

SECOND EDITION

ONE SMALL SACRIFICE

Lost Children of the Indian Adoption Projects

Trace A. DeMeyer

© Greenfield, Massachusetts © 2011 ©

Memoir/Native American Studies

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(also known as Laura Jean Thrall-Bland and Winyan Ohmanisa Waste La ke)

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Dedicated to Cameron, Wild Cat and Kim Peterson (1956-1978),
(Shown here in her high school graduation photo)

“My problem is secrecy. I believe that perpetually secret adoptions assure un-accountability and lack of transparency. And secret adoptions are only the tip of the iceberg. The secrecy permeates the process: secret identities, secret parents, secret records, secret foster care providers, secret social workers, secret judges and lawyers (all their identities are sealed, typically), secret physicians, secret statistics and, in the case of some adoption-oriented organizations, secret budgets and secret boards of directors. In any social practice, when people in positions of power hide behind masks, one can be pretty sure that they have something to hide.”

-Albert S. Wei, Special Advisor to the Bastard Nation Executive Committee

“Storytelling is an important aspect of Ojibwe culture. My ability to tell a good tale can be used as a tool for teaching and connecting. Even though I grew up outside of my Native community and culture, my stories helped me to become a part of the community that I had lost. Adoption is part of the contemporary tales that Native people need to tell...”

- Tamara Buffalo, published author-poet-visual artist

“Everyone has a right to knowledge about their lineage, genealogy and identity. And if they don’t, then it will lead to cases of incest...”

-Lord David Alton quoted after married adoptee twins were granted annulment in Great Britain (January 2008)

“We, as adoptees and birth mother’s, have become so conditioned to keep quiet and take the living in shame as just a part of our life that we don’t unite. As if we are not allowed to unite. The fear and stigma is so incredibly strong, it is all controlling. I truly don’t think adoptees realize this.”

- 73Adoptee Blog: Chynna Girl, November 14, 2008
[www.blogger.com/comment]

PREFACE (2nd Edition*)

Welcome to the **Second Edition** of “One Small Sacrifice.”

Second editions are usually a cause for celebration, because there is either big news or big change...

Sadly, the situation for Native adoptees has not changed much at all since my first book came out in 2010 and since adoption records are still sealed in all but eight states. In fact, if records were opened in America in 2011, every single adoptee I know would be celebrating.

Big change will happen when there is public awareness and mainstream education will teach about this ongoing and very troubling chapter of American and Indian history. Knowing about the genocidal effects of the Indian Adoption Projects, and the humiliation affected children (now adults) suffered in silence and isolation, deserves international recognition and big news. It won't be easy. Evidence of these projects is still sealed, along with our adoption files and birth certificates. We also need more and more survivors to come forward and speak out. Contact me please.

The community called America needs to help every Native American child who was placed in a closed adoption. This type of adoption erased our identity and denies us our ancestral treaty rights. Healing survivors will happen when successful reunions happen.

The time for big change is now. Adoptees need original birth certificates to return successfully to our tribes.

Why a second edition? There was more information to share. For example, I now have a copy of my formerly-sealed adoption file to share with readers. I also made

some changes to the organization of this book, which I hope my readers will appreciate.

With this new edition and my blog “American Indian Adoptees,” [www.splitfeathers.blogspot.com] I hope to keep our story in the news...

*The first edition will be retired and replaced with this new book. (Hold on to your first edition.)

PREFACE (1st Edition)

I’m a fly on the wall, one who listens, the observer of the absurd, and a young girl wearing braids. That’s me standing in front of an Ojibwe wigwam with my adoptive mother Edie and my adopted brother Joey. I’m the only Indian in this family. It was 1969. I’m 12 and the family is attending the famous Lumberjack Festival in Hayward, Wisconsin. Then I heard the drum. The Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe powwow was happening on the same grounds. The sound of the drum, the men singing filled me, like my heart opened up and the sky fell in. I could not tell anyone what I was feeling that day but it made me feel good, proud, and different. I knew I was an Indian girl just like the other girls I saw there but no one could tell me anything since I was adopted.

Back then life was about mystery. I knew little to nothing about being adopted or Indian, just that I was.

North American Indians call adoptees Lost Birds, Lost Ones or Split Feathers. Adoption messes with the brain’s natural order so we Split Feathers get two experiences. I explain how later. One could argue which experience is best.

Adoption practices affecting one race of people had a specific purpose—the break-up of Indian families, to disrupt tribal culture across North America. I guess the idea was to assimilate us, tame us red devils and dirty savages. No kidding. So what is known about the Indian Adoption Projects and the aftermath, it's pretty much been secret. Few books acknowledge it happened, but it did...

It hurts to think secret adoption files (thick binders of papers with real names and the identities of real people) are still guarded (sealed by law) in 2011. This pretty much guarantees adoptees won't be rejoining their tribal nation or family any time soon.

Wisconsin was my home. I was transracially adopted and I'm American Indian and Irish. I am one of the lucky few who opened my adoption in a sealed record state. I explain that later.

Someone blogged in 2008: "Anyone who questions the Adoption Game gets thrown in jail or called crazy." Call me crazy then. Ground Zero for me was 2004, when I decided to write about it. Adoption "secrecy" made that nearly impossible. As a journalist I soon discovered nothing about adoption is simple or open; not after 1,000 drafts of this book; not after reading my file at age 22 back in 1979.

I expected little help or new discoveries. I didn't know there were six to ten million adoptees in the USA (alone). Some are blazing hot new trails on the internet global highway. I make friends, both Indian and non-Indian. Nor did I expect to find so many of us. We're all clinging to the same boat. Some even blog about it.

One in three Americans has an immediate family member who has been adopted...

Every Indian reservation in North America has a story about missing lost children and future generations who carry the stigma of lost language and culture. Some say Indian reservations were baby factories for social workers to fill their orders, or the place where churches and government abducted children for residential boarding schools.

Very few Americans witnessed this upheaval firsthand. Very few saw the Indian boarding schools and assimilation by whip or by washing the child's mouth with lye soap. Few knew that the Indian Adoption Projects and Programs were an orchestrated act of genocide, the same as ethnic cleansing. Many friends remember when they were abducted as children, not babies, virtually erased from tribal rolls, not told their tribe or their family's name.

These children, now adults, are expected to accept this? Funny thing is lost birds/adoptees don't look like adoptive mom or dad. So we are not supposed to notice this or dare to ask?

I strongly believe adopted children are in training to become warriors. I know many strong courageous adoptees.

Who said wild animals bred in captivity can never return to the wild? Can an Indian child return to the wilds of Indian Country? Sure, but not without baggage...maybe a language barrier, maybe a fear of the unknown.

