

Ed note: The approach of this guide is the topic driven format for the adoption parenting e-group sponsored by EMK Press at Yahoo Groups <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/adoptionparenting/> . At the end of the guide, you will find questions to get you thinking, resources and links to help you find the answers that are right for your family. We find this to be a helpful way to work through a variety of challenging and thoughtful subjects. (C.Kitze)

Mothers Day and “Our Mutual Families”

Being part of more than one family,
Making sense of having more than one mother

By

Sheena Macrae

INTRODUCTION

This article responds to the need of adoptive families to look at connections to birth-families, particularly in response to the calendar date of Mothers Day on May 9th. How should we adoptive families approach this? And should we begin the celebrations on Birthmother’s Day? That day has been given as the Eve of Mother’s day, symbolising the need of birthmothers to acknowledge their motherhood which is disjoint from the family celebration of Mother’s Day. We adoptive mothers couldn’t be mothers without these women, but our children need us too to grow to strong and steady adulthood. How can we find a best way to celebrate for our own family, and ensure our children understand their loss in combination with the healing power we have for them? What tools do we need to ensure an emotionally fragile child isn’t overwhelmed by all this? How do we allow ourselves to feel the parity with birthmothers ... we are the mothers who are the healing our children need?

For adoptive families, this celebration requires delicate balance. Our children need both their mothers; neither birth nor adoptive mother can be placed first against the other's second place. Adoptive mothers need to stand side-by-side with the birthmother; this is an assertion and affirmation that children when children are created to grow whole they need to be cared for, everyday and in everyway. When a birthfamily cannot, it is the adoptive family who nurture the nature. Neither mother need apologise for being "lesser". Both mothers can celebrate the child. The child has full permission to love both mothers.

In all of this, though, the adoptive parent may feel drawn to second-placing herself to the "natural" mother. Maybe it is right that our children are given permission to love their adoptive families without feeling guilt or perjury? Who then sanctions this permission? Perhaps it is a rite of transition that will make this possible? To find if this is so, read on.

Mutual Relationships

Leceta Chisholm Guibault (Canadian adoption writer and adoptive mother) wrote the words "our mutual family" in the course of recent discussions online with adoptive mothers discussing the relationship possible between birth and adoptive families. She used them to describe how she has made a relationship with her son's birthfamily (an open adoption) such that now she considers that he is the mutual son of her family and his birthfamily. It's a wonderful phrase. It is a dynamic phrase, showing how families can adapt and make a positive out of loss. It points to how adoptive families can grow not only with the arrival of their children, but through vital connections to their birth-families. Families become mutual when relationships are acknowledged, fed and then grown together (even when far apart). All of us with adopted children are in a mutual family with our children's first families, even if we do not know who those people are. We can make them a part of our life, and we can toast them on special days.....

In looking at the upcoming rite of Mothers Day this Topic aims to look at symbolic ways of showing how the relationships contained in "our mutual families" works for us, the adoptive parents, for our children, for their first family and other communities of care. It also aims to look at how we can find ways in our daily lives to keep the past and the present of our mutual families in a healthy and dynamic relationship. It also dares peek at how those first families and communities may make their presence felt on us...

Deconstructing Mothers Day

What does Mothers Day mean for us as adoptive mothers? Is it a day when we feel a sense of joy in being a mother? Is it a day when we expect (even just a little) to feel that our child appreciates us for being mum? Is it the day for the Mother-on-the-Ground? Is this the day when the hard work of

parenting is rewarded? Is it good that that children are helped acknowledge what being a mother means (in the cultures of the west)? Is this the day we take for ourselves? The day when we **don't** look over our shoulder at our children's birthmothers?

Or, is this day a bitter-sweet day? Days before adopting for the first time and with no bio kids, it was Mothers Day. Some sent cards. All cards were consigned to the bin. We are never mothers till we have crossed the divide. And the corollary? Once a mother, always a mother, no matter what happens to the child. Death, divorce, relinquishment, abandonment. All may remove the child, but that mother is forever a mother. Is this a day when we should set aside time to think of the other mothers and other carers? A day of thanksgiving for the gift of a child, a day of remembrance that our joy may well have meant anguish for the relinquishing parent(s)?

