

## Adoptees as Parents

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This article examines the personal experiences of an adoptee who has become a mother of her own biological children. The article touches briefly on the challenging relationships between the adoptee and both the adoptive mother and birth mother. Details are discussed regarding deep emotional feeling that arose during the adoptee's time of pregnancy and birth. The article talks about cellular memory experiences and the impact those had during pregnancy. There are details on how being an adoptee may have affected mothering styles and how issues arose during this time that were influential in the adoptee gaining a deeper understanding of the impact of adoption. The article does note that there were similarities with other adoptees that had become mothers investigated during the author's research.

Before I became a mother, I thought that I had dealt with the many issues I had surrounding my being adopted. I had no idea, though, of what was about to be revealed to me during pregnancy and the early weeks that followed my children's birth, particularly my first child, my son. When I finally decided to write about my experience as a mother in my book, *Chasing Away the Shadows; An Adoptee's Journey to Motherhood* (Phillips, 2004), one of the driving forces was that I wanted to know if other adoptees had felt the same as me. I needed to know I wasn't crazy and I longed for identification. I interviewed women adoptees that had become mothers, and I began to see a pattern. It was incredibly liberating. There was a similarity in our feelings of connection to our babies, our fears, and our sadness.

I had always suspected that there was a deep grief that lay within me, because I had spent many years as a young child feeling it. As a teenager, I tried to suppress it by acting out in ways that were indeed extremely harmful toward myself. I was constantly running. I did not want to slow down and feel. I eventually reached a rock bottom and began to get help for myself. The topic of adoption was discussed, but not with someone who really understood the adoption dynamics.

I searched for, and reunited with, my birth mother. It was an incredibly difficult reunion, and without the right support, I mainly felt overwhelmed with my feelings and depressed when I had the clarity that the reunion itself was not going to fix me. If anything, it was going to make me have to face myself. I knew I was in trouble, but for many years I did not know how or where to get the correct help that I needed. I did not, during this time, seek comfort from my adoptive family.

## MOTHERS

My relationship with my adopted mother, in particular, had always been very tempestuous. And I didn't ever feel as though I could discuss with her what was going on in my life. We had an extremely difficult time communicating and argued constantly. I was born and raised in London, England, and sometimes I thought that the reason my mother and I were so conflicted was because of the way my mother was raised by her parents living through a World War and having had the experiences she had.

But regardless of the differences of our childhoods, I realized somewhere inside myself that there was a very deep misconnection between us. And even though I never doubted that my adoptive mother loved me, I felt that she didn't like me, the person I was, the way I thought. We seemed to conflict on so many levels. I always felt that I was the wrong daughter for her. And yet, admittedly, there were things that I didn't like about her, and for years we just never really understood each other.

I never told my adopted family that I was searching for my birth family. I needed to absorb each piece of information alone, and I needed to focus. I knew that if I told them, I would be worrying about their reaction and people-pleasing. I also knew I couldn't afford to take on the guilt of upsetting my mother that was a constant struggle, and the fear of them abandoning me.

On meeting my birth mother and finally looking at someone who resembled me, I definitely felt some sort of connection. And yet, I also felt a bigger sense of loss, which I hadn't anticipated. Time could not bring back those years of separation. Time could not give me the kind of relationship that my newfound brother and sister had with our mother. I was still an outsider. I was extremely young emotionally at that time in my life, and I was very unprepared for the reality.

I did indeed go through the honeymoon period when my birth mother called me dutifully every day. Often, I would not answer the phone. I didn't know how to cope and I felt extreme guilt toward my adopted parents. I did not feel free to enjoy my new relationships. I was secretive and always felt that I would be seen or found out.

I also didn't know what to do with the deep feelings, which I now recognize as grief, that surfaced so easily. Tears wouldn't stop when I was around my new family and howls so deep and primal came from within me every time I left their house. It scared me and I think it scared them. "Why can't you just enjoy us now?" my birth mother would ask. "The past is gone; we are together."

I couldn't explain in words. I knew what she meant, but I didn't know why I couldn't stop crying. Yet the tears were indeed familiar, the howls comforting because I knew that I had held onto these feelings all my life. Finally, they were allowed to come out.