Indian Country is still our home and adoptees like me will not be satisfied until they get some answers and meet some family.

This book could have many names: *Innocent Kid Running into a Minefield; Outside the Circle; Adoption Didn't kill our Spirit; Orphan Trauma; Babies to Distribute: Cultural Genocide; Not Exactly Grateful; Our Ancestors Prayed for Us*

to be Born; The Only Good Indian is a Dead Indian; and Adoption Reality is No Place for the Weak. All would fit.

My Irish blood advised, tell your whole story. The Indian in my heart cautioned me to stay balanced, humble. Shame tried to interfere and told me to keep quiet. I took my old humiliations and used them like keys. I open up my life like a can of worms.

Take a journey with me. Keep reading.

Trace A. DeMeyer/ Winyan Ohmanisa
Waste La Ke

ACTS AGAINST INDIAN PEOPLE:

By Terry Cross (Seneca tribe)

As European migration increased, to what is now the United States and Canada, traditional tribal practices in child rearing became more susceptible to the influences

of the dominant society. Efforts to “civilize” the Native Indian population were almost always focused on Indian children.

The “Civilization Fund Act” was one of the first federal laws targeting Indian children. Passed by Congress in 1819, it authorized grants to private agencies, primarily churches, to establish programs to “civilize the Indian.”

Later the federal government and private agencies established large militaristic boarding schools or institutions where Indian children were placed involuntarily and forced to abandon their traditional beliefs, customs, and traditions. Severe punishment in the forms of beatings, being chained and shackled, bound hand and foot, and locked in closets was not uncommon.

By 1900, after decades of forced removal of Indian children from their families and communities and the stripping of their culture from them, the natural child protection system that once flourished in every tribal community began to break down.

During the next half-century, tribal traditional practices continued to be discouraged and banned by federal and private agents, while oppression, alcoholism, disease, and poverty were allowed to take hold in most tribal communities. As these destructive elements took hold in Indian Country, child abuse and neglect became more prevalent too.

Government policies shifted in the 1950’s towards a more humanitarian view, but not without serious consequences. Humanitarians still viewed assimilation as the best answer to the “Indian problem” and viewed tribes as incapable of caring for their children. New projects began, such as the Indian Adoption Project, which used public and private agencies to remove and place hundreds of Indian children in non-Indian homes far from their

families and communities. Few efforts were made or resources committed to help tribal governments develop services on tribal lands that would strengthen Indian families.

As efforts to outplace Indian children continued into the 1960's and 1970's, the Association on Indian Affairs conducted a study in the 1970's that found between 25 percent and 35 percent of all Indian children had been separated from their families. This study also found that in **16 states** in 1969, **85 percent** of the Indian children were placed in non-Indian homes. The long-term effects of these massive out placements of Indian children were only just beginning to be understood in the 1970's, which included effects not only on individuals, but also the well-being of entire tribal communities.

Not until 1978, after the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act (P.L. 95-608), did the federal government acknowledge the critical role that tribal governments play in protecting their children and maintaining their families.

The long-term effects from these removals and efforts to strip Indian children of their culture produced generations of Indian adults who have weak ties to their families and tribal communities, unresolved grief and trauma, and few supports or resources to help them. Other factors that are attributed to the rise of child abuse and neglect in Indian Country include the inappropriate interpretations of Indian parenting practices; exposure to known risk factors for abuse and neglect, such as alcoholism, poverty, and unemployment; federal policies that have supported family and community disintegration, such as termination and relocation; and learned responses that result from oppression and exploitation.

Written by Terry Cross (Seneca Tribal Nation) in a
STATEMENT OF THE NATIONAL INDIAN CHILD WELFARE

ASSOCIATION PRESENTED BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE
ON INDIAN AFFAIRS Regarding the REAUTHORIZATION OF THE
INDIAN CHILD PROTECTION AND FAMILY VIOLENCE
PREVENTION ACT S. 1601, SEPTEMBER 24, 2003

**WARNING to readers: This memoir contains explicit
graphic material that includes emotional and sexual abuse,
and the cruel exploitation of Indian Children. This is not
written as a chronology but rather as a memoir as I'm able to
recall certain events and experiences. Trauma has a way of
making our minds work in a non-linear fashion. Other Native
adoptees helped me see this commonality in a non-judgmental
way. We are called Split Feathers for this shared experience.
Many adoptees I interviewed for this book are still unable to
remember certain events of their childhood.**

One Small Sacrifice

Who are you?

Stop and think about this... Who are you?

Think about your parents, your grandparents and great-grandparents, who you knew when you were growing up. Remember the stories of when, where, even how you were born.

Now... imagine you disappear, you're erased, no longer a part of your family history and genealogy. How would you feel? Grateful? I don't think so.

Now ... imagine an adoptee who doesn't know who they are ... nothing, anything, zilch... Can you imagine looking in the mirror, not knowing anything? How might that feel?

A fairytale? You think?

"Adopted people" are the only people in the world without free or unlimited access to their personal history.... we simply vanish into thin air.

This decision was made for us. Someone decided this long ago. Someone decided adoptees were better off not knowing anything. Someone decided this for me – I'd be fine, never knowing my identity.

Wait ... I was dead without my identity, without my name. I can't live like this.

My adoptive family had their stories, their names, their parents and grandparent's names, where they were from, how they lived, died, everything.

Like my adoptive mom and dad, many families are very proud of their stories. There could be bank robbers or horse thieves or rich barons or fancy politicians. Mine could be, too.

To tell my story, I needed more than their story. I needed my own.

Chasing Ghosts

"You must know where you came from yesterday, know where you are today, to know where you're going tomorrow." – Cree saying

I'm over 50 now. Helen, my birthmother I never met. I know she was 22 when she had me and gave me up. I know this since I read my sealed adoption file. I share the contents later in this book.

She was not what I expected. Ok, I'm not what I expected.

Getting this life and this experience is no coincidence. This makes me an adoptee uniquely situated. I experienced two worlds growing up, American and Indian, being raised in rural northern Wisconsin. Today I'm a journalist and write exclusively about Indian Country. I'm good at chasing ghosts.

But how do I write about Native American genocide? I ask Indian friends. They say, "Well, it's not exactly the Jewish Holocaust. It's bigger."

I did not see film footage when a ship pulled up on Turtle Island, but the story lives on. There are no photos of when early invaders arrived here and began their land grabs, collecting bounties on Indians, conducting military massacres. Indians fought long and hard. Tribes did Winter Counts, a kind of Indian Census and narrative. Photos and papers exist of Indians signing white man treaties to enact removals to lands called reservations. I've been to the graveyard of the last Indian uprising, the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890.

