

Letting Adoption Define Your Kids

"I Don't Want Adoption to Define My Kids"

by Cheryl

Often on adoption forums, I read an adoptive parent say "I just don't want adoption to define my kids". Or, in a more hostile tone, sometimes I see "Why do you let adoption define you?".

I want to talk about this, and see if I can explain my thinking about adoption better, but also how my adoptee ears hear that statement or question. First how I hear it, because that's easier, lol...

When someone asks why I "let" adoption define me, it feels hostile to me. It feels like it's saying that first of all, I'm just choosing to look at the negative side of things. And it feels like it implies I am painting (deliberately I guess) a role for myself that is just not necessary. It feels dismissive of my reality, and it's a reality I'm not all that unhappy with (more below, lol), so that kind of bothers me. It's kind of like the "angry adoptee" statements in terms of how I react to it emotionally.

When I hear an adoptive parent say "I don't want adoption to define my kids" my reaction to it is different. And this probably is greatly influenced by being a child of the closed era, where parents generally tried to avoid talking or thinking about adoption as much as possible, with all the problems (in my own opinion) that often caused. I hear those words and I hear more like "I don't want adoption to be a big deal", "I don't want us to really have to think about or talk about adoption, except to give the facts." and, understandably (to me) "Please, dear God, don't let my child suffer or feel bad things, or have problems related to this." and its corollary out of self-protection and love, "Please let me believe that if I do it all right, and am a great Mommy or Daddy, that none of this will be an issue for my kids."

But here's the thing for me -- adoption DOES define me. And it was more difficult for me precisely because I KNEW at the core of my being, that my parents didn't want me to talk about it, think about it, feel about it. Those were frankly pretty much the hardest parts for me then, and still are high on the list of things that hurt or are hard.

Why do I say adoption defines me? I know many adoptees would not agree. To me it just IS. It defines me in the same way (though to

differing degrees) that I'm defined by my race, by being raised in a two-parent home, by being raised in a middle-class family, by my religious background, by my other life experiences (college, relationships, places I've lived, people who have touched me). Those things all come together and shape me into the person that I am. And adoption was a biggie. It gave me a different ethnic heritage, physical characteristics, holes in my history, different thoughts to grapple with, emotions to sort through, things to wonder about, questions to answer (or choose not to ask in some cases). Those thoughts and feelings shaped me.

Having been shaped by them doesn't make it bad. In saying adoption is a big part of who I am, I am not saying that I am flawed, deeply scarred, or that I wish I had never been adopted. In fact, I've gone to great pains on the board to say that I have NEVER wished I hadn't been adopted. It's hard for me to even formulate that notion - it'd be like saying I wish I wasn't born in the US, or born of my race, or that my parents hadn't been my parents, or that I hadn't grown up where I did. I'm pretty content with my life - and accepting all of what went into making me, well, ME, seems pretty natural. But ignoring the role that adoption played ignores a big part of what shaped me into who I am. It shaped my relationships, my emotions, my thoughts, my family dynamics, probably even my view about my step kids, my own kids, heck, even whether I could even give away my daughter's doggie that I dislike a wee bit (in a way too complicated to explain at the moment, but probably pretty interesting for me to look at, lol).

Recognizing that adoption shaped me doesn't mean that I think it's all bad. Saying that there were some things that could have been better or easier doesn't mean that I think all adoptees are going to suffer agonies, or even that I think all adoptees will think or see things the way I do. And certainly saying there are challenges that are a bit bigger for an adoptee, or simply just different, does not mean that I think they're either insurmountable, or that I think my parents sucked.

And you know what? I can even say that I think in a perfect world there would be no adoption, because there would be no infertility, no unplanned and unwanted pregnancies, and no crushing poverty, without it making me anti-adoption, or meaning that I wish my life was different. It's not a perfect world, and even the huge idealist that I am, I don't believe it ever will be. Something doesn't have to be perfect to be ok though, and to end up with kids that are happy.

Adoption does define me. So does being the daughter of my parents. So does having lived in overseas for 5 years. So does many, many other things, some more so than others, some just differently than others. It's not the only thing that defines me. But acting as if it wasn't an important part in making me, ME, and an integral part of my thoughts and feelings about myself, the world, my family, just life, is, well, not true in my experience. And in doing so, I fear it leads to kids being afraid to really look at their own experiences, thoughts, emotions, doubts, fears, because it may be interpreted as being flawed, or unhappy, or simply wishing they had different parents. All of what I just said doesn't mean I'd change a thing about being adopted. But I hope that maybe, just maybe, some of the adoptee voices can help a wee little bit, smooth the road for others, by helping parents understand some of what many of us think and feel, but sometimes can't say. Maybe. If people don't discount our words or put us into little boxes and decide we have nothing of any relevance to share, however nuanced it may be, because we must be (fill in the blank).

