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Journey of the Adopted Self

A Quest for Wholeness



Betty Jean Lifton

AUTHOR OF LOST AND FOUND

Journey of the Adopted Self

A Quest for Wholeness.

BETTY JEAN LIFTON

BasicBooks

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Names of individuals interviewed by the author have been changed to protect their privacy.

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**JOURNEY OF THE
ADOPTED SELF**

ALSO BY BETTY JEAN LIFTON

Lost and Found: The Adoption Experience

Twice Born: Memoirs of an Adopted Daughter

The King of Children: A Biography of Janusz Korczak

A Place Called Hiroshima (photographs by Eikoh Hosoe)

Children of Vietnam (with Thomas C. Fox)

Return to Hiroshima (photographs by Eikoh Hosoe)

Contemporary Children's Theater (editor)

I'm Still Me (young adult novel)

FOR CHILDREN

Tell Me a Real Adoption Story

Joji and the Dragon

Kap the Kappa

The Dwarf Pine Tree

The Secret Seller

A Dog's Guide to Tokyo

The Silver Crane

Mogo the Mynah

To the memory of
my adoptive mother
Hilda
and my birth mother
Rae
who might have known
and even liked each other
in another life
and another adoption system.

CONTENTS

Part I THE SELF IN CRISIS

1	Betwixt and Between	3
2	The Mothered/Motherless Self	13
3	The Conspiracy of Silence	21
4	The Hidden Relationship	28
5	The Broken Narrative	36
6	Artificial Self, Forbidden Self	48
7	Stuck in the Life Cycle	65
8	The Antisocial Tendency	88
9	The Adult Child	109

Part II THE SELF IN SEARCH

10	The Call to Self	127
11	Alternate Reality	146
12	The Painted Bird	175
13	The Fathered/Fatherless Self	191
14	The Found Adoptee	212
15	The Mark of Oedipus	225
16	The Adoption Tie	241

Part III
THE SELF IN TRANSFORMATION

17	Becoming Whole	257
	<i>The Best Interests of the Adopted Child</i>	274
	Resources	277
	The Adoption Reform Network	
	National Umbrella Network of the Adoption Reform Movement	
	Birth Parent Support Groups	
	National and International Registries	
	Adoptive Parent Groups	
	Periodicals	
	Resource/Referral/Counseling Organizations	
	Recommended Reading	
	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	299
	<i>Notes</i>	303
	<i>Index</i>	323

PART I

The Self in Crisis

Was it you who came
Or was it I who went—
I do not remember.
Was that dream or reality?
Was I asleep or awake?
—BASHO

1

Betwixt and Between

"Then I shan't be exactly human?" Peter asked.

"No."

"What shall I be?"

"You will be Betwixt-and-Between," Solomon said, and certainly he was a wise old fellow, for that is exactly how it turned out.

—JAMES BARRIE, *PETER PAN IN KENSINGTON GARDENS*

MANY PEOPLE IDENTIFY WITH THE FAMILIAR condition of being Betwixt and Between, just as they identify with Peter Pan, the boy who did not want to grow up and face the responsibilities of the real world.

Peter, James Barrie tells us, is "ever so old," but really always the same age: one week. Though he was born "so long ago," he never had a birthday, nor is there the slightest chance of his having one. He escaped from his home when he was seven days old by flying out the window to Kensington Gardens.

Barrie doesn't tell us what was going on in Peter's family that after only seven days he knew he had to take off. But adoptees recognize Peter Pan as a brother. They, too, became lost children when they separated as babies from their natural families and disappeared into a place very much like never-never land. Like Peter, they are fantasy people. Denied the right to see their real birth certificates and the names of those who brought them into the world, they can't be sure they ever had a real *birth*

day. They can never grow up because they are always referred to as an “adopted child.”

