



# Experiences

LESLI JOHNSON



SOURCE: HUFFPOST ONLINE

6 things  
adoptees  
want you to  
know

I was adopted as an infant, during a time when adoption was still shrouded in secrecy. My birth-mother kept her pregnancy hidden from her family for nearly seven months.

Her parents and my biological father's parents agreed she would be sent away to have me. She birthed me in a sterile room, frightened, with no familiar faces and no compassion for her situation.

I was taken from her before she even had a chance to see me. Back then, this was considered acceptable. Today, we realize that this separation is traumatic for both the mother and the child, and we recognize that early experiences have a disproportionately large impact on the structure of the brain.

I spent 82 days in foster care until I went home with my adoptive parents. My parents felt they were being "open" when they told me I was adopted, but no one helped me understand what adoption was. None of my

*heartstrings* | 13





friends were adopted, or maybe they just weren't talking about it. Adoption was a big secret but I thought about it often.

I wondered if my best friend's mom might be my "real" mom. I wondered what was so wrong with me that my birth mom gave me away, and was she going to come back? I loved my family, so this idea caused great anxiety.

I struggled to complete family tree and genealogy assignments in school.

I went to therapy for the first time when I was 6 years old because I had begun to suffer from sleep issues and crippling separation anxiety from my mom. I'd begin each day worrying that my mom might forget to pick me up at school. Although she was always there, part of me knew I had been abandoned before and my child self believed it could happen again. Slumber parties and overnights at grandma's house were fraught with "nervous stomachs" and invented earaches. Were my parents coming back? I

14

desperately needed someone to help me understand my feelings. Unfortunately, my child therapist was not that person. I went twice. I drew pictures of pumpkins. Adoption was never mentioned.

I returned to therapy in my twenties, fresh out of college and anxious about pretty much everything. It took two years before I even mentioned that I was adopted. It wasn't on my therapist's radar to ask, and I was conditioned to believe it was irrelevant. It wasn't until graduate school that I really began to explore how my adoption shaped me. I began to connect the dots of my story and ask questions. I met my birth-mother and her family and two years ago, I searched for and found my birth father's family. He's no longer alive, but I have pictures of him. For the first time in my life, I see someone I resemble.

My experience is not unique, but it is important. I now understand that the main reason adoptees don't talk about their



struggles is generally the same. When we are young, we don't have the ability to identify our experience and articulate our feelings. As an adoptee gets older, if no one is talking about adoption, we get the sense that our feelings won't be understood or validated. I'm now a therapist myself and have worked extensively with adoptive families. In my work I strive to help this generation of adoptees, adoptive families and birth parents to have a different experience than I did.

Here are some of the ten thousand things adoptees want the world to know.

It's helpful when parents have done their own psychological work before adopting and continue to be aware of their on-going experience as it relates to adoption. It's

important for adoptive parents to grieve their inability to conceive a biological child if this is why they

chose to adopt. Adoption is not a substitute for having a biological child nor is it a way of "replacing" a child who dies. Adoption is one of many ways to make a family.

Adoptive families benefit when parents continue to educate themselves on relevant issues related to adoption and access support when necessary. Many communities now have various support groups for all members of the adoption constellation. If your community doesn't, why not start one?

Adoptees want you to know their experience is real and that no one can "fix" it.

It's difficult for parents to see their children struggle with the complexities of adoption. They want to make things better

and alleviate suffering. Parents cannot eliminate the pain of their child's past experience.

***1. Adoptees want their adoptive parents to prepare emotionally and psychologically before they bring them home to become a family.***

## *Experiences*

*heartstrings* | 15



However, they can provide a safe place for their child to explore current feelings about adoption at various stages of life in order to help their child integrate the experience more fully.

The adoptee wants and needs validation of their feelings, and a compassionate presence. They want to know it's always okay to talk about adoption and ask questions.

