

WHO IS MY MOTHER WHO IS MY FATHER, WHO AM I?

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Let me begin by thanking COWAP and my friend Arlene for inviting me to speak on this topic that is so dear to my heart. In thinking about this moment I was torn between deciding which of the many anecdotes that I have about becoming an adoptive mother would be the most appropriate to start with. I could not begin writing until I decided. At last I did! I would start with the invitation to be here today.

I received an email from Arlene who told me about the COWAP program which of course I found most interesting. Then she mentioned she wanted me to speak at this about interracial adoption and to make sure I included my own experience as an adoptive mother and as a psychoanalyst. I was of course, both happy and flattered but could not figure out why she wanted me to relate my comments about interracial adoption.

I will tell why this is funny. First of all because my husband is Japanese born, and I am Mexican born. (as you can see not of Japanese origin) Any of you who are familiar with the Japanese culture will know that they are very conscious about racial differences and racial continuity. This was an issue when we married and decided to have children. "What will he look like?" my husband said?. It became clear to me, back then (30 years ago) that it was more important to him than it was to me. I answer lightly: "very beautiful, of course, since we are both good looking". I don't know how convincing I was, but I

became pregnant and a truly beautiful boy was born. When I decided to go for the second one, I wanted girl, and of course thought, she would be as beautiful as our first child.

Well, that did not happen. I tried everything available to me, back then and the bottom line was that I was too old. I was very sad, because my age, closed the door also for a regular adoption. We (I should say I) spent years trying unsuccessfully to adopt a baby girl. I was offered boys ages 6 to 11, several times but it was not what I wanted. In all my work with adoptive parents I always insist they should be very clear as to what they want in age and gender and not be embarrassed by it. Becoming responsible for a child is always a blessing but it can also be a burden, so one must be clear about what one want.

Of course there are always doubts, obsessive thoughts, for instance, I had thought a lot about settling for what I could get, after all I was too old to be picky. I had also thought a lot about insignificant issues such as, what school would I send her to?. I worried because, being adopted she could be bullied by her peers. I also worried about the possible differences of skin colour if she were to be (as most children are in Mexico) from a rural origin and therefore dark skin. All of that concerned me but did not torture me, as I thought I could handle it all, except she had to be a maximum 12 month old baby girl. My husbands conscious doubts were more related to the racial and cultural differences and how would she be accepted.

Many years went by, and I had lost hope. I fully understand the torture a women goes through when she finally decides to adopt a child and there are

endless obstacles on the way and it begins to look impossible, It can become an obsession.

Our son had finished High School and he was on his graduation trip before entering the University. I thought it was all behind me (I was 54 years old) and I had sadly settled for not ever knowing what it would be like to have a daughter.

One afternoon I received a call from a niece telling me that, “I have a baby girl, her mother died, and I remember you always wanted a girl. We don’t know what to do with her. She looks a little bit like Kiyotaka”. (that’s my husband) After that I really don’t remember much. I said, that I would be over the following day to pick her up. I had to drive to my home town 4 hours away. When I said I understand obsession, I meant that I’ve been there. I called her back and confirmed her age and more or less her health status. It all seemed to be in order, she seemed healthy and she was between 9 and 11 month old. Couples are bound to have differences of opinion even in important situations. Sometimes one or the other takes the initiative and the responsibility for a specific decision! I laid out my plan. I would leave early next morning. I organized my extend family and secured their support, and of course I could not sleep all night. I left without much explanation as to why I was going home.

!!! I will never forget the first moment I saw her. Small, thin, frail and completely still. I came up to her, she threw her arms around me and hug me tight around my neck. She was completely still and allowed me to press my cheek against hers. It was a moment to remember and savour forever. Having had an ADHD son I was in great need of a baby to hug that would accept me and respond to me.

I realize now, that at the moment I never thought about her skin colour or that she was racially different than me and my husband. I think, and as a psychoanalyst I know, that we are really searching for far more than we are consciously aware of. I needed a baby to hug!

I said “She is mine forever”. I said what I had to, and signed everything I had to, to leave with her in my arms. You are probably wondering, what about the father?. As you can already imagine, when he saw her and she threw her little arms around his neck, he sat for hours not moving so she would sleep comfortably. Never did he say anything about her difference and he is convinced, and so are many members of my family, that she looks like him and is as Japanese as our son. Sometimes I think he feels she is even more so

This is the happy beginning, and then came reality. How do you incorporate a baby in your life whatever your life is at that moment? How do you make space emotionally and mentally all of a sudden for a new person. How do you make her feel she belongs? How do you make her feel secure and wanted? And, what about my son? What will he think?

Life in school had been hard for him. He had to go through a lot just being ADHD and also being bothered occasionally for being “Chinese”. We had dealt with that issue and his learning difficulties through out his school life. Many times he had asked me, upset, why had I married someone Japanese. It obviously made him “different” from his friends. He wanted to be one or the other. He wanted to be like his friends!!