I didn’t realize that, like Peter, I wasn’t “exactly human” until I was seven *years* old. It was the moment my mother told me I was adopted. Like most adoptive parents faced with breaking such bleak news, she tried to make adoption sound special, but I could feel the penetrating chill of its message. I was not really her child. I had come from somewhere else, a place shrouded in mystery, a place that, like myself, was *Betwixt and Between*.

As I listened, I could feel a part of myself being pulled into the darkness of that mystery—a place already carved out by Peter and the lost children. I would never be the same again.

This was to be our secret, my mother said. Hers and mine. I was not to share it with anyone—not even my father. It would break his heart if he suspected I knew. In this way I learned that secrecy and adoption were inextricably mixed, as in a witch’s brew. By becoming a keeper of the secret, I was to collaborate in the family conspiracy of silence.

I didn’t know then that our little family secret was connected to the *big* secret in the closed adoption system, just as our little conspiracy was connected to the larger social conspiracy around adoption. My mother and father had been assured that my birth records would be sealed forever, that I would never be able to learn the identity of my original family. Secrecy was the magic ingredient that would give our adoptive family the aura of a blood-related one. Secrecy was the magic broom that would sweep away all feelings of grief and loss on the part of any of the parties involved.

As I played my role of the good daughter—repressing a natural need to know where I came from—I was unaware that the secrecy inherent in the adoption system was shaping and constricting the self through which I organized my perception of reality. By denying my natural curiosity about where I came from, and my grief for my lost birth parents and for the child I might have been, I was shrinking my emotional space to the size permitted by that system. So, too, were my adoptive parents forced by the secrecy to shrink their emotional space as they denied their need to grieve for the natural child they might have had.

We were trapped in a closed family system where secrecy cut off real communication. We were not unlike those families who keep secrets around alcoholism, divorce, incest, and all the other things that family members are prone to hide from their neighbors and from one another.

I had no idea of this as a child. Having repressed my real feelings, I was not consciously aware of my pain. And as a consequence, I was not consciously aware of myself, except as someone unreal pretending to be real. I did things that my human friends did, even looked real in my high school and college graduation pictures, and in the photographs taken at my wedding, before I flew off with my husband to the Far East.

Perhaps I might have never been in touch with my feelings if, shortly after my return from Japan, a relative, recently married into my adoptive family, had not remarked about something she heard—that my natural parents had been killed in a car accident. Her statement was like a Zen slap, knocking me into another state of consciousness. I had been told my parents were dead, but I had not been told this story. When I tried to clear up the mystery of how they died, I was shocked to learn that they had been very much alive at the time of my adoption—and might still be.

Much that had lain repressed in me now began stirring. I started to wonder how my mind had been able to cut off the primal subject of who my parents were. Even if it were true that they were dead, why had I not asked any questions about them? After all, dead people have names; they have relatives they have left behind; they have graves. Why had I behaved as if death had wiped out all traces of their existence? It was my first conscious brush with the psychological mystery that forms the core of this book: How does a child's mind close down when it senses danger, and stay closed until some life event or crisis inadvertently jars it open? And what traumatic effects does this have on the child's growing sense of self?

As a writer, I set out to explore the psychological complexities of being adopted in my book *Twice Born: Memoirs of an Adopted Daughter*.¹ I was amazed, even alarmed, at what surfaced. The compliant adopted child within, as elusive as ever, was in many ways a stranger to the adult I had become. The anger, barely contained under what passed as irony and wit, could no longer be disguised as I dredged up memories of that child's helplessness in the face of mysteries too dark to comprehend. Even as I wrote about my search and reunion, I felt burdened with guilt, as if it were a disloyalty to my deceased adoptive parents. Nor had I fully absorbed the depths of what I had been through. I found a birth mother who had tried to hold on to me but, as an unmarried seventeen-year-old with no emotional or financial support, finally had to let go. Once she was defeated, she put on the scarlet letter—S for secrecy and shame—and did not tell either of her two husbands or her son about me. We met

secretly twice before I had to leave for a summer in Japan. The psychic chaos I felt during those two months in Tokyo—as if I had fallen into a black hole—was so great that when I returned to the States I did not call her for fear of falling back into that dark place: a place, as we will see, that is not unfamiliar to many adoptees who have internalized the taboos of the closed adoption system. At the time of my reunion, there were no books to sanction my search for my mother or to prepare me for what I might experience.