As for the Indian Adoption projects, I needed a calculator. If the Native American population was 2 million and if just one quarter of *all* children were removed before the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, then on-paper, 80,000+ children were removed from their families during the early to mid-1900s. If the population of American Indians was 3 million, then over 100,000 babies were removed. I hated this math...85 percent of children were removed by adoption in 16 states. That's genocide.

Genocide, by my definition, means a community of people were culturally killed, wiped out or literally made dead for political and/or economic reasons. Strong words but true. Some of us are your next door neighbors. Some of us are not correctly listed on the census. Some of us are Indian only when we look in the mirror.

Pretend

You must stay drunk on writing so reality cannot destroy you... - Ray Bradbury

There were no cell phones to warn other Indians in 1491 or earlier. There were no text messages. There were no cameras rolling when the missionaries, militias and later social workers came for children. CBS, ABC, NBC did

not film news documentaries. It's a miracle Indian people survived America's bad history.

So, yes, I did pretend to be someone – and live a lie – because I'm adopted, because I was supposed to be kept a secret. Ask any adoptee who has tribal ancestry. If you are not told, you're just another dead Indian, at least on record and on tribal rolls. America is like that. Adoptees of all skin colors in the United States are now estimated to

ADOPTION RECORDS

Access varies by state: At present these states offer open or semi-open records: Alabama, Alaska, Delaware, Kansas, Maine, Oregon, Rhode Island, Tennessee and Washington. In other states adopted persons are provided with a fraudulent birth certificate under their adopted name and showing the adoptive parents as the natural parents of the child.

number between six and ten million. That's a lot of bogus ancestry.

The 2000 census says there are 2.5 million Indians. I'd say many more if you count me and the thousands of

Lost Birds from all across North America.

America would prefer every one of us to live as an American citizen as if none other were as good or as important. America forgets it's very new by all standards; it just acts like its old.

Indian Country is ancient. Our cells are identical to those of our ancestors of 30,000 years ago. Indian kids who are adopted and raised outside Indian country eventually get it—more or less.

We get that less Indians around is best. We get that America didn't respect us or our culture. We get that America tamed us, took our land, and then revised our history. We get that more Americans prefer us tucked away somewhere. They'll teach us their version of our

story. We get that it's wrong but it's America. It's been this way a long time, over 500 years.

No one is exactly sure how many Indian children were taken, but thousands are gone, probably living on the fringe as urban Indians. That is how I see myself. I get that.

Chickens and Ducks

Alright, here's an analogy that woke me one night—can a duck raise chickens and the chickens forget they're chickens? That's a definite no.

I considered this at age 48 when I started writing this memoir. Steve Elm, a member of the Oneida Nation, and an editor in New York City, asked me to write a story about Stolen Generations, about American Indian children adopted by non-Indians, for his publication *Talking Stick* in 2004. The idea generated lots of comments from friends so I tried a few drafts of a story. I found no one had tackled this particular subject, what really happened to all these missing kids.

I never knew how or if I fit into this picture. I'd been working as an editor and journalist since 1996, first in Wisconsin, then Connecticut. I never imagined there was something specifically called the Indian Adoption Project or Indian Program, not when I was a kid, not when I started writing about it. But there was proof and I found it eventually.

Indian people disappeared—many did—all across America. Not all were adopted. After a few centuries, Indian Country better known as Turtle Island, apparently dissolved into America. After numerous relocation programs were created, Indians were told to move off their reservation so many did.

So, can an adoptee return to a reservation community as an adult when America raised us and changed us? Not that easy. I thought our bond is everything, our blood is everything. I get that someone came along and changed that, too.

Never before had I experienced such difficulty. I repeat: never. I took to writing like a duck takes to water. Most days, writing and doing research is like breathing. This time was different. I struggled. I knew I'd hit something so I had to slow down, to process, to dig.

This history, my history, similar stories, had to be somewhere.

GLOBAL

How many countries do not allow adoption? Several. Iraq is one. No children from Western Europe, Australia, or Canada are eligible for adoption by Americans right now.

Nonetheless, America's adoption reach has been global, widely publicized, some insist saintly, God-like of those who adopt orphans, even if money is exchanged for babies.

International adoption really began after the Korean War, when American GI's left numerous orphans with their poverty-stricken mothers; then Korean and American-Asian orphans were brought here to be adopted in the United States. After that, Americans adopted thousands of children from Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. There is no bigger adopter. In 2002 alone, U.S. families adopted over 20,000 children from various Third World nations. [Americans use fertility doctors, too; they can't seem to make enough of their own babies.]

The overall topic of adoption begged one question for me. “Wait, how do adoptees feel?” No one had asked me when I was young or old. I wanted this answered so I dug in.

An adoptee movement makes headlines these days. Adoptive parents are usually shocked to hear their adopted child say they need to know who they are and what happened.

My Alaskan Native-Cherokee-Celtic friend Anecia says, “The power of identity is stronger than fear.” That’s a powerful statement about adoption, yes. Anecia went full circle as an adoptee and met her birth mom and dad. Her adoptive dad helped her.

The reality is adoptees do have a strong biological curiosity. It’s awful scary not to know who you are. My first goal was discovery —how I lived a mystery and solved it, and I survived spiritually intact and remarkably well. Other Split Feathers need to know how this is possible, even after our pain.

This memoir is not about my recovery from depression or addiction or self-mutilation or suicide attempts, not at all. Apparently adoptees do suffer from these more than the rest of humanity.

Facing my own situation head-on, what choice did I have? I was an abandoned baby—it was my initiation into being human.

So I will share how my book started, my experience (as a child, a survivor and a journalist) and my friendships with other American Indians who were also adopted. I learned much more about the business and history of adoption so I include some of this, too. This might be controversial since it concerns mysterious (some say hard-headed, some say unethical) adoption practices, with unknowing Americans raising indigenous children who

come from a distinct culture; and in a very real sense feel persecuted for being Indian. This story might contradict some popular beliefs, myths that persist about adoption.

Years ago I was embarrassed to say I was adopted. I used to think, "What made me such a loser?" I did not feel lucky. I did not have a clue that my adoption hurt me so badly, its tentacles reached into every aspect of my life, even as an adult. I ached to know my own mother, the woman who created me.

One expert wrote, "Loss of the most sacred bond in life, that of a mother and child, is one of the most severe traumas and this loss will require long-term, if not lifelong, therapy."

Really? No one helped me with my loss.

For years I just wanted to find the truth. I did not disrupt anyone's life, showing up on their doorstep unannounced.