His most difficult time was during middle school. Let me tell you it is most painful to see your son upset over something you can't resolve. I would accept his frustration, and mine, and say that I knew, when he was older he

would realize how enriched he was by the mere fact of benefiting from both cultures. My husband and I were very clear in always stressing the fact he was Mexican with a Japanese father and a Mexican mother. To help him understand, value and accept his Japanese side we invested a great deal of effort in taking him to Japan since an early age to become familiar with the culture and his family. As he emerged from middle School he began to feel more comfortable with his double identity. He began, to enjoy being Japanese and being a bit different from the rest. He identified with friends that like him had an enriched cultural background. He has to this day a “ulticultural” social circle. Let me say that I think the total acceptance of the families on both sides made things a whole lot easier. Many people wondered how my son accept his “sister”. He was and is delighted, I quote “this way you have someone else to worry about and I can relax” he said. But then, he was 17 years old when this happened.

When you go through pregnancy, 9 month go by, you slowly begin to make a space for the baby to come. First, in your body and then a mental space in you mind. Then you begin to think of the practical physical space and then the reorganizing of your life to incorporate a little one .

When you adopt a child, it’s usually sudden, even though you are in the process of doing so, when the moment comes you do not have much time to get adjusted. She is there!.

I was told many times how impulsive I was in making the decision to adopt at that moment in my life. I have to accept I probably was. But I can say now, that not all impulsive decisions are negative. I was told so many reasons why I should not have done it. Fortunately not by my family.

The only thing that was, and is, heavy on my mind, is my age. I know many women stop trying to get pregnant or adopt a child for reasons of age. I fully understand that it is something to keep in mind, but let me tell you I was not thinking about it when I decide to take my little girl home. **I did** think about it a week latter when every muscle and bone in my body hurt and no amount of sleep was enough to recover my strength and energy.

I think, that like with any child, there are a great deal of expectations, obsessions, fantasies and fears on the part of any parents, more so with an adopted one. I can't speak of the intensity of these expectations when you have no children of your own, but I can easily imagine that it can mean 100% more that what I felt thinking how it would be, having an adopted baby , in my case a girl. I can see clearly now how much I needed I a baby that would allow me to "mother" her. A baby to hold, that would sit on my lap and just stay there. I also realized that the real reason I wanted a girl is because I wanted someone who would be like me!!!. I don't know about every one else, but being a psychoanalyst and a mother that gets a second chance to try, after I thought I would never get the opportunity, I felt a great responsibility.

Being a single mother can be a successful adventure, yet I think that as a mother, it can be much easier when you have a companion-husband. It's also better and more enriching for a child to have both parents to identify with. I am positive that from the beginning as parents we have a great deal of different unconscious fantasies and expectations from a girl that from a boy. I will give you a very simple example. When we decided a school for our son, there was no hesitation, it would be the most neutral school, for it's obvious multi racial

and multi cultural environment. Naming him was easy, it would be a combination of both his grand parents name (Spanish and Japanese).

With our daughter I somehow felt (I didn't know it then) it was my privilege to name her and to decide on her school. I talked with friends and family about her name. We sometimes alienate our companion-husband and we are not even aware we are doing it. It clearly responded to my unconscious conviction that since she was a girl it was completely my call. I was behaving as if I were a single mother. Fortunately for me, my husband would not let himself be excluded, and 16 years of personal analysis allowed me to "let" him in. He said " Do you want to do this alone or do you want me to participate". It was difficult to ignore such a clear statement. Of course, I said I needed him but I had a hard time dealing with it myself. I wanted her to be like me!! not like him. (remember everyone said she looked just like her father)

First came the name. After many consultations a friend said, "you know that what you really want is to name her like you". Immediately, I became conscious that was what I really wanted. So I did. My husband decided to give her his mother's name. It was a great combination. (same as my son)

Now, the school turned out to be a simple decision after all my conscious and unconscious debate. I wanted her to be like me, but without the difficulties I had in reaching adulthood. How do you teach her to be independent yet not rebellious like I was?. All my early school experiences, positive and some not so much, ran through my mind. Without being aware I wanted to transmit all my good experiences and spare her all the unpleasant ones. This is so much a part of what we want to do as parents. My son was most helpful and clear in his opinion, " She should go to the same school as me of course" and so she did.

As I mentioned before, this was not a concern with our son. The preoccupation with him was mostly focused towards the control of his impulsive behaviour. In this, his intelligence, was both an asset and a disadvantage when it came time to negotiate behaviour issues with him.