My next book, *Lost and Found, the Adoption Experience*, was an attempt to write such a book and, in so doing, to illuminate the existential condition of being adopted.² I explored the psychological pitfalls that await adoptees all through the life cycle when they are forced to close off their real feelings and live *as if* their families of origin were not an inherent part of their identity. I laid out the difficult stages of awakening that adoptees experience before they dare to set out in search of the missing pieces in their lives.

As the search phenomenon was still relatively new at that time, the last part of the book gave an overview of the varieties of reunion experience and the psychological growth and accommodation that everyone—adoptee, adoptive parents, and birth parents—has to make.

Perhaps it was no accident that I chose to spend the next few years traveling back and forth to Poland and Israel for research on a children's-rights advocate named Janusz Korczak. Already renowned as a Polish-Jewish children's writer, doctor, and educator, Korczak became a legendary figure in Europe when he chose to accompany the orphans of the Warsaw Ghetto to Treblinka rather than save his own life. I realize now that I was drawn to Korczak as the idealized parent that all people, not just adoptees, seek—a parent who does not abandon his or her children, even in the face of death.

I was also drawn to the deep passion that Korczak had for defending the rights of the child, all children, regardless of race or creed. Children have a right to be treated by adults with tenderness and respect, as equals, not as masters and slaves, he wrote in *How to Love a Child*.³ They have a right to grow into whoever they were meant to be, rather than who their parents want them to be. We can discern his fierce anger about how parents use children to fill their own egoistic needs in the writings of Alice Miller, who has been influenced by Korczak's work. And we can recognize the empathy they share for what we now call our "inner child," when she asks "whether it will ever be possible for us to

grasp the extent of the loneliness and desertion to which we were exposed as children.”⁴

With the publication of my Korczak biography, *The King of Children*,⁵ I was released from his life to return to my own. I found an adopted woman waiting there, one who was more sensitive than ever to the lack of respect for the rights of adopted children to know who they are, and who was still absorbed with the psychological mysteries inherent in adoption. Once again I was faced with the same questions I had been grappling with earlier: Why do adopted people feel so alienated? Why do they feel unreal, invisible to themselves and others? Why do they feel unborn? Now, however, I had a new question that I felt would shed light on the others: How do adopted people form a sense of self in the closed adoption system?

The psychoanalyst Karen Horney defined the real self as the alive, unique, personal center of ourselves that wants to grow. When the real self is prevented from free, healthy growth because of abandoning its needs to others, one can become alienated from it. She quotes Kierkegaard on the alienation and loss of self as “sickness unto death.”⁶ Adoptees, who often say they feel they have no self, can be seen as expressing this despair. Having abandoned their need to know their origins for the sake of their adoptive parents, they are left with a hole in the center of their being. They feel they don’t exist.

Of course, everyone has some kind of self. The adoptee born psychologically into the closed adoption system and shaped by its myths, secrets, and taboos from first conscious memory, and even before, has a unique self, an adopted self. But this fragile self has a basic inner division brought about by the need for denial that is built into the closed adoption system.

When I began research for this book, I was primarily interested in how secrecy affects the formation of the adopted self. I saw it as emotional abuse (of which adoptive parents are unaware) because it distorts the child’s psychic reality. In the course of interviewing adoptees, however, I realized that it is not just secrecy that affects their sense of self but rather a series of traumas. This “cumulative adoption trauma” begins when they are separated from the mother at birth; builds when they learn that they were not born to the people they call mother and father; and is further compounded when they are denied knowledge of the mother and father to whom they were born.