The initial contact lasted a year or so. I wasn't honest. I was becoming more and more angry. Why didn't my birth mother understand how I felt? Why didn't she say how sorry she was? Why did she keep making excuses for what happened to me? Wasn't she going to be the one that would be on my side? Wasn't she going to protect me and stand up for me? Aren't those dreams of finding comfort from a mother going to come true? Isn't that what a mother is: full of unconditional love?

My birth mother had issues too, and I didn't know that she would have feelings of anger and guilt, feelings that she had stuffed away for so long. She had so many emotions toward her parents, but for some strange reason I began to become her target. The anger got misplaced and I began to

feel the same way I felt with my adoptive mother; that my birth mother didn't really like who I was either, and I didn't trust her.

Our relationship was on and off for many years. Now we have reached a time in which we are in sporadic contact. I had asked many times for information on my birth father after finally realizing that, yes, there had to be a man involved. I still today have little information. I know that my father was an Italian working and living in London, and that piece was extremely important to me. My birth mother says that she has given me all she knows; she regrets that she doesn't remember his last name. And maybe that's true, but it did not come from her easily; it did not flow. I have always had to ask. Every conversation was guarded and strained. I never felt allowed to ask, because I knew it troubled her, but I could never tell why exactly. Was she holding a secret? Was it worse than I imagined? Or maybe she just felt deep shame and embarrassment that she had had sex with a man she barely knew.

The main piece I was so shocked about was that she truly did not want to understand my need to know. She has never willingly helped me, and I haven't ever been able to understand why she wouldn't search every corner of this earth to help me find him. My birth mother had her own feelings surrounding my birth father. I had never known to consider any of this when I did my search.

## MARRIAGE AND PREGNANCY

I visited the United States in 1993, where I finally met the man that I married. I had never intended on living in America permanently, and I missed my home, but it gave me the space I needed to deal with my adoption issues in a way that I don't think would have been possible if I had stayed living near both my families. I had truly thought that I had cried all the tears surrounding my being adopted and grieved my imperfect relationship with my birth and adoptive mother. I was in for a surprise.

I didn't realize that they were all about to burst open when I embarked on marriage and motherhood. My husband didn't know either, but soon learned very quickly about the issues that come up now being the spouse of an adoptee! Before we got married, I had gone into therapy for my adoption issues, finally with a therapist who worked specifically with adopted people. It was suggested as an investment into our future from a knowing friend. I agreed a little apprehensively, but yet I knew I was still struggling. Deep within myself, I still had a lot of feelings to work out surrounding my families.

It had taken me a while to commit to getting married, and I still had a lot of insecurity about trusting another human being, so I began to test my husband in various ways to see whether he would stick around. Amazingly, he did. Now he's armed with adoption reference books to know that it wasn't actually about him! But I still tried and tried and then finally surrendered, ready to be rid of this annoying sabotaging behavior.

I started to read every suggested book on adoption: *The Primal Wound* (Verrier, 1993), *Journey of the Adopted Self* (Lifton, 1995). You name it; I read it, absorbing every last word on the page. I finally began feeling a connection and understood. I began to attend adoption support groups.

During this short 6 weeks of marriage, I became pregnant with our first child. I was truly shocked. I really had felt for most of my life that I was infertile like my adoptive mother; that I was different from other women. My adoptive mother had briefly talked to me about her difficulties in conceiving, and I knew that she had had many miscarriages. I had never liked to ask her any more

questions about it. I knew it was not an easy subject for her. For some reason, I took it on that I couldn't have children even though I adored babies. My adoptive father told me just recently that I was telling everyone that I would have four children when I was grown up, and I was only four years old at the time.

I told my husband that there could be a chance that I couldn't get pregnant and that we should try straight away; also I said that it could take people months to conceive. My husband, however, did not have the same fears as me and said that he really thought there wouldn't be a problem.

It was extremely important to me that he wanted the baby too. I wanted our children to be conceived when both partners were in agreement. The first month we tried, I was pregnant. I took one test; it was positive. I did another test later that day. I then went to the doctor and had one blood test, although he assured me that I didn't really need it, that pregnancy tests were accurate. That one came back positive too. The next morning, I did another test just to make sure it hadn't gone away.