Mother's day: Commercial Hype? Deep- needed Rite? Out-of-sight for our family?

Mothers Day. Commercial hype at its worst? Saccharin? But for the hype to work, what buttons are being pushed? How can we tap the well and come up with fresh clean water to drink? How do we present Mothers Day in a way where we can both celebrate what we do and connect with other mothers and carers who were there before us?

Making a ceremony is one way. There are some adoptive families who are working to make non-denominational services of thanksgiving for family possible for "all" in adoptive families. ALL includes not just adoptive parents and children, but the candles blowing in the wind of unknown parents and carers and also the known first families and communities of caring....

Many other families will want to share how to devise such, whether this is a service, a presentation, a rite, for our adopted children in celebration of Mother's Day. So that in celebrating our children, and in our children honouring us, we can also hold hands with our children and celebrate our children's birthmothers and families. And first communities of care (the welfare systems that supported them prior to adoption); do we include them here?

In looking to devise such a service, many adoptive families might want to involve all members of the adoption triad known in local communities. So we may well be looking for a non-denominational way of making this rite possible. Is it best done this way, even though some of us parent our children within our own beliefs, because we know our children's birthparents most likely honour rituals other than ours? Should any ceremony require that we rise above the local and known, and move to a universal connection to **all** those that care for children? Is to do this to slide and glide over practices in adoption where children are made available for inter-country adoption when they would fare better in communities of care in the first country? How can we celebrate such loss and make of it a positive? Should we be celebrating the rigours of law that make adoption "safe" or should we bite our nails about the safety of adoption even as we celebrate our adopted children?

How do we do this? From where do we resource devising a service which includes thanks for our children's first families? And can those of us who don't have open adoptions or even adoptions made with information about the relinquishment make firm decisions to celebrate first family when we don't know if the child was abandoned for good or poor reasons? Some women give birth and walk away without a second thought..... If we are committed to telling truth to children can we celebrate what may have been a bad decision? Maybe we can, because we are celebrating the fact of a child.... not the why of the birth or the relinquishment but the **fact** of a child in need of an adoptive home.

Maybe celebration is not an issue for some families; it's not on the agenda, because we don't feel a keen need to keep affirmation with people who after all let our children "go"? Or perhaps it is not on the stocks within our families because our children have told us that they do not honour their birthparents? That being "let go" ended any relationship the kids wanted with the birthparents? What if the pain our children suffered in transiting to our families makes us fear celebration (and acknowledgement) of who they were before they became ours?

Mutuality and Choice.....

Indigo Williams (Founder of Adopted Vietnamese International and herself adopted from Vietnam to Australia during Operation Baby Lift) says that:

"There are a couple of adoptee people I have seen who say that once the mother relinquishes - or loses - their child to an orphanage, then they lose all rights to claim any emotional demands on the child. The child is the one who should call the shots as to how much contact they want or do not want. Of course, sometimes birth mothers refuse contact too. That's another thing altogether. I may want to see my birth mother should she be found, but I cannot believe it'd be right to be swayed by any 'forced' obligations to speak/write/see her if I felt I didn't want to. That'd have to come with time...I personally feel, that it would have to be earned. On the other hand, I could not feel happy if my adoptive mother had somehow stepped in and kept my birth mother's whereabouts a 'secret' from me. Choice is the biggest thing one can feel grateful for".

This is powerful.

Looking at symbolic ritual for Mother's Day and looking at the tools of building "mutual" families, deciding whether and how much this is right or appropriate for us and our children in our families: that's the heart of this Resource Paper.

THE RITE ITSELF

Where will we be -psychic plane stuff- with our kids on Mothers Day? What psychic pain will we endure (loss perhaps of **our** birth-kids?) and what psychic pain will our children endure, if they are attuned to loss? Most adoptive kids seem to have psychic antennae that could service a whole new galactic system of feeling as opposed to verbal being. How to make a rite that supports this?