I was not unfamiliar with the literature on trauma. My husband, Robert Jay Lifton, has been preoccupied with trauma on a massive scale.⁷ As a journalist, I have reported on the war-wounded, orphaned, and traumatized children of Hiroshima, Korea, Vietnam, and the Holocaust. Still, as an adopted person, loyal to my adoptive parents, I didn't allow myself to see that closed adoption is also a form of trauma—an invisible and subtle one—until years later when I began noticing parallels between adopted children and children of alcoholics, children of survivors (even survivors themselves), and children who have been abused.

There has already been some misunderstanding about the linking of adoption to trauma. Far from being regarded as traumatic, adoption is still widely viewed as fortunate for the child who is rescued from homelessness, and for the adoptive parents who are rescued from childlessness. And in most cases it is. Yet the word *trauma* has been slipping into the psychological literature on adoption with increasing frequency in the last decade as clinicians come to realize the high psychic cost that both parent and child pay when they repress their grief and loss.

I have come to believe in the course of my research that it is unnatural for members of the human species to grow up separated from and without knowledge of their natural clan, that such a lack has a negative influence on a child's psychic reality and relationship with the adoptive parents. By enveloping their origins with secrecy, the closed adoption system asks children to disavow reality, to live *as if* they were born to the parents who raise them. They grow up feeling like anonymous people cut off from the genetic and social heritage that gives everyone else roots.

As I write this, we are *Between* and *Between* change and stasis in the adoption field. We are between two systems: the traditional closed one that for almost half a century has cut adopted children off from their heritage, and an open one in which birth mothers choose the adoptive parents of their baby and maintain some contact with the family. It is a time when the best interests of the child, for which the adoption system was originally created, have become subordinate to the best interests of the adults, as fierce custody battles are waged over the few available healthy white infants.

Meanwhile, adoption records remain sealed in all but two states due to the influence of a conservative lobby group, the National Council for Adoption, that has managed to polarize the field by labeling those who seek reform as "anti-adoption."⁸ Reformers who are working to open

the system, as well as the records, however, are not anti-adoption but rather anti-closed adoption and pro-adopted children.⁹

While no amount of openness can take away the child's trauma of being separated from his mother, or save the child from the trauma of learning she was not born into the adoptive family, we can remove the secrecy that compounds those two traumas. We can begin to demystify the adoptive family and to see it with much of the strengths and weaknesses of other families. The conservatives argue for the myth of the happy adoptive family that has no problems because love conquers all. But we will see that something more is expected of the adopted family: an excess of happiness that is meant to make up for the excess of loss that everyone in the triad experiences, and an excess of denial to cover that loss. Exposing the myths of the adoptive family while still holding on to the very real need and love that parents and child have for each other has been the challenge facing me.

My previous work was deeply influenced by Erik Erikson's identity theory, which stresses the importance of continuity with one's past in the service of one's future.¹⁰ Now I am also making use of theories of the self and concepts of psychological trauma to explore how adoptees put together a sense of self without that continuity.

Over the past few decades, I have been in touch in one way or another with hundreds of adopted men and women through my rap groups, my research interviews, and my part-time counseling practice with both adolescents and adults. For this book, I have drawn upon fifty in-depth interviews conducted with men and women adopted before six months of age, and over two hundred essay-style questionnaires that cover the adoptee's life cycle. I wanted to know how adoptees think that the separation from their birth mother and the secrecy in the adoption system have affected their sense of identity as well as their attachment to their adoptive parents. How they perceived themselves as children and adolescents, and how they perceive themselves now. What fantasies they had as children and adults. And, if they searched and had reunion, what the impact of that experience was on their sense of self.

I also sent questionnaires to fifty birth mothers about their experience in relinquishing their children and the quality of their reunions. And I interviewed twenty-five adoptive mothers about their reactions to their child's reunion with the birth parents. While the parental material threw light on the hopes, fears, and complexity of what both sets of mothers