

Adoption Is....

What is Adoption? If you asked 100 adoptees, birth mothers and adoptive parents, you'd get 100 different definitions of adoption. Adoption has been described as an invisible thread that connects 2 people, sometimes half a world away. Other's describe adoption as a tapestry with many colors and shapes, making one beautiful piece of art. Adoption has been described as a puzzle, with many pieces all coming together at the end to complete a picture. Some believe adoption is altruistic, with a certain "saving a life" aspect, while others refer to adoption as "luck". Defining adoption is complicated, it's complex, it's not simple. For each life that adoption touches, the story is different, so the definition is different. Adoption is many things, but mostly...adoption is personal.

Adoption is.... **Loss.** Every Adoptee's story naturally starts with loss. There is the loss of a child for a birth family, and a loss of a birth family for a child. Sometimes, many times, there is loss of biological children for an adoptive family, loss of a family plan that started at a wedding and ended in a Drs. office. It's loss of culture and country for an international adoptee. For the adoptive parents, it's the loss of what many of their friends have: pregnancy, children that physically look like them, family expectations. I will never hear, "you look so much like your mom or your dad", people don't realize how common this statement is. It's the loss of easy explanations to social expectations, no matter how out dated those expectations are. I remember a time in the airport when my dad and my brother were going through security, the TSA agent grilled my brother asking him several times if he "knew the man who was with him". It wasn't until my mom and I showed up that he relaxed and let my dad and brother finish checking in. We all wondered if the agent ever questioned children travelling with adults who shared their race, like if they were all Asian would they ask the kids to identify their parents...probably not. BUT there is beauty in the loss, there is sacrifice, risk and deep bonding. The birth mother loses a child, but her sacrifice can create a wonderful life for the child she loses. There is beauty in the risk that adoptive parents take by welcoming, loving and supporting a child that doesn't share their genetic make-up. Finally, there is beauty in the unique bond that forms between adopted children and their adoptive parents. The other side

of loss is always gain, and there is so much gain to adoption. It's the completion of a family. For some it's trading an abusive life for one with loving and caring parents. It's new and exciting adventures and a safe living environment. For my family, it was just the way we found each other and became a family.... adoption is loss and gain.

Adoption is...**Family**. There are birth **parents**, but there are adoptive **families**. My family is made up of two parents and two kids and two dogs. Parents who love their kids and make sacrifices for them. It's kids who love their parents but sometimes still struggle with questions. It's life, complete with vacations and life events and being called mom and dad, daughter and son. It's a dad who works really hard to give his kids opportunities that he didn't have, and a mom who defends and protects her kids. My brother is really good at track, especially the long jump. Once, during a track meet he was dominating so much that the other parents started to question his scores. They began joking about him taking steroids and being trained from the time he was a baby (like they do in communist countries like China), and wondering what they fed him at home, "they must feed him lots of rice, he probably doesn't weigh very much". My mom was sitting in the stands and heard all these comments. At the end of the track meet when my brother found out he'd set a conference record she turned to the parents sitting by her and said, "He eats normal things, I know I'm his mom...he's legit, he's just THAT good". Adoption is that kind of a family, where even though you're different you have the same bond as any other family does. Even though my mom didn't give birth to me, she would tell me that she "carried" me in her heart, adoptive families love fiercely, they are bonded...adoption is family.

Adoption is...**Mystery**. There are always questions for the adoptee: What do my birth parents look like? Do I have siblings? Why couldn't my birth mom raise me? It's wondering every time I see a "23 and Me" commercial if I have relatives here in the United States, cousins who may have been adopted too, or other family members who came over here before I was born. It's wondering what I'd be doing if I hadn't been adopted. Would I be a mom myself by now? Would I be working? Where would I be living? What would I look like without all the Western medicine and hygiene care provided in the United States? I would never have had some of the opportunities in China that I have here. I've been to Disney World, Yellowstone, Mexico, Taiwan and Niagara Falls, those trips would not have happened if I'd never been

adopted. I would never have gotten involved in ice skating, or been on a State Championship cheerleading team my Senior year of high school, or be headed to Illinois State University this Fall. There is mystery in both what I don't know, and what I do know. It's always answering "unknown, athlete/patient is adopted" when asked to answer questions about my family's medical history. What is my genetic medical history? Will I inherit certain diseases and conditions as I grow older? Is my excellent eye sight, high cholesterol and very clear skin, traits passed on from my birth parents, or just a side effect of my lifestyle? Many of these questions will never be answered, some may be answered in time...adoption is mystery.

