

Getting Real

by Patricia Irwin Johnston on 01 Jan 2006

What makes a child REALLY your child?

For several years I've had the interesting experience of participating in Internet newsgroups and commercial on-line usegroups discussing adoption. The culture on the Net is different from that of local support groups or conferences or magazines. Protected by anonymity and by the facelessness of those to whom they are "talking," Net folks often feel less constrained by conventional "rules" to coat their anger or their angst in politeness. Net groups are dominated by an outspoken few. Many other subscribers merely lurk, reading over the shoulders of other posters, afraid to chime in with their own opinions for fear of being blasted. Conversation is up front, "flaming" is commonplace.

While those engaged in Net dialogues or diatribes are frequently reminded that they cannot and should not speak for others, there's a lot of generalizing on the Net, but the bottom line concerns are really little different than they turn out to be after months of getting to know somebody in your local parent group: Adoption can be wonderful, but it's scary, too. It brings with it a blend of gain and loss, happiness and pain. Some people on all sides of the triad go through periods (sometimes lifetimes) of feeling powerless and victimized by the experience. Pain expressed in any forum tends to create defensive attitudes on the part of other members of the triad. The fear is nearly palpable. These wounded souls are in constant search of their "real" selves... whatever that means.

As a young parent (it seems a long time ago now that my children are 17, 20 and 26) I remember worrying that the babies I was fiercely loving might not see me as their "real" mother, or that their grandparents, who were loving them, too, might not be "really" seeing them as grandchildren. I came to understand that many of those concerns were a result of my own self esteem questions--questions that were brought to the surface once again by infertility and by adoption, but which were not created by it. I suspect that's true for many others.

I began to read omnivorously about adoption. One of the most mind-opening things I read was social work professor and adoptive parent Jerome Smith's now somewhat dated (1980) book *You're Our Child*. It introduced me to the concept that adoptive parents need to build a sense of entitlement to their children--coming to feel that their children are theirs to parent and that they are deserving of the parenting role.

Building a sense of entitlement is related to attachment, but it isn't the same as attachment. One can be firmly attached but not feel entitled. One can feel quite entitled to a child who is not attaching well.

Over the years in the workshops I frequently do for professionals and people touched personally by adoption I've expanded a lot on Jerry Smith's concept. It seemed to me early on, for example, that entitlement was not just a task for the infertile adopters about whom Smith wrote, but that preferential adopters had issues to deal with, too. Though Smith didn't say so, it seemed clear to me that entitlement was a two way street, and that children being raised in adoption needed to build their own senses of entitlement to their parents and families. Still later I saw that, depending on the closeness of the family, it is likely that not just parents and children need to work on this entitlement building stuff, but that grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins, too, need to build a sense of entitlement about those joined to them by adoption. The result of a healthy entitlement building process is that the members of a family come to believe that they all belong together and are deserving of one another. When entitlement building is ignored, the fact that "something is missing" is clear from both inside and out.

Smith says (and I include some of my own expansions here, too) that building a sense of entitlement involves three steps. A first step is in being honest with oneself about the motivating factors that brought you to adoption... for adoptive parents that means dealing with infertility or honestly acknowledging the good and the bad about other motivations for adopting; for adoptees this step involves understanding and accepting why a birthparent chose adoption rather than parenting; a grandparent may need to embrace his child's philosophical drive to make the world a better place or to mourn the loss of his genetic connection to this particular grandchild. The second step is coming to understand and deal positively with a concept first discussed by sociologist H. David Kirk: that adoption is different from being related by birth in significant and unavoidable ways. The third step in building a sense of entitlement is to learn to deal straightforwardly with society's widely held and broadly spread conviction that adoption is a second best alternative for everybody involved.

In my husband's and my family, adoption has been central to two generations of family building. My in-laws and their brothers and sisters were not a very fertile bunch. Of five siblings between the two sides of Dave's parents' generation, two gave birth to only children and the other three (including Dave's mother and his father) adopted children. So of Dave's generation of six cousins, only two were born to the family and four were adopted into it. In the next generation, Dave and I are parenting three children thanks to adoption.