But with Rosalba Chieko, there it is, I said her name, it was different. She was a quiet and docile little girl that wanted to eat all the time. So, our concerns were: How to make her an independent and confident woman and at the same time try to anticipate and counteract a possible depressive personality in her. This we spoke about from the beginning. My husband and I discussed many times how to prepare our daughter for the clear possibility of being alone as a young adult. The extended family acceptance of her was no problem, because there had been other adoptions in my family, and I also felt confident that it would be the same with my husband's family because they had accepted both me and our son without hesitation.

Consciously we decided that reinforcing her identification with me would be the best way to do it. So, for the first two years I personally undertook all her care, waking her, dressing her, feeding her, bathing her, putting her to bed, and telling her the story of her adoption all in relation to me.

We decided to speak to her about her adoption from the beginning. I put together part of her story and got myself into a short fairy tale that I would tell her often before she would go to sleep. The fairy tale goes like this: There was a mother who wanted very much to have a little girl, she was very sad because she often thought of how it would feel to have a little girl with her to hug her and love her, but she had none. In another city, far, far away, there was a little girl, that was very sad because she was alone without a mother. She wanted very

much to have a mother because she felt lonely and sad. Then, one day they meet, and from that moment on they knew they would be together forever. . . And they lived happily ever after. This little girl's name is Rosalba. She would always say: "just like me" and I would answer "and just like me too". We would hug and I would say how wonderful my life is since I found her and we are together.

I will not fool you, there were times when I thought, maybe this time I took on much more than I could handle!. Being a mother at age 55 has many challenges, but it also has great rewards. One has to make at first a great effort at thinking and behaving younger, and pretty soon you begin to feel and act younger.

Caring for her was less difficult than I expected. We decided never to leave her alone, my husband or I would be with her always. So, I decided to take her with me every where I went, my friends and colleagues were most understanding and accepting of me with her. Therefore, all meetings, gatherings, be it scientific or not, trips, except to see patients she would be with me.

If I had to tell in detailed, I don't know how I/we did it. But, we did. Our life took a turn and was organized around her, it turned out to be more enjoyable than we could have ever anticipated. Periodically our son would pitch in. This is specifically important because being with her big brother gave her a sense of belonging to a family.

As I was writing this paper I decided to tell my daughter about this meeting, and I noticed she was flattered, so I asked her a couple of questions about her feelings about being adopted. She answered "What do you want to

know?. So, I asked: Do you feel different from your friends because you are adopted?. She answered she felt no difference. Do you remember what it was like, for you the first moment, when you realized and thought about being adopted? “Yes, I remember very well, she said, when in school we talked about adoption and I spoke about it in class. I felt sad” . My psychoanalytic training could not be silenced!. “Sad or angry”?, I asked. “No, just sad”!. “Ah, I said, that’s when you started calling me an evil woman” (which she did) “No, she said, I called you evil because you are”! (fortunately for me I waited for her to finish her thought) “you wake me up in the mornings and put your cold hands in my neck and stomach, that is really evil”, she said. Again I interpreted: “I thought it was because you were angry at your biological mother for dying abandoning you”. No, she said , “you are really mean when you wake me up”. Later she said: “I don’t really think about it too much. I don’t feel any different, and I am not embarrassed with my friends for being adopted. I just don’t think about it”. Yet, I think she does, but not consciously of course. But, this might be my own concern because she frequently complains “don’t abandon me” when I tell her I am going out.

Her first recollection is in pre kinder dressed up to dance a regional Veracruz dance and seeing her father and me watching her and being “very happy and emotional”. She is right, I was happy and emotional. The fact that the regional dress was from Veracruz symbolizes the fact, many times repeated by me, that we are both, she and I, from Veracruz. She includes her father in this screen memory. He was not there. Including him means to me that she has integrated us all as her family.

I think that I have been incredibly fortunate in having the opportunity of being a biological and an adoptive mother. I had the opportunity to be aware of the similarities and differences in the rearing process of an adopted child. The importance of the identification of children with their parents in the process of forming a family this identification gives you that sense of belonging which is necessary for us all and more so with an adopted child. I believe that we as parents can be torn in the rearing process with the thought of “respecting,” specially in interracial adoptions, the “origins of our daughter/son and in this effort of “respecting” we can loose sight of what’s most important, which is, that our daughter/son needs to feel truly ours, and thus achieve a sense of family belonging. To do this, it’s more important to diminish the emotional space between parents and child and not be so concerned about respecting the differences and be more concerned about building similarities and closeness.

IN CONCLUTION

- At some point I wondered if I would ever come to love an adopted daughter as much as I love my son. This question is no longer on my mind. It was dissolved the moment my daughter threw her little arms around my neck. (achieved the capacity to love an adopted child as much as a biological child) Now I feel the same unconditional love as a mother for both of them.
- The identification process has been archived for all of us, which I think is the corner stone for a successful adoption. (corner stone for a successful adoption is achieving a family identification)

Bibliography

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