In cases when trickier questions arise, parents might consider waiting to respond rather than being caught off-guard, giving a quick, less thought-out answer that they have to go back and fix later. In a recent episode of "Modern Family," Mitchell is reading a bedtime story to his young, adopted daughter Lily about a "beautiful princess in a faraway land." They are both visibly tired and as Lily begins to nod off, she asks questions about her birth mom. "Was I in my

mom's belly?" "Where's my mom now?" Mitchell replies, "She's in a faraway land." He adds, "Because she's a princess and she's very, very

busy." Lily, seemingly satisfied, drifts off to sleep. Mitchell's answer creates a fantasy for Lily and she feels compelled to dress up each Halloween as a princess in the hope

she'll find her mommy. Her dads are later able to talk with her and the made-for-TV-moment is neatly wrapped up but sometimes it's wiser for parents to wait to answer questions. Parents can say to their child, "I can see your question is important to you. Let me think about it and we'll talk first thing in the morning." Offer a specific time and follow through. This allows space for parents to consider the question, talk with their partner and seek guidance from a therapist to provide a well thought out answer.

Healing occurs with the repetition of a story, especially

2. *The adoptee's experience is REAL.*





in the case of children. When a child gets hurt they repeat the story over and over. "I fell off the swing, and cut my knee, it bled, and daddy got me..." They repeat the story to mommy, to the postman and to the cashier at Trader Joe's. This repetition allows the experience to become integrated

into their system as a whole. Similarly, young adoptees want

3. *The adoptee needs help to make sense of their "story."*

parents to be comfortable with their adoption story and repeat it to them so they can know their story and tell it with ease.

Adoption language can be tricky. Avoid words like "chosen" and "special," as they are loaded. The phrase "She loved you so much she wanted you to have a better life" is near impossible for a child to understand. Instead, use language like, "Adoption was a decision the adults made." "We

*Experiences*  
love you and we are a family." Emphasize that your child had nothing to do with the decision and more importantly, did nothing to create the situation. Adoptees need help with specific language and "tools" to use when they are asked questions by friends and classmates to eliminate potential shame and embarrassment. I suggest parents and children role-play possible scenarios to find answers that fit. For example:

Q: "So, who is your real mom?"

A: "My mom is at home taking care of my baby brother. I also have a birth mom."

"That's my private business," is always acceptable if the adoptee chooses.

Often, adoptees acclimate in one of two ways. Some might test limits, trying to discover if they are going to be abandoned again. Others acquiesce to situations, sometimes to the point of withdrawal. Hoping if they go along, they will keep their place in the adoptive family. The adoptee is

*heartstrings* | 17



forced to develop a “false self.”

Many adoptive parents I’ve worked with describe their

children as defiant and uncooperative, angry, testing out and manipulative. I encourage them to become curious about the behaviour, rather than judging or naming it. As we utilize the lens of adoption, we can see the underlying experience that’s driving the child’s behaviour and then tend to the raw feelings of fear, grief, despair and anger. Remember, the behaviours are coping mechanisms and not personality traits. Adoptees need parents to be curious and act as compassionate detectives to discover what’s going on or seek professional help if it seems too difficult to do it on their own. Because an adoptee’s early experience was that of relin-

*4. Many adoptees struggle with issues of self worth, shame, control and identity.*

quishment, their brain is wired early on to expect more of the same. Sometimes older adoptees unknowingly set themselves up to re-create abandonments, thus fulfilling the sense of shame and unworthiness. Not having access to the original birth certificate adds to the adoptee’s sense of shame. Only eight states in the U.S. allow adult adoptees access to their original birth certificates. Adoptees in other states have modified and falsified documents.

Where there is secrecy there is inevitable shame.

When an infant or child is separated from his or her birth-mother, it is undeniably a traumatic event. All of the once-familiar sights, sounds and sensations are gone, and the infant is placed in a dangerous situation -- dangerous that is,

*5. Adoption is hard.*





perceived by the infant.

