

Legacy And Adoption

When Two Love Stories Are Better Than One

Through the lens of an adopted person, the notion of legacy is filled with complexity. A large part of legacy is understanding one's history and beginning. For the adoptee, life's journey begins with traumatic and profound loss – losing your first family. So then, where does legacy take root and who defines it?

According to Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986, in the Grief Silverstein Article, adoption has its triggers. These are “seven lifelong and core issues for all members of the triad (adoptee, birth parent, and adoptive parent), *regardless* of the circumstances of the adoption or the characteristics of the participants.”

These issues are: loss, rejection, guilt and shame, grief, identity, intimacy, mastery and control.

For example, as identity develops an adoptee experiences significant ambiguity. Oftentimes, the lack of information and understanding impacts their sense of self. This can spur a variety of maladaptive behaviors in the search for self. Those behaviors may look like attempts to conceive or bear a child in order to establish biological and genetic connection. They may also look like defense mechanisms and emotional safeguards for fear of repeat rejection or loss. On the other hand, they may manifest haphazard attachments that allow everyone in, seeking closeness in other spaces and looking for external input to define self.

Innate Questions

Human nature is naturally curious. Genetic testing organizations such as Ancestry.com and 23andMe satisfy this curiosity by allowing people to discover the intimate details of their lineage and heritage. Even for the person born into their family of origin, and reared by their biological family, the desire to align with a wider ancestral body is innate. Likewise, curiosity in the search for self only grows as an adopted person's origins are blurred or may be completely cut off in closed adoptions. Adoptive families that find themselves unable, or ill-equipped to support their adopted child in their search for their birth family, in order to answer questions that inform *who* they are, weave a complicated web of perceived rejection and reinforced abandonment.

An adopted person's search for heritage and fulfillment of legacy is not an unnatural phenomenon. Many people experience this yearning at some point during their lifetime, whether triggered by positive or negative inputs. There are simply more roadblocks and barricades to capturing this for the adopted person, impeding their ability to embrace their history as a matter of import.

Embrace Openness

A multifaceted and practical approach to activating legacy for an adopted

person is through embracing the spirit of openness in adoption. In recent years, professionals surrounding the adoption process increasingly and systemically support the benefits of open engagement. Adoptive families, as a result, now experience the joys of pursuing birth family connections. As quoted by Sharon Kaplan Roszia, a nationally recognized adoption professional, at the 2019 Conference for the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC), "Adoption should be about addition rather than subtraction." We should be adding to the lives of adoptees, aiding them in embracing rather than erasing legacy and history.

Whenever and wherever open communication between adoptive and birth families can be supported, it should be the first priority to preserve and foster these interactions as they serve to be the greatest benefit to the adoptee. Having direct access to someone who can aid in answering lingering questions helps to undergird the sense of self and belonging, and creates an avenue for the child to express their own wants and desires concerning the relationship and its evolution.

Risks and Rewards of Openness

For many years, adoptive parents feared that the child's loyalty was at stake. They worried about their children's longing to return to their birth family. This cloud of worry always looms over the future promises, hopes and dreams of adoptive families. Lying at the root of some closed and restricted agreements were the fears that the genetic pull would be stronger than the indelible love and commitment of the adoptive family.

One practical benefit of an open adoption is it allows birth parents to be owners of their narrative. They can give voice to their own adoption plan, and answer the adoptee's "why" questions. Birth parents fill in the blanks, questions such as "where do I gain my athletic abilities?" or "who gave me my broad smile?" Ongoing contact can aid an adoptee in understanding their place in the world in a small but meaningful way.

Complexity

To understand where one is going, one must first understand where they have been. Preserving legacy in adoption where historical context is absent may be a continuous battle. Efforts to provide this context are not at all lost on the adoptee, however. Ongoing support, commitment and appreciation for the adoptee's journey strengthens and reinforces healthy attachment. It also provides tools to aid them in charting a new course with their adoptive family to establish legacy. In the absence of the birth parent history, this becomes incredibly significant.

However, through the inclusion of open adoption and ongoing, meaningful contact, the adoptee now has access to two love stories. In two love stories they can create a vibrant and rich legacy, bridging worlds and closing chasms. Adoption this way never minimizes the profoundness of an adoptee's origins. Instead, it gives them the ability to embrace the end. This is key because adoption should always be the addition of a legacy and never the erasure of one.