Carrie Kitze (author-owner of EMK press) is currently devising services for use both in church and in the wider community for use on Mothers Day. She has said that it's a fundamental to incorporate ritual from cultures which serve the need to celebrate love yet are underpinned by "knowing" separation... She holds it's crucial to welcome all in the adoption triad into the service, so that all three corners may share the blessing, all perhaps be strengthened by it even through loss.

Many rituals in human life are rituals of development. The purdah of the woman-and-child-in-childbirth, the first haircut for a boy, the deeper cut for ditto, menstruation, voice-breaking, marriage as a handover from one family to another.... How do we strengthen for our children that adoption's loss is yet another of these seeming cruel transitions that might have a good ending? How can we make our children see value in loss (finding our families) as well as value out of loss (we are open to who they were, and who they might have been as well as whom they are)? That we celebrate that because they were born to us, they were born to others and that is significant to our family?

All the better, then, if we can find such rites in a meaningful sense in any of the rituals current in our children's motherland. Many cultures celebrate enlightenment after loss (think how many religions speak to light and darkness, and how light is stronger). Even if we transplant rites from one culture to another, even if we "hi-jack" an icon from its normal place in a cultural calendar, is this not OK if we weave a new tradition from the strength of an old? Look how many rites do this... Easter, set close to Mothers Day, springs to mind. Old old thinking placed in the hands of a new way of thinking. It must have been both energising and comforting to the merging of the old and new believers of nigh on 1700 years ago. Eggs -and Stones Rolled Away. Rebirth and Restoration. We are therefore being only traditional in seeking new rites.....

Tools for Family

We need to help our children by giving them a chance to light the darkness of the loss of their first family. European Roman Catholic tradition, now spread across the globe, uses the candle-lighting ceremony as a way of connection

to loss and the light that was the person who is lost. We can use that. Could we use Hanukkah candles adjusted to hold just three candles for birth and adoptive parents and the child? Can we look to the Rite of Spring and offer flowers over the loss of a mother sacrificed/mother's sacrifice? Was the sacrifice to cultural imperatives? Could we use as an emblem flowers growing to show how children can thrive even if transplanted? We can use inspired poetry and the words of other birthmothers and mothers to illuminate any service or prayers we make (see the Resources Section)

We can spend a little time in quiet thought. We can maybe do something that will impact in the birthcountry (a donation, a letter to the institution....). Lighting the darkness can be literal or metaphorical. Children can learn very quickly how helping lights the way, and learn it's a good feeling to help. We can teach our children quite literally that charity begins at home, and tell them charity is a special word that means love that helps others. There are a great number of adoptive families that have done powerful charitable deeds for adopted children and the first communities that nurtured them. These families have had their children help the fund-raising. Many families have told their stories to make us all feel glad they took time to act, and maybe also make us want to act in our right.

How will YOU join with your child on Mother's Day to celebrate the mother there before you? Or is that (and there is no judgement inherent) just not pertinent to you and yours? It's good to question why connection is seen as right, and it is especially right to consider it if your child iterates that s/he was hurt to the point of severance by being lost by birthfamily. Finding the tool to deal with this last is harder than just about anything....

Tools for Children

Jean Macleod (adoption writer published across the adoption spectrum, and cherished by EMK Press as a Guide writer as well as author) has given permission for us to see her toolbox for helping children deal with birthmother loss. Here it is:

Invite the birthmother in. Have a tea party and pretend that the birthmother is there, too. Encourage your child to ask the birthmother questions, and help her/him to formulate his/her thoughts, or the "answers" if s/he gets stuck. "I think maybe your birth-mom might say XXX- what do you think?"

2) Tell the story (as you know it, or can surmise it). Give your child the truthful birth/adoption facts in a storyline, discuss feelings, and then add the ending that involves YOU. For example "If I gave birth to you/found you, I would offer bottle/bathe/massage/sing/rock/play baby games" The idea is basically to re-parent, and re-enact all of the above with the child as you tell how you do keep her/him safe and love her/him and do all of the things that good mommies do. TELL (how else would s/he know?) how carefully you took care of her when s/he was very small and was adopted by you. Big children like this stuff, too!