I've often shared in speaking and writing some of our multi-generational adoption-expanded family's defining moments in "getting" the concept of entitlement, which we believe is central to successful adoptive family life. I use our personal stories in trying to help families exploring adoption understand the importance of all members of an adoption-expanded family coming to feel a sense of entitlement to one another and to their respective interactive places in the family. I encourage these families to begin before arrival to bring their families on board, and to expect that issues surrounding what brought them all to adoption may resurface later and need to be dealt with on a variety of levels over time. Accepting that this is so, I tell families, will allow them to be less defensive about their own pain, and the result of that lack of defensiveness will be that they will be more open to listening to growing children's processing of adoption's gains and losses in their lives.

Perhaps if I share one particularly poignant anecdote here, you'll understand why we believe that the done or undone tasks of entitlement-building have a powerful impact on all who are touched by adoption...

My husband Dave was adopted at age six months by his parents, Perry and Helen. His parents were particularly "advanced" in their adoption thinking for their time, and Dave does not remember ever not knowing that he and his younger sister had been adopted. His questions were answered openly and honestly. The Johnstons were intensely involved parents--volunteering at school and in scouts, baking cookies and building projects. His parents and extended family embraced Dave and Mary into the family fold without apparent reservation, and the gang of six city cousins growing up in Chicago and the New Jersey suburbs were a close and rowdy bunch when gathered at the family's homeplace in Central Illinois.

During his growing up years, Dave received a number of family heirloom gifts from his father: the Civil War sword and camp stool carried by a Johnston ancestor who was a Union soldier; the pocket watch with which a Johnston grandfather had clocked a long career with the Chicago and Elgin railroad; a late-1800s-published book, *The Johnstons of Salisbury*, which traced the family from New England in the 1600s as it branched out and extended through the South and the West (and into the back of which his grandfather and then his father had carefully printed the updated information available for their own generations of cousins and children and grandchildren.) These things came into our marriage and found places of honor--along with the Chinese lacquer box my own great grandmother had brought home from her days as a missionary, the medical texts from my great-great-grandfather's country medical practice and the law books from his son's Illinois State Supreme Court offices, and the beautiful landscape painting by my housepainter great-grandfather--in the home we established as our own for the family which was to come to us through our adoption of three children.

When our son was about nine, our middle daughter three and our youngest girl just a baby, Dave's parents moved from the house they had lived in for nearly 50 years to a retirement community. In the process of weeding out all those years' accumulation, the senior Johnstons asked us during one Sunday afternoon phone call if there were particular things we would like from their home. Mary's list had been long: china, crystal, this chair and those lamps, handmade quilts, etc. But Dave, a less acquisitive person already dealing with a confirmed pack rat wife, had fewer wishes.

Two items from his parents home came to mind that day--items whose stories I already knew. The first was a rickety table from the dining room. I shuddered to think how long it would stand in our house with active youngsters. But the table had come to Central Illinois over 100 years before in a covered wagon driven by his mother's people, who were migrating from Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The second item was a string of sleigh bells belonging to that same covered-wagon family. The bells had hung on a leather strap in the front hall of his parents' home for as long as Dave could remember. Dave's interest in those bells had little to do with their heirloom status, but instead involved a custom begun by his own dad-- one that Dave was following (albeit with modern adaptations and a single garage sale purchased bell) with our children.

Every Christmas Eve during the 23 years Dave lived with his parents, Perry Johnston had waited until his children were asleep and then ventured out into a Chicago winter with those sleigh bells in hand. He put a ladder against the side of the house and climbed to the porch roof; from there he made his way in the windy Chicago night onto the usually icy roof to a spot above his children's rooms, where he stomped his feet, rang those bells, and shouted out a hearty "HO, HO, HO!" What a memory!

When Dave expressed interest in those two items, his mother blurted out, "Oh, I'm sorry, Dave, I've already promised those things to my nephew, Bob. He's my only living relative."