For adoptees I write about each step to reunion with my birth family and relatives. For those who attempt to open their own adoption, or simply want to understand, I explain many stages. And I mention other adoptee stories, people I know.

Even now there is persistent rampant poverty in Indian Country. Even now it isn't easy being Indian, let alone poor. But it is better to know, and not be a mystery.

Adoptees with Indian blood find out soon enough their reservations are closed to strangers. Without proof, you're suspect. We don't always get our proof since state laws prevent it. Just one Minnesota tribe, White Earth, decided to call out to its lost children; this made news in 2007. Just a few showed up. Why? Adoption files are still sealed in Minnesota.

For any adoptee going back, this requires a special kind of courage. Adoptees know this.

Rhonda, a Bay Mills Tribal member, an adoptee friend of mine, was told early on—be happy, be white. Ask yourself, how would you react? When did Indian Country become such a bad place to be from? When did this happen? How did this happen?

Adventure

Keeping journals all my life, I'd never actually told anyone of my own harrowing adventure, my illegal pursuit of strangers who share my blood. It always bothered me I looked like no one I knew. I was pretty sure I had a tribe but was not sure which one.

When I started writing for Steve Elm in 2004, I didn't really want to look at my own perceptions or lack of them. Was I afraid? Yes. I didn't want to appear less than grateful to the DeMeyer family who adopted me. But I wasn't exactly grateful.

What had my "non-Indian adoptee status" done to me? I wasn't exactly sure.

I'd blocked out a lot. I prefer to think of my younger self as brain-dead or crazy. The past was a dark place to visit. Most of my earliest child memories were vague, even blank in places. I had shut down mostly what hurt. Some things, ok, many things, I didn't want to face again.

Early drafts of this book were fragmented. That's what one nice editor said. I kept patching memories together like a quilt. I remembered slowly, not seeing the whole picture of what had actually happened to me. Again I did not want to appear less than grateful to my adoptive family. It was good they adopted an orphan.

What this did, writing about it, is not what the adoption flyers said. Adoptees are expected to be happy, grateful—not devastated, not in shock, not horrified. To

find any kind of sequence to this, I had to remember how I felt. Then it hit me—I didn't want to remember. I'd left the past behind for a reason. Too much hurt.

Writer's block was not what I needed. Months passed. Steve was waiting. Maybe I didn't want to ruffle any feathers, least of all my own.

Finally, one year and counting, after numerous mind-bending wake-ups at 4 a.m., I was writing again. First, I remembered the steps, opening my adoption, how I handled it, the good, bad, who I met, etc. In fact during 2004, I was still meeting new relatives.

What I encountered—besides shock—was me, barely alive, living dead.

Let me explain. I started to see that I was usually caught up in other people's lives just to avoid living my own. Under layers of denial, I conveniently forgot what I didn't like to remember. I had stopped caring about the past but it had me, all of me.

To piece together this life, I needed to step back, to connect the dots. I wasn't exactly ready to meet her—my newly-resurrected Shawnee-Cherokee. I had buried her. I didn't know how to be her. By the way, we're only dead to our tribe.

That is, until we return as ghosts.

Revelations

"...well I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and civilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before. – Huckleberry Finn (Mark Twain)

Only two categories of American citizens cannot obtain a copy of their original birth certificates: people in the FBI witness protection program and adoptees.

As a kid, I'm unaware of this. As an adoptee, I'm full of illusions. Now an adult, I see how illusions spared me from pain I could not yet comprehend or process.

I was emotionally stalled at 20, then 30, then 40. In other words—a wreck. I didn't like it. I'd found lots of books on what to do if you adopt a baby. There weren't any on how to live like this. Revelations were happening at all stages of my life. The internet helped, revealing a big picture of how I fit into this.

I'm no kid now. Thank God I've had Indian friends all my life. I hated being a stranger to my own tribe. I knew more about other tribal nations than my own. I looked like a success story, successfully assimilated.

By America's standards, I'd lost more than my parents. I lost my language, my ability to pray as a Shawnee-Cherokee. I lost my passport back to Indian Country. I had no right to be Indian anymore. In this way, adoptee culture is unique. In many ways it's like torture.

Two ducks raised me, two (chickens) walked away. I think all four parents were totally unaware how my "being adopted" affected me. No, this was not about fault or blame. They knew and I knew adoption was the way it was done; in the 1950s, a bigger system decreed let someone else raise your baby. Single women should not keep their babies. No one questioned adoption since it was done in the best interest of the child.

For Indigenous people around the globe, far too many moms and dads had no choice, truly no choice. Even uneducated Indian people are not stupid. Giving Indian babies to white families was part of a larger plan: colonization. It worked. It ultimately did change our future.

This was quite a revelation for me, being one of the colonized.

Further Reading: ***Of 'Sluts' and 'Bastards': A Feminist Decodes the Child Welfare Debate by Louise Armstrong*** (1995).

The author reveals the critical link between the issue of welfare and that of child welfare: between the will to punish sluts and intervention to remove their “bastards.” Armstrong guides the reader through the nightmarish foster care system. With razor sharp wit, she exposes the prejudices—and professional pride—that infests the social services bureaucracy and destroys so many children’s lives.

Sacrifice

I maintain that most of us could have kept and raised our children with just a little support from our families. That being denied, perhaps if we had been treated like other mothers—allowed to see and hold our babies, have some memento of their existence—we might not have been so traumatized. —Denise, Arizona Birthmother,

www.blogger.com/profile/05105971355542234723

Some unmarried mothers were told, in so many words, “Sacrifice your baby and save your reputation.” Adoption officials assured them their privacy, “No one will find the baby once they’re adopted. Records are permanently sealed so no one will ever know.”

Some of these women were treated like savages, knowing their only option was to abandon their baby and forget it happened; easier said than done, right?

My birthmother's sacrifice, abandoning me, was a decision she made for herself. I was small compared to the rest of her life. She had no clue how I'd feel. After I disappeared, she had no idea if I would look for her, or my dad and my siblings, if I had any. I was supposed to live happily ever after.

It's sad to say my birth mom didn't seem real when I was young. She was a slut, painted for me by the Catholics who raised me. When did these ideas get planted?

If she was so horrible, what did that make me? Then why was my birth dad left out of my early thoughts? I don't know.

I hoped meeting some of my relatives I might feel human again.

After I read my adoption file in 1979, it was very hard to accept why my own birthmother abandoned me. "Let go... Abandoned...Orphaned." Those words echoed inside me like an infection, like I was defective.

At times I did act like an emotionally battered and beaten dog. I do remember. I felt terrible as a kid. It wasn't safe to be me, so sad. I remember living with my adoptive parents. I held back more anxiety than they or I could handle. I buried that too, filed it away, and pretended it wasn't there.