3) **Symbols.** This could be a present of adoption jewellery, for example The Mother and Daughter necklace that we have made available at <http://www.emkpress.com>. It comes in a pretty satin bag with a lovely poem, written by Jean MacLeod that goes as follows:

*Adoption isn't always easy,
but good or bad, nothing in life is without challenges.
You are a wise girl with a wonderful spirit,
and I think you will appreciate what this necklace symbolizes:*

*The Sun is your birthmother, who gave you life.
The Star is YOU, of course!
And the Heart is me,
your forever mom, who loves you, and cares for you,
and makes a home with you.*

*I know adoption can be hard to understand
and I know you think about your birthmother.
It can be a struggle to make sense of your feelings,
but I believe your feelings and experiences
will someday make you a strong and brave-hearted woman.
You will also be the BEST of both your moms--
Stars shine!*

It can acknowledge OUR belief and the child's that two important women shared her. And because the child wears the jewellery, it is a symbol that since we mothers give the child doesn't go through these tough feelings alone. Jean recommends that we play up ourselves and our important role into the scenario. She holds that we don't have to diminish the birthmother in order to affirm our bond with our child- just don't forget to affirm!

4) **Baby Heart.** Jean tells that a therapist friend taught Jean and her daughter about having a Big Child Heart and a Baby Heart...what happens to some adopted children- trauma, loss, and sadness- is held in the Baby Heart. The Big Child Heart knows that the Baby Heart reacts sometimes when the child is feeling scared or out of control. However, the Big Child Heart's job is to tell that what a child is feeling (when over-reacting or in a tailspin) is from the past, not the present, and that if the child knows this, s/he can regulate her/himself and make sense of the loss feelings. We adoptive parents can't make the loss go away, but we can help our children deal with it and even normalize it. The "Baby Heart" is a very effective analogy with a child, especially when used in conjunction with nurturing Holding Time.

5) **Anger & Accusations.** When or if our children say "I want my birthmother!" every time they are angry with us (e.g., being told NO, being disciplined by us or having to take things from them), ASSERTION is needed! Jean insists that this is one we don't argue or

try to explain. Try simply and CALMLY saying “well, I’m the mom you’re stuck with” every single time the children pull the big gun (it works unbelievably well if we mothers don’t take the bait). About accusations: some children truly believe that their adoptive parents stole them from their birthmother. And of course this is something they might hear even within adoptive kid communities... Jean recommends pro-actively addressing this in a gentle way. This is one that needs reiterating with truth more than once over time, and probably always during birthmother conversations.

MAKING CONNECTIONS ON A DAILY BASIS

Connections to whom?

For many of our children, connection maybe should not be restricted to a birthfamily they are unlikely to make connections with... these are children adopted under adoption law and regulations which insist currently that searching for birthparents/opening an adoption is outside law (unlawful as opposed to illegal). Allowing these children to acknowledge their first (and perhaps remembered) communities of care is of deep significance. Adoptive parents of older children (children who came home beyond babyhood) talk very powerfully to this. Kids adopted later in their childhood will have deep (good/bad, no matter) connections to those who cared. Even very small children remember carers. Acknowledging these building bricks in our children’s development is important. Ignore them, and making a coherent sense of identity will, for our adopted children, be the harder because these bricks are required load-bearers in making the wall/house of their development whole. Accepting mutual relationships with the people who cared for our children makes it less likely that the wall will be gapped.

So, do we need to add all people who were there in forging who our kids were before they became ours?

Tools of connection

Connection on a daily base mean that adoption is on the table from our children’s earliest days. Loss and sadness are dealt with, and ways of accepting that some of these feelings are rightfully embedded are found. Children’s literature is a useful way of making connections, and to this end EMK Press’s own in-house children’s books (*Carrie Kitz We See the Moon, I Don’t Have Your Eyes*; Jean Macleod *At Home in this World*) send messages of connection to the past and stability in the present. The EMK Press parent guide on Parenting With Narratives is a wonderful exploration into using books to help our children navigate feelings and emotions.