We mumbled a few more awkward words, said our goodbyes and hung up. I dashed downstairs from the bedroom extension to where my husband had been using the kitchen phone. He was leaning against the counter, softly crying.

Her only living relative? For over 40 years the son Helen loved with all her heart (we don't doubt it for a minute!) had felt no questions about who he was or where he "belonged." But in that moment, 40 years were nearly shattered. For in that single conversation, Helen Johnston revealed a carefully hidden piece of her own unresolved pain: parenting her cherished children had not been enough to heal the anguish of her infertility and the loss of earlier children to miscarriage and neonatal death. Though her children had felt entitled to her, an important piece of herself had been held in reserve for the genetic children she never had on behalf of her family of origin.

That afternoon Dave and I wandered from room to room in our house, turning over keepsake items and family mementoes and applying pieces of masking tape bearing our children's names to the bottom of them. We were determined to protect our children from ever having to feel pain in adoption. (How naive we were to think we could do that!)

And, yet, that single moment taught us more as adoptive parents than any book we could have read, any class we could have taken, any counseling or preparation we had had. The greatest gift we give our children is our own determination to do the personal work necessary to build our own senses of entitlement as parents in adoption and to bring our family and friends firmly on board with us, so that all of us, together, can help the children believe in and feel entitled to our familiness.

Since this article was first written, the story above has come full circle. A couple of years ago Dave and I were invited to the wedding of his cousin's daughter--the first wedding in this next generation of the family. We were delighted to be there and were pleased to be seated in what seemed to be a place of honor behind the family of the bride and then to find ourselves at the bride's parents' table at the reception. As introductions began, we listened as Bob's wife introduced her large extended family of many brothers and sisters and their children, her nieces and nephews. Then Bob rose, and looking around the room, he chuckled that his family introductions would be shorter. He had been an only child, and his parents had been dead for many years. He put his arm around Dave's shoulder, tears welled in his eyes, and he said, "I'd like you to meet my cousin, Dave Johnston, and this is his wife, Pat. Dave and his sister Mary Jane are my only living relatives."

Bob never knew--still does not know--the story of Dave's request for the sleigh bells and the table which were bequeathed to him instead. But Bob feeling of family entitlement is secure.

He, like his cousin, is bouyed by the family he has loved his whole life--no matter how those connections began.

"What is real?" asked the Velveteen Rabbit in Margery Williams' classic children's book of the same name. And the skin horse who was the nursery's philosopher responded by reminding the rabbit that, yes, becoming real does sometimes hurt, and that it usually doesn't happen easily to people who need to be "carefully kept." Real, advised the skin horse, usually happens after your fur has been loved off and your eyes have dropped out, but that doesn't matter. For when you are real, you can only be ugly to those who do not understand.

We claim this book--we touched by adoption--and yet sometimes it is we ourselves who do not understand. Building a sense of entitlement to one another is a part of the claiming and bonding process for all of those in adoption-expanded families. It's about believing, with all of one's being, that you are OK, that you are deserving, that you belong, that, together, the family and each of its members is whole and strong. That we are real.

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Patricia Irwin Johnston, M.S., is a member of a family expanded through a third generation by adoption. Her husband was adopted, and they are parents of three young adults who joined their family through adoption. Pat has been a long time award-winning volunteer in the infertility and adoption arenas, founding a RESOLVE chapter and serving for eight years (three as chair of the board) on RESOLVE's national board of directors, for two terms on the national board of Adoptive Families of America and as a national advisor to Pact: An Adoption Alliance in addition to local and regional volunteerism. Pat works as an infertility and adoption educator, traveling throughout the US and Canada to provide workshops for consumers and professionals. She is the author of several books (including *Taking Charge of Infertility* , *Adopting after Infertility* , *Launching a Baby's Adoption* , and *Adoption Is a Family Affair!*) and is the publisher at Perspectives Press, Inc.: The Infertility and Adoption Publisher, located at <http://www.perspectivepress.com>