As a young girl, I lacked the tools necessary to handle or repair my damage. Sure, if I were a Vulcan on Star Trek, not feeling would be normal. I was supposed to feel grateful, not cold. What I could not see or hear was controlling me. I didn't know anything about birth psychology or soul sickness or other medical terms for my injury which felt like an open wound.

Sev and Edie, my new adoptive mom and dad, pretended too, hiding their own pain, her infertility after

her two miscarriages. She could never have her own babies.

Every heart was broken in our family.

For Joey and me, we grew up their adopted kids, their only kids, replacements for dead babies. We lived their secret fear we might not turn out OK so Joey and I tried to be perfect.

Now this makes me sick. I didn't know others kids who had to try so hard.

Sure I could function. I was a musician, a model and a writer, someone my family could brag about. My face was in *Good Housekeeping* magazine. There's no question my adoptive family gave me many things—and the confidence that they loved me. Yet growing up, no one said how deeply disturbed I was.

Right above my office chair is an African mobile called the Circle of Joy. A circle of straw dancers sway above me. A poet friend Erin gave them to me. Her dancers gave me great pause.

I finally figured it out. I'll dance my way home.

Connecting the dots

Usually parents, adoptive or natural, are never held responsible or accountable to anyone but God. It's an enormous, thankless job raising kids. It's learn-as-you-go.

All my adoptive parents knew was: I grew up. I seemed OK. I wasn't their duck anymore.

This wouldn't be the first time someone in my family forgot to ask me how I felt. There were probably afraid to ask. Back then I doubt I could have explained it anyway. I couldn't say, "No one has to take this ridiculous journey but me, challenging religion and law just to know my own name, just to gain any semblance of human dignity. Where is my mother? Why is searching for her illegal? I need to find her."

Growing up DeMeyer, relatives talked for hours about their ancestry. Every word hung in the air, and stung like a bee. Obviously, they were oblivious to my pain as I became distinctly numb. They had no clue.

As they talked ancestry, I deciphered their words: “You belong to someone else.” I felt so tiny, unimportant, like a stranger, though this was my home.

Writing this book meant writing about stuff I’d buried. Writing this required re-living that past, with no proof of what I believed to be true. Until I was in 40, I knew nothing about my tribal relatives on paper. Perplexed, sure I was, but I never gave up.

A chronology wasn’t what my editor Steve wanted. (Three drafts he returned, gently suggesting, “try again.”)

By 2005, it hit me. I needed to connect with other Split Feathers/Lost Birds. I needed to know if they were experiencing what I was experiencing. It took me awhile to get all my ducks (and dots) in a row. The row became more like a circle.

By the end of 2005, I was writing at all hours, usually in the middle of the night. I submitted “*Generation after Generation, We are Coming Home*”; Steve Elm finally published it. It wrote itself. At 3 a.m., the story flowed out of me like a geyser. (You’ll read it later.)

I inadvertently started a fire. My re-connection to self didn’t stop or end. Two, then three more years flew by, still sitting at this computer, dots connecting me all over the place, to more people and more fires.

Coast to coast, people could read my *Talking Stick* story online. Friends emailed my story to their friends who were also adopted.

Paul DeMain, the publisher of *News from Indian Country*, is also an adoptee, so he published my story. Then more adoptees popped up, slowly like baby turtles.

Then more found my blog. Then more found me on Facebook.

By 2009, the circle spread like a web. I'd not only found me in this story, or a new sense of it, I found other adoptees just like me... hopefully with this book, I'll find even more.

Mosaic

Writing, I think, is not apart from living. Writing is a kind of double living. The writer experiences everything twice.

Once in reality and once in that mirror... – Catherine Drinker Bowen

There's no way someone can work on processing emotions, day in and day out, without some kind of mental health break. I tore out my bathroom. Even though this book was waiting to be written, I slowly and carefully installed mosaic tile around my old bathtub. I ripped away the 70s wallpaper, slapping adobe plaster on the walls.

I'm sure the plumber and electrician thought, "Trace is a little crazy."

Hard physical labor—keeping my hands busy—helped me think. I worked six long months on that mosaic. That you can't rush. Like the Seal song, "We're never gonna survive... unless... we are a little crazy..." Well, maybe I was a little crazy.

I call the mosaic a labor of sanity.

Since 2005, I wrote and rewrote. Each day was becoming a mosaic of adoptees; some might call me, or we email or we visit in person. Some share their pain and the complexity of being lost or they tell me about their happiness (or the tragedy) after reunions with their birth family and relatives.

A shy lost bird in British Columbia emailed me right after the *News From Indian Country* story was published. She shared her mystery and said no one had ever talked to her about being a Lost Bird. No one had ever helped her deal with her sense of loss. That's how insane this is—being isolated, perilously alone, powerless.

An adoptee survival mechanism (and patience) seems to kick in when we need it. Lost Birds/adoptees, even in remote places, do figure out the internet. More than one emailed me: "I never told my adoptive parents. I waited a long time. I used the internet to search. I used a registry. I had a friend who used a lawyer..." they wrote.

If they need it, I offer my help.

They ask me, "How would an American handle being taken to India or Iraq... to a completely new culture? How would they handle this situation if it happened to them?"

My answer: They'd adapt, yes. Ask a lot of questions? Sure. Miss home? Definitely.

Each Lost Bird/adoptee has a unique story. Some tell a horror story of searching for answers and their tribal identity without instructions, receiving rare encouragement. There is no passport back to Indian Country. Very few found help. I met a few who successfully opened their sealed records and some did get enrolled in their tribe. Some found out they were already enrolled.

It amazes me how clever and creative adoptees are. We are never really lost, they say, just missing a huge chunk of our life and the people who have answers. Our identity becomes both Indian and non-Indian. Some adoptees feel moving back to our reservation will replace some of our pain. Some are hopeful, and cling to the idea they'll find living (or dead) relatives. Some adoptees

figured out Indian people are more likely to be in cities, and not on the reservations. A few adoptees said they were children, not babies, when they were adopted, and remember being taken. More than one told me “fight-or-flight” was how they felt as a child. Some ran away as teenagers.

For any adoptee still searching, the information you need is the name of your mother or father, and which tribe.

It hurts me so much I can’t help every adoptee. It pains me more birthparents aren’t trying to find us. It kills me the Bureau of Indian Affairs, an American agency created for Indian people, isn’t set up to offer resources to help Lost Birds. Adoption laws prevent us from ever knowing our true identity.

Lucky birds who do find their family name often do make contact. Several make regular trips home to their reservation to see family. Slow migrations are underway. At this very moment, someone brave is reconnecting past to present.