I was floating on air. I couldn't believe that it had happened to me, that I could get pregnant like other woman. I was extremely sick during my first few weeks. I could barely get off the sofa. At the time I wasn't working, just waiting for immigration papers, so I was able to read about babies. The subject consumed me and I couldn't wait.

I worried a lot that I would lose the baby, but once past the first trimester I began to relax a little. It was still difficult for me to believe and trust that the baby would stay with me. I spent many hours in the bookshop looking at pictures of the baby's stages of development and would sometimes cry as I looked at the strange budlike creature, thinking how beautiful he was, totally unaware of other shoppers around me.

I did worry that there would be something wrong with my baby; doesn't every mother? I still couldn't believe that my body would know what to do; I felt incredibly powerless. I had a couple of dreams that my baby had two heads and looked like an alien and yet I adored him. I fell totally, madly in love, and when I woke up I was so happy because I knew that even if my baby were handicapped in any way I would still love him. I didn't want to find out the sex of my baby, but I felt so strongly that I was having a boy.

## CELLULAR MEMORY

I think I was about 6 or 7 months pregnant when I began to have what I now know is a cellular memory experience. At the time I wasn't quite sure what that meant, but I knew that it was something very deep. I had been reading a book called *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child* (Verney, 1981), which describes in detail the way a baby remembers and is all-knowing. It resonated deeply with me. I knew within myself that babies knew everything, that somewhere within them they held the memory because I had that feeling my whole life. That is the simplest way to describe cellular memory—the body remembers before there were words; the memory is retained literally in the cells.

I found myself waking in the middle of the night with what I can only describe as a boulder inside my stomach wanting to erupt out of me, and I did my best to keep it inside. But it became impossible. I sat up as if I were going to vomit and opened my mouth and began to howl from the deepest place within, and it took a life of its own. I began to feel myself going down a tunnel and my husband, who had awakened, told me to lean back on him and let it all out. I tried, but every

time I came to the end of the tunnel I would scream “No!” I couldn’t do it. My husband said the sounds were like that of a baby.

I had a few more nights like that at various times. I would go to bed, I thought quite happy, and then I would awaken from a deep sleep and start the crying again and the same feeling took over me. But I would fight it. I never let myself totally go. I was too scared.

A few weeks before my baby was due, I began to have birthing dreams, yet I never did see myself give birth. In my dream I would go to the hospital and ask to collect my baby. I would tell the nurse that I had given birth the night before and that I wanted to bring him home. It was like I was waiting in line for a prescription!

My water broke and it was time for me to go to the hospital, but I started telling my husband that I didn’t need to go. He looked at me quite strangely and called the hospital. They told him to bring me in straight away. I told him that we didn’t need to bring the bag, that they would probably send me home. By this time he was looking very concerned and looked at me directly and said, “Zara, you are going to have a baby.” When we got to the hospital I was genuinely surprised when they admitted me!

The birth wasn’t easy. It was extremely long and, although I didn’t realize at the time, my contractions slowing down at the crucial time put my baby in extreme danger. Luckily, after a vacuum extraction, I delivered a healthy baby boy. As soon as my child was born, I didn’t want him out of my sight. I wouldn’t allow the nurses to take him away from me, and if he had to leave the room, my husband carried him. I felt an immediate deep connection towards him.

Once I was home from the hospital, some nightmares began to start on a regular basis. I hadn’t had nightmares since I was a child. The theme was the same: Somebody was trying to take my baby away from me, or I was trying to find him. I would awaken in a panic and find my baby sleeping either beside me or in the living room with my husband (to give me some rest). It would take a while for me to calm down once awake to know that everything was OK. The panic of being separated from my baby, which I felt during those nightmares, was hard to take. It was, I believe, the feeling that I had been trying my whole life to avoid.

## NEWBORN

I had the feeling that my baby was very noticeable to people (well, he is gorgeous), so much so that I thought he would stand out in the crowd among everyone else, and that made me feel vulnerable. I felt extremely protective toward him when out in public.

The most difficult days during this time were being around other mothers and not being able to talk about what was really going on with me. I didn’t think I could throw into general conversation that I had been up all night rebirthing! I was also terrified that someone would find me an unfit mother and take my child away.

