

Adoption and Therapy

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Peter was adopted. He was moved around between five sets of foster parents in the first five months of his life before finally being 'chosen'. The damage this can do is incalculable yet there is little literature on the emotional trauma that accompanies fostering and adoption. There is a National Agency now, Norcap, which helps adopted children, and mothers who have sent their children for adoption, to come to terms with this and maybe make contact again. Apart from this there appears to be no high-profile attention given to the emotional plight of the adopted child as is given to many other sorts of deprivation.

This is not to say that adoption should not take place. It has to occur and is much preferable to the child being left institutionalised or unattended, unloved. Nonetheless this does not excuse us from looking at the traumatic impact of adoption upon the infant or child.

The impact of adoption on Peter was profound and, until he came into therapy, unappreciated. The link between his own, traumatised, inner infant and the unrelenting screams of his external baby had not been seen by Peter until we discovered it in therapy. This discovery helped him enormously. He was able to put into perspective a whole range of compulsive reactions he had had during his life which

previously had remained unrelated to anything. With the insight of the pain associated around his adoption he was able to make sense of some of these reactions, most of which had been inappropriate to the circumstances, all of which had been unconscious and compulsive, and one of which caused the death of his own little boy.

If you can imagine yourself newly born, kicked out of the environment in which you have grown happily for nine months and where you had recorded every nuance of feeling. You have entered this completely different environment of 'the world' where your hot-line to food, indeed all your needs, has been cut, literally. You scream, you want your environment back. Your mother does her best to give it to you, she cuddles you, breast-feeds you, holds you as much as she is able. So your first few hours, days, weeks are not as perfect as those nine months had been but they are survivable; you are not averse to shutting up once in a while and having a good 'sense around'.

Now imagine that instead of mother doing all this for you someone, who you just know in your bones is not your mother, holds you a bit and puts you down and then somebody else hears your screams and picks you up and holds you a bit and puts you down, and so on and

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so on. This is not going to be conducive to your sense of self-worth and loveliness is it? Somewhere pretty early on you are going to get the feeling something — you can't put your finger on it, but something — is wrong with you. This feeling stays with you for life. It is impossible to eradicate this feeling. It can be minimised, however, with honesty on the part of the adoptive parents, and with courage on the part of yourself, the adopted child. The courage involved is in facing those feelings, because when we first feel them, as an infant or newly adopted child, we do not have the emotional vocabulary to express them. So what we do is we suppress them. Thus the courage involved is in unsuppressing our feelings when we are older and have learnt that by suppressing our feelings we are promoting inappropriate reactions and responses, out of our control, in situations where there is some pressure put upon us. We have all of us experienced this sense of powerlessness at the mercy of our feelings and our reactions to them. 'I don't know what came over me' is a familiar phrase used when picking over the previous night's outburst or whatever.

Adoption leaves the adopted child feeling unwanted in the first instance, whether or not this is actually the case — sometimes it is but at other times it clearly is not, such as with the death of the mother at birth. Just as the little child does not have the emotional vocabulary to contain the feelings of rejection it experiences, so it does not have the intelligence vocabulary to rationalise to its own satisfaction the reasons that it has been left bereft of its environmental host. People can 'there-there' the child for months on

end — it will still not alter the fact that the adopted child feels unwanted by its mother and will carry out into the world very painful suppressed feelings of rejection. Consequently the adopted person will find it extremely hard to trust people and will project a certain rejecting image onto anything new that dares to enter its life. Adopted people can either be very shy or, if their defence mechanism has had to be especially sophisticated, extremely pugnacious and challenging on the outside (on the inside these people will be feeling just as unconfident of themselves as the shy ones).

This is not to say that all shy or all pugnacious people are bound to be adopted. Of course not. But these qualities are clear markers on the spectrum of the personality of the adopted person. People who are shy or pugnacious who have not been adopted will still have felt profound rejection at an early point in their lives, whether or not their parents are aware of having been rejecting. The important point is what the child felt.

This may seem like a no-win situation for parents with children particularly sensitive to rejection, and for adoptive parents. The truth of the matter is that that just might be the case — a no-win situation. The reason for this may be that the whole self, the multidimensional self, has chosen this situation to be born into physically so as to work through, or transform, some bottled up energy affecting the multidimensional self. It is my belief that this is the very reason we are all alive: to transform blocked or negative energy into free-flowing, positive energy. I believe nothing happens by accident. It is all for a purpose, and that purpose is personal

transformation leading to or facilitating higher self and multidimensional self transformation.

