Connie Dawson, Ph.D., says that it’s such a relief not to have to explain herself or protect herself from the judgments she feels are so often there when someone “finds out” she’s adopted. She says, “It may have something to do with adoptees being ‘rejects’ or something. Sometimes I think people feel at a primitive level we have experienced abandonment and they pull back because their worst fear is being abandoned. And we’ve already experienced it.”

I remember my therapist saying, “Sherrie, I can go to the mat with you.” I didn’t know what she was talking about at first. But I later learned that she had already worked through her pain and could go with me into mine.

- **We Are a Huge Net of Safety for one Another.**

Many of us have been in therapy, some of us for years. Some have gone to numerous therapists, like yours truly, until finally the “I-have-it-all-together” mask is broken down and we learn to open up and be real. That’s a huge step for those of us who are terrified of intimacy with another! Therapists can teach us many wonderful tools, like learning to trust others, learning to trust ourselves, learning how to be mentored and coached, and learning how to feel safe.

But therapy is temporary no matter how many therapists we go through. I confess that after seven years of weekly therapy and thousands of dollars, one of my vivid memories is pouring my heart out and then when time was up, seeing the back of the therapist as he/she went to the next appointment. To the therapist, it is a professional relationship. A business-type relationship. But to me, it was personal and even though therapists can help us grieve the loss of their presence, abandonment issues are often triggered. They were for me.

Fellow adoptee, Joyce Maguire Pavao, who has tons of credentials after her name, says this about her type of therapy: “There is a completion of each stage of therapy, but no ‘termination.’ The word ‘terminate’ is too loaded for those who have suffered the losses associated with adoption. The therapist or team of therapists remains available for consultation and therapy. This avoids the emotional cut-off and loss that are primary issues in adoption.”

Therapy is not only temporary, it is limited. It can fall short because most physicians and therapists and physicians haven’t had specific training in regard to adoption issues. They “don’t get it” many times. Dr. Pavao said in an article in *Family Therapy News*, “There is no real training in professional schools regarding adoption. In social work programs, there is perhaps one case study. Certainly there is nothing in marriage and family therapy or psychology graduate programs, unless someone makes it his or her dissertation. Even then, it is hard to find faculty who understand the issues and have experience in this field. The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) occasionally offers one

or two workshops on adoption at its national conference. But this subject is under-represented at all mental health conferences.”

I must add here that I was very encouraged at the last NACAC Conference to learn that there is a national association of adoption pediatricians, so things are progressing but there’s still a long way to go.

The therapist par excellence is a fellow adoptee, but don’t necessarily assume that because the person was adopted that they have worked through their own adoption issues. One of my friends went to such a person thinking that she would “get it,” but she didn’t.

It must be a fellow-adoptee who believes that adoption is a life-long journey that can teach precious lessons and that is working to learn those lessons on a daily, monthly, and yearly basis. We are blessed to have these *rare* individuals, such as Betty Jean Lifton, Connie Dawson, Dirck Brown, Joyce Maquire Pavao, and Joe Soll.

But when therapy is over and it’s time to say good-bye to our therapists, we are at a vulnerable point and we need a huge safety net to fall into. You know...like the kind they have at the circus for tight-rope walkers.

What is that net?

You guess it!

Friendships with fellow adoptees! We may have to say goodbye to therapists, but with one another, we can be friends for a lifetime.

Wouldn’t you agree with me that friendships with fellow adoptees far surpass weeks of psychotherapy? Besides, it’s free!

- **We are like Triple-Chocolate Cake.**

I never had an adoptee friend until I was forty-five. Her name is Jody. She had just moved to Indianapolis and was looking for adoption literature from a biblical perspective. One Sunday she visited a church and noticed a newspaper that had a headline about adoption. She read the article and found that it was biblically based and written by me. She called and got my number, we soon met for lunch, and the rest is history! We spent hours in our favorite little tea room sipping spiced tea and “talking adoption.”

Life doesn't get much better than that!

We found that we not only had the bond of adoption but also the bond of faith. I am a firm believer that you can read all the psychobabble you want and it may help some, but true healing must involve the spirit because we are made up of body, soul, and spirit.

We found our match, and looking back, I can say that not having a fellow adoptee for a friend was like going through life and having missed triple-chocolate cake!

One feature of my new book is that there is a section at the end of every chapter, encouraging the adoptee to make a life-transforming decision.

What do you think it would be after our discussion?

It's not difficult to figure out! Our choice is to connect in meaningful, supportive relationships with at least one fellow adoptee.

“Well, how am I going to do that?” I hear some of you saying. “I live way out in the boonies in Montana and there's not an adoptee within miles.” You might be

surprised. Just try putting an ad in your local newspaper and say you are starting a support group for adoptees. Even if it's just two or three, it still can be wonderful.

The organization that I founded in 1995, Jewel Among Jewels Adoption Network, Inc., has four adoption-related workbooks that you could use as springboards for discussion. They are very user friendly and make it easy to lead a group. We will do whatever we can to help you get started. Just come visit us at [www.adoptionjewels.org](http://www.adoptionjewels.org). We have many resources for you, including eight years of archived newsletters, featuring articles for anyone touched by adoption.

The most eye-opening experience for me after meeting Jody was attending the national convention of the American Adoption Congress. I couldn't believe all the adoptees that were there! Scads of them. Some of them I am still in contact with. So do a word search for adoption organizations on your computer and see what is available.

I guarantee you, fellow adoptees, that if you connect with other adoptees, your face will glow like the little girl's at the adoption carnival!