For children that are in open adoptions, **letter writing** is a wonderful connector. For children NOT in open adoptions, letter writing is still a powerful tool. The letters can be “sent”, and we can choose how we send them. Real

posting, symbolic posting? Where the child is angry letters once written can even be burnt. Symbolically.

We can look at **trips to the birthcountry**. Is connection made real by travelling to meet the people there a good thing? That it is different from connections to ethnically similar people in the adopted country is spoken of with feeling by families who have made the trips! Jane Liedtke has written a Guide for EMK on Homeland Visits and she and Jean Macleod have written other supporting Guides under the topic of homeland visits, again see the Resources section of the EMK Press website.

And **Histories/Lifebook pages** for the children of trips to their birthcountry, and perhaps to their first communities of care? EMK Press has several guides on lifebooks including one written by Beth O'Malley (www.adoptionlifebooks.com) which will underpin this, as well having presented a workshop designed to help children found their composite identity, stepping through the route with their adoptive parents...

Perhaps most of all is the willingness in the adoptive family to make talking roots just a part of life, as fundamental as breathing. To do this in no undermines the adoptive family, it in fact enhances, because to espouse the "bigger picture" will when our kids are grown make them realise they were in our family for themselves, not in just to fulfil our needs??

WHAT MOTHER ARE WE?

Jean Macleod writes that for her family, celebrating Mother's Day can be symbolised by a circle of light, a conjunction of the child with birthmother and the mother who is bringing up that child. A celebration of one is meaningless without the others.

She also writes that in celebrating birthparents, we should take time to celebrate ourselves as mothers to our adopted children. We are the mothers making our children at home with themselves. We are the means (when our children grow up) for our children to connect to what was, what might have been, and what may be. And if we don't the odds are not good that our children will build strong personal identities, will feel able to centre themselves as adopted persons, and will become healed and whole adults

If we facilitate healthy connections, whether real or talked-about, we empower our children to make relationships and connections out from us, an ability to "go out from our families" to look for the other family. And perhaps more importantly we empower them to look for routes out and on from "who they have been nurtured into being" as opposed to the roots from where they came. By celebrating roots, we give them wings (to coin or purloin a phrase!)

If we have told our children daily and in celebration that their first family/community of care has a relationship to us, our children don't have to leave us to find them. They may go off to look, they won't leave? They will come home to us, with add-ons, new feelings about first communities and families, perhaps even new firsthand knowledge about the same?

Because we broker this, we deserve to celebrate our mothering. And more, because we are the menders of hurt, the mothers who make the child whole enough to understand losses, we stand in a precious relationship to first family and communities of care. Like everything of value, we need to broker this valued child and his/her adoption, support it, risk manage it... and at the end of the day wear it with pride. We are the mothers who heal, and who facilitate. Surely that is being a "good-enough" mother??

And if we are around a mother who is mother to a hurt child, a child emotionally, physically or cognitively deprived, we need to make especial time to connect to her. Mother's Day might be bitter for a mother with an attachment disoriented child for example, where the child will have no desire to thank Mom for being Mom. This mother needs to hear and see from the concern of others that she is a good mother. She will know it, in her heart, but she needs to see it in the care and concern of others for her- so she too can have a quiet weep that she IS a good mother. Send this woman a card, flowers or call her.

We adoptive mothers are the mothers who can heal.

SOME POETRY

***"A MOTHER'S PRAYER" by Becky Miklos (adoptive mother)
(with permission)***

May I claim my motherhood in all fullness and diversity, joy and sorrow, moments of discomfort and ambiguity. May I let my daughters each fashion their own many-colored cloth of life, densely woven from all their threads of identity, made steely by truth.

John Donne's devotional work ***For Whom the Bell Tolls*** (Devotions XVII). This speaks to profound loss and profound connection

" ...No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the Continent; a part of the main....Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee"

QUESTIONS

Will you and yours celebrate Mother's day? If not, why not? Too commercial? Too sentimental?

Will you incorporate your child's birthmother/family in your celebrations?

Would you help direct thoughts of birth-families on May 9 even if the whole package of Mother's Day is too saccharine for you yourself? Children are driven perhaps more by occasion than we are, once they understand its meaning....