To arrive in this world only to lose one's sense of belonging through adoption within minutes, hours or days leaves an indelible scar and sets the agenda for life. That so little attention is paid to this in our society is surprising. One of the reasons for this may be that the adoptive parents find it hard to talk about it since talking about it will inevitably lead to talking about their needs when they decided to adopt, and the peer and social pressure current at the time of adoption. If the parents adopting the baby have some powerful and painful feelings associated with not being able to have a child, these feelings may well have been suppressed and thus not addressed which would account for the blanket silence on the emotional trauma suffered by their adopted children. For where a parent fears to tread so follows the child.

Further, there is the gratitude factor. The fact that all adopted children have within them this feeling that it is somehow expected of them to be grateful for being 'rescued' is a bit of a taboo but nonetheless present. Of course this is not conscious in most adopted children and would be brusquely denied by many an adoptive parent. I would ask such parents to consider those early years of adoption once again. I would ask them to check with themselves whether or not they didn't at any time wonder whether they had done the right thing in adopting the child — God knows most biological parents ask themselves a similar question often enough. It would be inhuman not to have doubts from time to time.

If, as an adoptive parent, you can be honest enough to acknowledge that you had these thoughts occasionally, if only fleetingly, then you have opened the door to what I am saying: that the infant or child will pick up on your feelings of doubt and feel grateful when your loving feelings return. Some may argue: but isn't this the case with biological children too? I would suggest not for this reason: the biological child has not had the unbelievable trauma of being wrenched from its host environment earlier in its life — it is not looking for a repeat performance. The adopted child, through its now ingrained insecurity, is vulnerable if not prone to such thoughts and feelings.

It would be a useful piece of research and fascinating to learn what percentage of the prison population is adopted and to compare it with the figures of the population at large. I have a strong suspicion that we would find it considerably larger within the prison population. If you feel rejected at an age when you cannot handle the emotional consequences of that rejection you suppress the feeling of rejection. The consequence of this is often that the suppressed feeling of rejection is projected outwards, onto the environment, by 'acting out'. In this instance, as with most manifested suppressed feelings, the acting out is deemed 'anti-social behaviour'. And what happens to people who behave anti-socially is that they get put in prison.

So what can be done? How can we help? There is only one way we can help any disadvantaged sector of society and that is by raising their profile. We need to communicate, to talk on a one-to-one basis or perhaps in small groups, to people

who feel a desire to explore why they are the way they are but don't know where to start. We need a National Counselling Service so that all disadvantaged groups who have had the temerity to form themselves into self-help groups can refer their members on to a nationally subsidised and approved National Counselling Service. Only then could we make any serious claim to being a 'caring society'. We simply cannot leave it to the likes of home-grown or even National Adoption Societies.

Just as the individual act of Peter holding his hand over the face of his little boy for a moment too long was a projection onto that baby of a suppressed pain too great for the inner infant Peter to bear, so the continued discarding of our fellow men and women to lives of misery by society is the projection onto those men and women of a suppressed pain too great for society to bear. If Peter, as a child, had been able to talk around this infant pain while he was growing up, Peter's son would not have died as he did. If we, in society, could begin to re-introduce into society those parts of it we are rejecting because they are too painful to be included in society's view of itself, then we would begin the traumatic, often painful, but undoubtedly courageous journey of social

self-awareness the world is in desperate, desperate need of. A fully subsidised and supported National Counselling Service would be a huge step forward on this journey.

There is one further issue: whether or not it is desirable for the biological parents and the now adopted child to get together again. It seems to me that this is a decision that remains irrefutably the right of the child. I find it extraordinary that in our society in Britain today we maintain that both parties have to agree before a meeting can take place. There might well be circumstances where it would be in the best interests of all concerned that no meeting should occur but this must be the exception not the rule. To argue that the rights of the mother must be protected, should her once biological child wish to re-unite, if only for an hour, strikes me as cock-eyed. What rights of the child were considered when the decision was made to adopt? It has been my experience with clients who have been adopted (10% of my intake, incidentally) that there has not been a huge desire to locate the biological parents. There is ambivalence, but should it be overcome? In this instance the rights of both lots of parents surely have to take second place.

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