Many more pray for a sign. *The Morning Show* on NBC ran a series on *Lost Identity* in November 2008. One Oregon adoptee hired a private detective and in three days found his mother who is a member of the Klamath Tribe. Oregon passed legislation for adoptees to gain access to their sealed adoption records. Many more will succeed with these new laws.

We’ll guess why the Indian Adoption Project files remain sealed and closed.

I’m not giving up. I want the government *and* tribes to open records for every adoptee. I will never give up until this happens. I want Senate hearings on this issue!

A Lost Bird I know in Connecticut travels around Eastern reservations looking for people who look like her,

since a priest had handled her adoption 56 years ago and no paperwork exists. I pray for Mary Ann to reconnect with her tribe every day. She has asked Maine and New Hampshire to find some record of her birth.

Hearts heal when you find your tribe, when relatives welcome you home, when you find someone who looks like you, when you learn words of your ancestor's language.

Grass Prisons

By treaty, America created oppressive dirt-poor grass prisons they called Indian reservations, isolated far away from the American pilgrim-pioneer.

Poverty is poverty and looks pretty much the same in Indian country. From that perspective, most Indians have lived poor since treaties, moving from a hunter-gatherer society to organized concentration camps.

The Indian Program was one of the Indian Adoption Projects I researched. It was different for Native mothers, many judged for poor living conditions on their reservation or in their urban ghettos. The pioneer judge and jury did nothing to stop missionaries (then social workers) from coming to take (others say steal) children, with the promise of a good Christian upbringing, or a Christian home, or a Christian boarding school.

There was nothing wrong with the way Native people prayed to their Gods. Indian people do raise children differently because grandparents, aunties, uncles, your mother and father's kin act as parents to every child. No child was ever lost or without relatives since the entire tribe was your family. There was kinship adoption.

Americans and Canadians didn't understand Indian people. Indian culture was judged inferior—so they scooped up Indian kids for boarding school and adoption,

to assimilate us, make us white and to take more and more land.

Tribes are still on the lookout for others who come for their children, a few hundred years later. In many ways, poverty was a powerful weapon. It still is on many reservations.

Excerpt:

“Our Indian Program” 1960, New York

A pioneer in offering adoption to mixed-race children and children of color, Louise Wise Services placed a large number of children through the Indian Adoption Project. The following excerpt describes the agency’s early role in that effort and suggests that matching played a somewhat different role in adoptions of Native children during this period than for other children marked by visible differences.

“Miss Jenkins discussed our Indian Program as a whole, giving the background of the project which was created a little over a year ago (1959) by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Child Welfare League of America. There are very few services offered to Indian unmarried mothers who may want to give up their babies for adoption. The mother has very little communication with the Indian Bureau workers who are not geared to the unmarried mothers’ needs and the mother has had to be dependent on state resources which have provided a limited number of homes for Indian children, and who would more likely place the child in a foster home than in an adoptive home. The possibility of finding good Indian adoption homes has not been fully explored and not enough has been done in placing Indian children with non-Indian families. We are not sure how much prejudice has had a part in this and more interpretation is needed. It is

hoped that some of these things may be resolved in this project. The (1960) project is for a period of three years and it is hoped that adoptive homes can be secured for 50 children and that the project will stimulate additional placements by the local agencies.

To date our agency has placed six Indian children and at present we have one child in care. The first two children referred to us were half Indian and they were placed with Jewish families, who had one child from us. The third, a little full (blood) Indian boy was placed with an Indian family and it turned out to be very suitable as both the child and the adoptive father were from the same reservation in Arizona. The next two children, twins 2-1/2 years old, were placed with a Protestant family. The fourth child placed (with a Jewish family) was Peter, two years old.

Peter, a full (blood) Indian child, was born September 1957, came here October 1959, and was placed for adoption in December 1959. The ratio of Indian blood is determined because as a member of the tribe Peter shares in the money the tribe accumulates, and Peter had money of his own. Peter's parents were on the verge of divorce and he was always the center of controversy between his parents. They had married very young and have three children; they were not able to take on the responsibility of a family with the result that the children were shifted from relative to relative. Peter had been in a foster home when his mother took him back and shortly thereafter his parents surrendered him.

Peter was placed in a boarding home on an Indian reservation in Montana. The plan was for Miss Jenkins to visit him and to help him get to know her, and in short, to make him comfortable enough with her so that she could take him back to New York. The Bureau of Indian Affairs

worker was very helpful to Miss Jenkins, and worked with the Indian boarding mother in order to get her assistance in helping Peter to relate to Miss Jenkins. The help the boarding mother gave was outstanding and much careful thought was given in planning for the big change in Peter's life.

Peter managed beautifully on the 9 hour plane trip to New York, even though he was very frightened when the plane took off. He adjusted well in our boarding home where Miss Jenkins visited him every other day so that she could continue her relationship with him thus serving as the connecting link between his past and his future.

The family selected for Peter had originally attended one of the group meetings for applicants interested in older children; they were over-age for our regular group of young children. The leader of the group had been favorably impressed by them and felt they might also be interested in an Indian child. When this was explored they were most enthusiastic and wanted Peter immediately. The adoptive father grew up in Canada and knows quite a bit about Indians. Peter was placed with them and they are already speaking of adopting another Indian child. The placement is working out very well and Peter is beginning to acquire a sense of permanency. The Committee found the presentation fascinating and enjoyed it very much."

[Source: www.uoregon.edu/~adoption/archive/LWSOIP.htm]

Note: Louise Wise adoption agencies closed their doors more than a few years ago. Those adoptee records are now held by Spence-Chapin adoption agencies in the US.

Open and Honest

After I did my search, I found I was more open and more honest than I'd ever been. I felt whole.

My closest friend is another adoptee named Rhonda. Do we have a lot in common? Our story goes: our birthmothers never told our birthfathers about us. Both our dads were Indian men. I did a DNA test in 1994 with my birthfather Earl who was Shawnee-Cherokee-Delaware and Irish. Rhonda did DNA with her Bay Mills Indian uncle since her birthfather Teep had already passed on. Neither of us met our non-Indian birthmothers.

My dad didn't live on a reservation and Rhonda's dad did, on and off.

Raised white kids, we were not "recognized" as Indians. Each of us has a brother who was also adopted, probably not American Indian, but who knows since neither opened their adoptions.

I met Earl who was very sick, who died shortly after we met. Rhonda never met her dad Teep.

Very often Rhonda and I would talk about who cared for us prior to our adoption. We both had foster families. Who cared for us as newborns, before our adoption? Those months must have hurt if we bonded with them then were taken away again.