If you are making a connection to birthfamily, how will you make it happen? What tools of focusing will you use?

How will you deal with your child if she refuses to make the connection she should make? This is anger of loss, what rituals are there to calm it? (And here everyday words don't do. Do they? Or DO they?)

In the UK Mother's Day is in March, so use of spring flowers from dark earth is powerful. But how does one cope where the child insists the flowers offered to celebrate her birthmother be cut to show no root?

HOW do you affirm a connection your child's birthparents (and not seem mad) if it's thought your child will never know them???

How to convince people we have a different sort of parenting, where two families who may never meet share (a little?) the gift, however lost, of a child.... Or is this sugar again?

Do you like ritual? Is it important for your child? Yes: why? No: Why not?

Will you celebrate your own role as an adoptive mother?

How will you cope if your child uses Mother's Day to reject you as incorporating the bad in his/her birthmother (for the loss)? Will you be supported by others who love you?

RESOURCES

Thinking

***The work of Joyce Maguire Pavao.* Available widely online and can be found using many search engines.**

***The work of Jean Macleod.* Jean has written a guide for dealing with birthparents and loss, it is available free and downloadable from the EMK Press site (). Click on Resources to view *Dancing with Ghosts*. Many other EMK resources are Jean's work, find also at the Resources section of the EMK Press website.**

The work of Jane Brown, MSW.* Jane has written a guide for adoptive families which is free and downloadable from the EMK Press site (www.emkpress.com). Click on Resources to view *Using Books to Open the Adoption Dialogue

This site presents a view of how birthparents can be "integrated" into the adoptive family:

<http://www.rainbowkids.com/1203-invisible.html>

This site looks at the necessity of dealing with birthparents:
http://www.r2press.com/what_is_open_adoption.htm

This site looks at the deep connection between birthmother and child seen through the eyes of the aparents:
<http://www.birthpsychology.com/birthscene/adoption4.html>

This site presents many facets of (Birth) mother's Day from the point of view of birthmothers:
http://www.openadoptioninsight.org/birth_mother.htm

Adoption Parenting E-Group

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/adoptionparenting/>

Please note you have to be parenting adopted children currently to be accepted for membership.

Making a Service

This site leads to the wonderful poem by Khalil Gibran from his work *The Prophet*. Click on *Children*:

<http://www.kafel.com/poetry/gibran/gibran.html>

This site leads to Joyce Pavao's adoption poem "The Family of Adoption". Click on the link, scroll to the bottom of the page and then click on *The Family of Adoption*: (the service is an interesting one to honour the adoption triad...

<http://www.fpsudbury.org/kl/1999-2000/bearclan111499.html>

This site offers a beautiful song: Samuels Song. Find it at
www.cdomusic.com/music_campaign.htm

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the adoption journals *Adoption Australia, Adoption Today (UK), CACH (UK), China Connection (NE) and Mosaic (UK)*. Her work also appears in *Adoption (Changing Families, Changing Times)* (ed) Douglas and Philpot, Routledge 2003. Forthcoming in a book to be published in China (in Chinese) are two of her articles on revisiting China with her Chinese-born children.

Sheena holds an MA First Class Honours in English Language & Literature from Edinburgh University and also a PH.D in diachronic language change, which began a great interest in child language acquisition and its psychological underpinnings. Her early career reflected her interest in language; she worked as a University lecturer (Edinburgh), a Senior Researcher with the Scottish Education Department's Think-Tank and as a Dictionary Editor (University of Madison/Wisconsin).

Her adoption work includes a spell as ICA Country Fact-Sheet Editor for a UK adoption support group, work with Adoption UK and the UK adoption government department in consultation response and research for ICA and lobby work with the UK Immigration Department for issues relating to nationality and children adopted from China. She has close links with her local authority adoption placement team, and works with them in their educational programme for prospective inter-country adopters. Recently, she has worked as the online Topic editor for an adoption listserv (supported by EMK press).

In her remaining time, she walks her dog, goes to the gym daily and delivers her children to school and their sporting pursuits of tennis, swimming and football. Luckily, her husband has a very full career himself and understands full days.