The only part of the brain that is fully developed at birth is the brain stem that regulates the sympathetic nervous system, that is, the fight, flight or freeze response.

The parasympathetic ability to self-soothe isn't available and baby needs his or her familiar mom to act as the soothing agent to help with self-regulation but she's not there. Events that happen age 0-3 are encoded as implicit memories and become embodied because they place before language develops. Adoptive parents can be sensitive to this and later help put explicit language to the felt experience for their child.

Sometimes birthdays and Mother's Day are difficult for adoptees and they might not even know why. Birthdays are often the day adoptees were relinquished and again, that memory of separation is an implicit one, just a feeling. I've worked with parents who become frustrated

after planning a big celebration and their child suddenly becomes sad and no longer wants to participate. Parents can empathically respond to a child who is struggling by saying, "I wonder if part of you remembers this is also the day your birth-mother made the difficult decision to have someone else raise you." Mother's Day can be hard because as an adoptee is celebrating with his or her adoptive

6. *Adoption is a lifelong process.*

mom, no one is acknowledging or talking about the "other

mother," that is, the first mother. Parents can "say" what is not being said by celebrating and acknowledging their child's birth mom.

Separations, relationships and transitions may be difficult

hurdles throughout the lifespan for those whose earliest experience was separation from their

*Experiences*

*heartstrings | 19*



birth-mother. Attuned parents can help their children and adolescents navigate these events and ideally these experiences will be integrated along the way. In time, adoptees can eventually acquire what Dan Siegel calls “Mindsight” or “the kind of focused attention that allows us to see the internal workings of our minds and examine the processes by which

they think feel and behave...”

As adoptees understand the details of their story, make sense of their feelings and triggers as they relate to adoption, they can cultivate resilience and learn to respond rather than react -- a skill that offers more freedom of choice in day to day actions and provides an overall sense of well-being.



SOURCE: HUFFPOST ONLINE

## What it really means to be transracial and Black

ZEBIA BLAY

**I**t's been weeks since the nation became obsessed with — then subsequently forgot about — Rachel Dolezal. In choosing to identify as a black woman, Dolezal introduced the concept of being transethnic or “transracial” into

the mainstream. Faulty comparisons to Caitlyn Jenner and the transgender community abound, and many commentators (including myself) rejected them, arguing that being transracial “is not a thing.”

I've since learned that being







transracial is a thing — just not in the way Dolezal interpreted it. The first known use of the word dates back to the 1970s. Transracial applies to those adopted by parents of another race. It's an experience often overlooked, and a vibrant community of transracial speakers, writers, and activists have come forward in the wake of Dolezal to take back ownership of the word and their unique identities.

For many transracial adoptees, to reclaim “transracial” is to reclaim themselves.

Angela Tucker, a transracial adoptee and subject of the documentary “Closure” has been vocal about the importance of acknowledging this complex identity. Tucker, who is black, was adopted by a white couple in Bellingham, Washington when she was a baby.

“Identifying as a transracial adoptee has a lot of power,”

*“I wasn't really black due to a lack of present black parents and family, but I could never ever really be white either”*

## Experiences

Tucker told The Huffington Post. “It unites a whole group of us instantaneously, in the sense that transracial adoptees understand what it means to grow up in a community of people and all the nuances, complications, complexities that come with growing up like that.”

Throughout her life, it's been vital to understand and accept

her blackness in the context of being raised by white

parents. “It doesn't mean [transracial adoptees are] trying to be a different race than what we physically present, but it does help to unite us in the sense that we know there are pieces of ourselves, emotionally, that don't match with what society perceives of who we are,” she said.

Their challenges are numerous. They may grapple with loss of a connection to their birth parents, and they may also struggle with their racial identity. They must

*heartstrings | 21*





navigate racism, sometimes with little to no preparation for the realities of being a minority — simply because their parents haven't had to. For that reason, in 1972, the National Association of Black Social Workers issued a statement suggesting that the adoption of black children by white families was just "further assignment of chattel status to black people" and "unnatural."