Together Rhonda and I vent our frustration over sealed records, paying for files, even the expense of DNA tests.

Rhonda called the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Michigan for information when she had her birthfather's name. The woman on the other end of the phone said if Rhonda's father was already dead, she'd never get tribal enrollment. Rhonda was smart not to listen. Rhonda's Uncle had her father's DNA. Rhonda was enrolled on Bay Mills tribal rolls in Michigan.

We talk about the ghosts of our dead relatives, our fate (some call salvation) being handed to strangers. In so many ways, adoption feels like abduction.

If we don't acknowledge the full extent of our wounds, we won't heal. Acknowledging the truth of my abandonment, I did begin to heal, but after I opened my file.

Adoptee Clarissa Pinkola Estés, a psychologist who wrote *Warming the Stone Child*, said that those who have been "abandoned" and face it and work through it can become the strongest people on the face of the earth.

Finding my answers happened slowly, like detective work, facing what seemed impossible. I shed old skin. I had the splitting sickness, though many don't call it that, not yet.

My adoptee friends Rhonda, Adrian and Anecia said some of the same things I'd already put in this memoir. No, it wasn't just me; I'm not alone. It helps to know you're not alone.

Once I finished the writing for *Talking Stick*, I went further, scouring Internet records, adoption stories, newspaper articles and laws and decided a book might help other adoptees as much as my search, research and reunion helped me.

I had to buy a filing cabinet. There was so much adoption history; I read more than I could ever write.

Post-Adoption Depression

Splitting sickness is defined by Indian people as soul sickness. Anyone can split, even adoptive moms. When you can't handle some part of your life, a part of you shuts down.

The *Globe and Mail* newspaper in Canada published a story in June 2009 about adoptive mothers who suffer from post-adoption depression, what I call the splitting sickness.

Apparently, more than a few adoptive moms didn't feel any love for their new adopted child, even after years of waiting, often at huge expense. Afraid their new adopted child might be taken away, or how they might be judged, adoptive moms would not seek help for their symptoms. The story said an estimated 11 to 18 percent of adoptions break down during the first six months. American researchers found two percent of adoptive families cannot cope after an adoption is finalized. In some cases, the child is returned to authorities and readopted.

So adoption isn't perfect? No, it's forced. Adoption creates a "fantasy family."

Women who suffer with this new disorder "post-adoption depression" have numerous symptoms: feeling sad, tearful, irritable; self-imposed isolation from family, friends, spouse; anger at the adopted child, spouse or other children for no apparent reason; desire to leave home or have the adopted child removed; loss of interest or pleasure in most activities; significant changes in appetite and sex drive; insomnia or a marked increase in sleep; fatigue, lack of energy; feelings of worthlessness or guilt; and thoughts of suicide.

But wait. These symptoms exactly describe what many adoptees experience, but it lasts their entire lives.

What looks like a fantasy can really be a nightmare.

Warning Labels

"Take the first step in faith. You don't have to see the whole staircase. Just take the first step." – Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The adoption industry will not advertise that most patients in psychiatric care are adoptees. They don't warn

adoptive parents their new child will suffer from “Severe Narcissistic Injury” or “Reactive Attachment Disorder.” This news would not be welcome.

In fact, the adoption industry does not tell adoptive parents that adoption hurts adoptees so deeply they may consider suicide, self-medicate or commit criminal offenses.

Being an adoptee is a mind-altering experience, because the moment you are separated from your sacred space, the womb that brought you here—into this reality—into this world—being handed to strangers, given away, feels more like a nightmare.

I was terrified when *she* disappeared. No one could make *this* make sense.

I wrote in my journal, “Her rejection of you is the moment you become an orphan. The moment you become an orphan, your life literally rips apart.”

Denial hurts, too, because the pain is more excruciating when an adoptee never finds answers. Pretending everything is OK does not make our adoptee symptoms go away.

Adoptive parents are assured adoptees won’t need anyone but them, with little compassion for our complexities, or see our “soul sickness” as a ticking time bomb.

As a child I did not understand my emotional damage was a disorder nor did I receive treatment for depression. I’ve met many adoptees and none of us had treatment for severe narcissistic injury. We were never told.

It took me years to figure out how this happened. No one told me emotions, even extreme ones, could be expected at some point in my life. I was never allowed to express my fear, anxiety or confusion, or even admit these

feelings existed. Like other adoptees, I might delay it until adulthood, or not express them at all.

Adoptees don't come with warning labels.

Maybe we should...

The "Baby Scoop Era" (named for the period, 1940s to mid-70s, during which adoption was virtually the only option for unwed pregnant women) ended after Roe v. Wade, as abortion was legalized and single motherhood gained acceptance. The resultant fall in adoption rates was drastic, from 19.2 percent of white, unmarried pregnant women in 1972 to 1.7 percent in 1995 (and lower among women of color). Adoption is big business- lots of money changing hands. —DENISE, www.write-o-holic.blogspot.com/2009/09/new-culprit.html

One White Newborn = \$60,000-\$80,000 US (2009)

America's adoption industry earnings are approximately \$1.4 billion each year. Every birth is a true miracle. We all know what a gift it is to have a baby.

If famous people adopt, then it must be working, right?

After giving birth to one daughter then twins, actors Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt are still madly in love with their three adopted children. I don't doubt that. But how do their adopted children feel? The press will never ask; I doubt we'll ever know. Of course, their children would say: "We are grateful, loved and happy." It's like a script. They won't say, "Get me outta here."

Being raised with nannies in a celebrity circus will be normal for some of them. Joan Crawford, Burt Reynolds, Rosie O'Donnell, Jamie Lee Curtis, Sharon Stone, Michele Pfeiffer, Calista Flockhart, Sheryl Crow, Barbara Walters, Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman and many others in Hollywood made headlines when they adopted, shielding their precious darlings from the prying eyes of paparazzi. Madonna, Ricky Martin, and Meg Ryan made headlines when they adopted a Third World orphan.

Wealth and prestige might mask or delay symptoms in certain orphan adoptees.

Regardless, adoptees will have emotional difficulties, regardless of who adopts them, including Hollywood.

Bad Seed

I'm glad I don't recall the time I spent in a Minnesota orphanage. I won't deny adoption is necessary. Every child on Earth deserves a good home.

Since my adoptive parents never met my birthparents, they didn't know what kind of people they were. How heroic for them to adopt me when I might be flawed, or bad seed. Yes, it was dangerous to adopt a stranger's child. In the white America of my parent's era, "beware" and "be careful" was whispered about adoption since these babies might turn out to be genetic lemons.

Social workers might concoct a story, to sell us as white, even though Rhonda and I had our Indian blood, too. Our adoption files do not mention that fact.