I could never leave my baby alone in a room by himself. I thought he would somehow disappear or vanish into thin air. I would find myself hurrying into the room to check on him in a panic, but he was always there sleeping soundly. I decided to carry him with me at all times in a snuggly. I never told anyone the real reason I needed him with me at all times.

I would stay awake a lot at night and I remember my husband saying, “Zara, you have to sleep. He will be OK; you cannot guard him all night.” My son was such a gift to me in my healing. He enabled me to get in touch with parts of myself that were so buried and yet so familiar.

I had, until that point of becoming a mother, always thought of myself as a mistake. It was a negative voice in my head and one that I fought against. But in my son's early weeks, as I was watching him sleeping, I had a profound awareness, so strong, of how perfect he was, of the magical quality of the newborn, and I knew that he wasn't a mistake in any sense of the word. And I knew then that I wasn't either—that if I kept calling myself a mistake then I was saying the same to my baby. And I knew that it was no longer true.

As my son grew, I was also very aware of my protectiveness toward him and that I didn't want to hold him back. But it was an incredibly difficult balancing act. I did get baby sitters, but would take them with my son and me to where I had to go. When I did finally leave him with them, I would check up a few times.

I chose to breast-feed my baby and have him sleep in the family bed, even when people appeared judgmental and asked when I was going to stop. But I knew in my heart of hearts that it was right for us, that a baby at such a young age needed to be close to his mother and that the mother needed to be close to him. I also knew that, at the appropriate time, we would be able to move on.

## GUILT AND COMPASSION

I felt an incredible amount of guilt toward my adoptive mother during this time. I felt guilty for getting pregnant so easily, and guilty that I could breast-feed. I had carried a lot of her feelings for many years. I knew that I had to start separating them and it was OK for me to be happy. I was allowed. I began to see that I loved my adoptive parents, and I knew that in their own way they truly loved and wanted the best for me.

However, this blood, this genetic connection I had with my baby, this feeling of intuition that I had around my son, a feeling of just knowing him, was something I had never experienced before. I felt motherless in the sense that I wasn't able to talk to my adoptive mother about pregnancy or birth or breast-feeding, since she really didn't have any experience in those areas. I also felt that when I tried to talk to my birth mother about pregnancy and my birth, she chose to shut down, because it was too painful for her. She had buried my birth story for many years and didn't want to go back there. I did, however, find mothers who could help me along my new journey and that was indeed very helpful.

When my son was 3 years old, I had a miscarriage that truly devastated me. The loss was profound. And even though I had only been pregnant a few weeks, it seemed to ignite all my issues. I felt scared that other things could be taken away. It took a long time for me to get over it. My miscarriage, though, turned out to be a gift in disguise, as it led me to have more compassion for my adoptive mother. It allowed us to have a moment of connection as we talked about the affects of miscarriage, as she finally revealed to me in one line her despair and grief.

"It made me feel like I wasn't a woman, that there was something wrong with me." My mother's comment helped me understand her in a way that I never had before. I began to grieve for her and for me, and again I began to be able to separate what was hers and what was mine.

I became pregnant a few months later and gave birth to my first daughter. I had a doula during my pregnancy, and we did a lot of meditation. I remember her saying to me "I want you to go back and feel a connection to all the women in your family who have given birth."

I looked at her as though she were mad. What did she mean? I had known my birth mother for so many years at this point, but I still didn't feel a strong sense of belonging to her family. I had no

sense of before me, a connection to other women. It had always felt like a blank page. We talked then about all women having babies since time began and, as hippy-dippy as this sounds, that somehow was easier. I began, very slowly, to imagine all the women in the entire history of the world who had come before me giving birth, all the generations of women who had babies so naturally, and I tried to visualize myself as part of those women, that I was connected—and it awoke some part of me, some memory. I was part of the human race.

During my daughter's birth, I had the same experience with my contractions slowing down, but the birth was slightly easier. I parented her in those early years the same as my son, and even though I experienced panic at the thought of being separated in any way, I was able to talk my way through it. It wasn't as intense.

When my daughter was 2 years old, along came her sister, who looked just like their brother. My younger daughter's birth was so much easier than the others. During my pregnancy with her, I had a very vivid dream that I saw myself give birth. When I awoke, I felt extremely strong and excited. The genetic likeness of my children never fails to amaze me. I am sure that they are tired of hearing me talk about it.