Adoption is...**Culture and Identity**. There is a lot of discussion about identity today. There is pressure to explore our gender, cultural and racial identity. Because I'm an International adoptee, I identify as 100% Chinese AND 100% American. I can't deny or hide my physical appearance, I look Chinese. From the shape of my eyes, to the color and complexion of my skin, to my bone structure, to the color and texture of my hair...I am unmistakably Asian. I am happy with the way I look; I love standing out and when people tell me how pretty I am, I know it's because I don't look like everyone else in the room, and I'm proud of that. I am also 100% American, I dress, eat and act like any kid from the suburbs of Chicago. I think like an American, I understand life as an American, sometimes I actually forget I wasn't born in America. When I was little and people would ask me if I ever wanted to go back and visit China I would say, "No, I've already been there" ... But I am adopted, and people notice. Many times, I've been places with my parents and had to experience a stranger look at them, then look at me, then look at them again, until I'd finally say "Yeah, they adopted me". There was even a time when an after-school mom tried to send me home with another family, just because they were Asian. It was even funnier because my parents were standing right next to me. Adoption culture is not being asked out by a boy, who you really like and likes you back, because his parents aren't comfortable with your Asian culture. Then a few weeks later, this same boy does ask you out, but only after his parents find out your parents are similar to them and suddenly, they ARE comfortable with your American culture. It's an identity that causes a little Asian grandma to approach you in an airport and ask for directions in a language you don't understand, only to see her embarrassment when she realizes the American with you is your

dad. But you help her anyway because you understand how she feels. The older I get, the more I enjoy this identity...adoption is culture.

Adoption is...**Assumptions**. Being adopted comes with certain stereotypes. It's being called "Covid" at school during a global pandemic because the virus first infected the country where you were born. It's being voted as a celebrity twin to an Asian actress who really doesn't resemble you physically at all except that she's Asian. Just because I'm Asian doesn't mean I'm naturally super intelligent, people are sometimes really surprised when they find out I'm a B student. There are other assumptions, ignorant stereotypes of international adoptees, that we all like the food from our birth country, or that we have certain talents and skills. I didn't even like rice until I was in middle school and I still prefer French fries over egg rolls. It's people always assuming that emotional and social struggles are simply because I'm adopted. Everyone struggles, especially in high school, because of hormones, or a lack of sleep, or just having bad days, growing up can be hard. But these struggles aren't because somehow I was "damaged" during my first year of life. Mostly assumptions are because a majority of families have never had to experience the things adoptive families experience...they just don't understand, and instead of trying...they assume.

Adoption is...**Pictures**. I have a picture of a serious looking Chinese woman holding a baby, that baby is me and she is my foster mom, who raised me for the first 12 months of my life. Is she just a random person who was assigned to take care of a child, or is she really someone related to me. Maybe she knows my biological family, or is from the town where I was born. It's a picture of a door at a government office in a rural town where I was found early one morning and started my adoption story. Another picture shows my parents holding me for the first time, I'm crying, they're smiling, but they both seem unsure as to why this baby seems to hate them. Years later there are more pictures, they come over the computer every week of my new brother waiting for us in Taiwan. Pictures of him with his "family", of other children waiting to be adopted. Then finally, a picture of our family in Hawaii, after we are complete...two white parents, two Asian children...an American family.

Google defines “adoption” as: **accepting something created by another or foreign to one’s nature**. This is not a good definition of adoption; it is not that basic. It is love and loss, it is pain and gain, it is understanding and confusion. In its purist form, Adoption is beautifully complicated, and at the same time simply “just life”. It is community, and family and a lifestyle. After all the wordage and interpretation and testimony, adoption is personal...it is who a person is...it is me.

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