While the NABSW manifesto was extreme, there's been constant debate surrounding the adoption of children of colour by white people — is it natural? Is it ethical? To writer Lisa Marie Rollins, a black and Filipina adoptee who wrote the one-woman-show "Ungrateful Daughter" this is the wrong question. "Is it right or wrong? Is it good or bad?" That's not even the question, it doesn't matter. It's gonna happen," Rollins says.

Rollins was adopted by a white couple in the 1970s and raised in Washington state, later living in Southern California during

her teenage years. Her parents were descendants of Yugoslavian immigrants, blond-haired and blue-eyed, in complete contrast to her tan skin and curly hair. Rollins said that growing up in a community where she had very little interaction with people of colour left her isolated, despite having a generally happy childhood. "I consider myself to be a black woman, I don't think that I said it out loud until I was probably at university. [My childhood] was full of confusing messages around race, lots of hurtful things that happened around race, not in my family but outside in the community. My parents didn't necessarily have the tools to help me deal with that. I was out in the world as this vulnerable little black girl and people are of course treating me as a little black girl and as a black youth, and then as a black adult. Learning how to navigate those things by myself was really challenging."

For many transracial adoptees, having parents who lack the



inherent understanding of what it means to be a person of colour contributes to difficulty defining their own identities.

“My parents provided many opportunities for me to interact with a diverse range of people, they made a concerted effort for me, and my other siblings, for all of us to learn about our birth cultures and our heritage,” Angela Tucker said of her upbringing.

“They gave me a DNA test, not just to find my birth parents, but also to learn about my ancestors who were in Africa, where my ancestors were from. So, you know, my parents did a lot of things. But none of that will automatically help to instil a sense of identity. That comes through a lot of growth and hard work.”

“White Sugar, Brown Sugar,” blogger Rachel Garlinghouse has taken an active role ensuring her three black children are able to engage with race and their own racial identity in a positive way, but she still recognizes the hurdles she and husband Steve

face that there may be no easy fixes for. The mom has written extensively about being a white parent raising black kids during a time when police brutality and racism have been huge topics of discussion.

In a HuffPost blog post, she recalled the first time she witnessed racism against one of her daughters. “The girls were riding their bikes in the driveway, and a white male drove by our house and screamed the n-word at them. For the first time I really witnessed what it meant to be black in America. They’re innocent, they’re just riding bikes in the driveway and someone just decided to do that.”

Explaining the realities of racism hasn’t been easy for Garlinghouse. “I live near Ferguson, and it was on the news for months on end and it was just heartbreaking to watch. My daughter was like ‘Who’s that boy on the screen?’ and I didn’t even know what to say to her in that moment. That’s why if you’re white with black

## *Experiences*

*heartstrings* | 23



## *Experiences*

children, you need black friends to rely on to help you navigate parenting,” the mom told HuffPost over the phone.

Later, she came to look at the episode as the reminder of a devastating truth about her own privilege. “Right now, my kids benefit from our white privilege, when we go out, they’re given more benefit of the doubt. But it really frightens me because one day my kids are going to be out without me — and I’m not going to be able to protect them.”

Transracial identity, like all identity, can be such a nebulous thing. Some adoptees feel untethered, or as if they’re forced to choose between sides. Many experience an intimate, insider relationship with whiteness and white privilege while simultaneously experiencing racism. Blogger Katakasrainbow described that in-between plainly as the word “transracial” began to trend. “I wasn’t really black due to a lack of present black parents and family, but I could never ever

ever really be white either,” she wrote.

Now that the Dolezal story has blown over, it’s this in-between, these stories of dealing with racism while navigating both white and black spaces, that more and more transracial adoptees are actively attempting to shine a light on. Frank, open, and in-depth conversations about race, culture, and identity is what the transracial community really needs.