Since America was founded, it wasn't safe to be anything but white. The Eugenics Movement enforced involuntary sterilizations of minorities, particularly indigenous people (Indians) and Africans Americans.

Growing up, I never heard, “Tracy was illegitimate or Joey is someone’s dirty little secret!” but I knew it’s what people were thinking. People at church watched us with either scrutiny or pity. If Joey and I did not turn out OK, using the genetic lemon theory, it wouldn’t be our parents fault.

Today an adoptive parent can return flawed orphans who don’t bond well or act out. There are special lawyers who sue adoption agencies when an adoptee is imperfect in some way.

To protect ourselves, adoptees will train themselves to look happy. I know I did.

Funny, I always seemed to know who was adopted. Our parents usually introduced us or we introduced ourselves as adopted children. I had two friends named Kim and another named Lisa and we all knew we were adopted.

This became our bond, our shared identity.

Indians Never Forget They Are Indians

For any adoptee, opening an adoption is like opening Pandora’s Box. You just never know who—or what—will fly out at you. Since this story means a lot to Split Feathers, I couldn’t stop until I knew everything I could.

America’s Indian Adoption Project was not publicized or well known, just like a few more secrets I found buried along the way. Congress heard Indian leaders complain in 1974, “In Minnesota, 90 percent of the adopted Indian children are placed in non-Indian homes.” I was born in Minnesota.

The adoption industry won’t say exactly how many Indian children were adopted. They’ll say adoptees were raised by people who wanted us. They’ll say our

birthparents were poor. They'll say adoptions were done legally.

Wayne Carp, an adoption advocate and author who went "undercover" to compile his book on adoption history kept running into secrecy problems. Unlike Carp, I am the story. I didn't go undercover. I dove in headfirst.

"Be kinder than necessary, for everyone you meet is fighting some kind of battle." I don't know who said this but it says so much. Regardless if you're Indian or non-Indian, adoptees from closed adoptions do battle with the same things.

Even if the people who adopted us were kind, generous, thoughtful people, can they imagine what it feels like being adopted? Hardly. Wearing this "secret adoption" mentality is like wearing a strait-jacket. It wears you down. I tried to avoid it but couldn't.

When uncertainty becomes insecurity—that is not good for anyone, especially for families who live with or love an adoptee.

In 2009, Amazon.com had over 5,000 books on adoption. The majority written by adoptive parents, professionals and the system designed to promote more adoptions. Far fewer books are written by adoptees. I'm not surprised.

I am not designating myself an expert here, since I know many adoptions happen for different reasons with different results. Too many people, even Indians, take their identity for granted which makes it all the more frustrating. America has amnesia about lots of things, especially American Indians. Americans will need to wrap their minds around some very troubling history.

By the way, Indians never forget they are Indians, even when they are raised by non-Indians—or ducks.

Adopt, Adapt

...Leo Her Many Horses, an Arapaho who lives in Wyoming, says the men's chicken dance starts with the story of a boy who was feeling badly because he didn't belong to any tribe. He sat outside the powwow and watched the prairie chickens for a bit before coming back into the powwow, emulating their movement. At first, other dancers were appalled at this dance, but the elders said no, let him be, he represents the bird nation.

["American Indian dancers keeping it real," by Shauna Stephenson, News From Indian Country, Aug. 20, 2007, page 26]

My husband Herb calls me a bird. I know he's right.

Every bird has a song. Birds learn to sing listening to their parents who learned it from their parents. Each generation, birds make nests, roost and sing in the season of spring. Baby birds hatch in sync with migrations. Each chirp is a signal, warning of danger or predators. Birds must sing or they'll surely die.

Orphaned birds can't sing. They can't without parents to teach them. If baby birds are abandoned, they'll die. If raised by foster bird-parents, they'll sing just like them. Baby birds mimic and adapt.

Like an abandoned bird, I was fostered (then adopted) by strangers. I learned to sing like them. Adoptees mimic and adapt.

In Indian Country, grieving grandparents call us Lost Ones, Split Feathers or Lost Birds; they say we come from two worlds and there are so many of us, they call to us in dreams, as ghosts.

Birds do hold a special place in many cultures. In Hindu myth, birds are the messengers of the gods. Bird clans are alive today in many tribal nations and indigenous cultures. Singing is not just sacred, it's ceremony.

I am a Lost Bird and know the history of America is a history of possession, not just land, but perception. I know Native people get upset when our cultural beliefs are misinterpreted, even misused. I get that those who control the land control the history. If we don't know this, we are doomed.

Many Lost Birds I've met are my age, in their 30s, 40s or older. We have our own story now, and our own honor song. We live two cultures. We understand what adoption did to more than a few American Indian families.

Knowing you're not alone works like medicine.

NANCY VERRIER M.A., PSYCHOTHERAPIST

*"The chosen child and the grateful child myths are two beliefs that die hard. Although made to feel as if it were the case, most adoptees do not feel chosen so much as they feel **unchosen** by their birth mothers. To be chosen by anyone else after that is anticlimactic. So far as being grateful, it is the adoptive parents who should be grateful. They are the ones pursuing the adoption. They are the ones who got what they wanted. No child would choose to be separated from his biological mother. That she/he may have to be separated from her is a different thing altogether. That is an intellectual, adult decision, not an emotional/sensual baby experience. Although grateful for many things his/her parents may have done for them, no child should be obligated to feel grateful for having a loving set of parents. That should be his right."*

Four Traumas

More and more of this adoption reality is coming out on the internet, which means more and more adoptive parents and birthparents are in for a few more surprises. One study claims adoptees are more traumatized than a prisoner of war. We suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. A prisoner of war may escape or be released, but an adoptee will suffer its effects our entire life. There is no known cure.

Now I believe there are four distinct traumas in being an adoptee.

They are: 1) in utero, when you hear what is happening to you or sense what is coming; 2) when you are delivered, abandoned, and handed to strangers; 3) later when you are told you are adopted and realize fully what being “adopted” means; and 4) when you realize you are different, from a different culture or country, and you can’t contact your family, or know them, or have the information you need to find them.

It took me years to get this. There were more traumas, too—like when I’d fill out forms at the doctor’s office. I had no medical history. I had no idea if I was sitting next to someone who could be my biological brother, mother or father. To think I could marry my own relative and not even know it, that idea was horrifying.

I could carry a gene that I pass down to my own children—but I wouldn’t know until it’s too late. My child could suffer since I didn’t know. If my birthparents were alcoholics, then I really shouldn’t drink. I could be pre-disposed to diabetes or heart disease or cancer or depression and not know this. My list went on and on.