My eldest daughter resembles me the most. As she is getting older, I find myself literally doing a double-take as she walks past. For a while, I felt that I had been replaced. I am fascinated with her body shape, the fact that her legs are like mine, and her smile, and her mannerisms.

When I see my children all together, the similarities between them are something I always notice. I have pointed it out to my husband a lot, and he will say, "Yes, they look alike. They are brother and sisters. This is what it is like to be in a biological family." And I reply, "Yes, isn't it weird?"

I have, though, learned the hard way that I cannot be the super-mother I want to be. It is not realistic and I have indeed made many mistakes, which I have taken to heart. I have had to learn to be gentle with myself, because some days I really feel that I haven't a clue how to do this mothering. I tell my children I love them a lot and I acknowledge their talents, something that amazes me when I see them from my husband's family or from mine.

## MOTHERING

I want my children to be free to talk about their feelings and, probably because of my upbringing, I am more zealous about it. Sometimes my children look at me, their eyebrows raised, "Mom, we are fine." And I have to remember again, "Oh yes, they aren't me."

Motherhood is challenging for the best of us. I realize, as my children grow older, that I do take the good and the bad from my adoptive mother. I say things so much like her some days that it makes me laugh. As for my birth mother, I really don't know how she parented her other children and what I take from her. Since I have met her, she has always been generous in her present-buying, but not with her emotions.

My adoptive father, on the other hand, has always been extremely rigid with present-buying and particularly with spoiling children. As a small girl, I took it so personally. I would feel crushed when I was told that I couldn't have this or that, because I took that as I wasn't good enough. When my children were little, it was almost as though I wanted to make up for that part and buy them everything. Or maybe I was buying for myself. Luckily, having three children makes it too expensive to go too crazy. But I do enjoy giving them presents. I am, admittedly, completely over the top with my children. Birthdays are a fun, special day for my children, probably because I have never felt good on my birthday.

Every holiday we decorate, buying some and making others. Right now, as it is close to Chanukah, our house looks like a cross between a winter wonderland, with homemade snowflakes covering the ceiling, and tinsel town with dreidels thrown in. I want so much for my children to feel a part of the family. I don't like it when I think my child may not be feeling good, or when one of them teases the other. I don't want them to have the feeling of being left out.

I also have had to learn that it's OK for my children to have their feelings, that it is essential for them to experience not having what they want and to wait for something special. I also have to be aware that my children are not me. They may look like me, but they are not adopted. They are not searching for their birth mothers secretly. My children do not have the same issues as I do. I see my daughters with their father and it easy to see the bond and love they share. They adore their daddy.

I have had to admit to pangs of jealousy with my children, at various phases in their lives, that they will have what I haven't, and yet the joy of seeing them interact with their father is again a gift. I still look for my father on the street or on TV, and I wonder about him and his family. I know he is Italian and I am sure that I would carry some of his mannerisms. I look for clues in my children to who he is and what he looks like.

Motherhood has been the greatest gift in my life. I would have had ten children if I could. My children are now 10, 6, and 4, and that baby connection is beginning to go. They are becoming more and more independent. Some days I want that early feeling back, and I realize that when I am feeling separate from the human race (which still, regardless of being in this wonderful family, can take me over and want to swallow me up), I want to have more babies. But I realize it's the connection I want, the feeling of being part of another person when they place that new baby on your chest, when I truly felt a part of someone else. The truth is, I don't have to go and have a few more babies to get it. I just need to connect with my children and stay present with them here and now.

This knowledge hasn't, however, stopped my loving babies. I still do, and any chance I get I will happily hold and cuddle one. Luckily, being around mothers with young children, they are usually thrilled for the break when I offer. I feel incredibly calm when I hold a baby, and often I will get lovely smiles and have various interesting baby conversations.

My children are growing and will always tell me about their friend "who is adopted, Mommy, like you." This reminds me of when my son was three years old. He was talking to some workmen in our house, and as I passed the doorway I heard him say, "My mom is just like Superman." They looked at him curiously and didn't answer. He said it again, "My mom is just like Superman."

I waited quietly, thinking, "Me, Superman?"

"She's adopted," my son said, "just like Superman." I was thrilled. I was being compared to his superhero, and I knew that was an incredible compliment.

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