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## Orphans and Warriors The Journey of the Adopted Heart

Adoption is a life-altering odyssey for everyone involved and each of us begins our adoption journey as an orphan. It can be politically incorrect to use the orphan-word in adoption these days because it conjures the stigmatizing specter of things unwanted and forsaken -- children abandoned by their parents and in desperate need of salvation. Yet Carl Jung described the Orphan as an ancient archetype that represents a formative experience in the growth and development of every human psyche. Jung's Orphan is that part of each of us that reacts helplessly and fearfully to the many painful but unavoidable falls from innocence in life. The Orphan is activated in us by "experiences in which the child in us feels abandoned, betrayed, victimized, neglected or disillusioned" and the Orphan's desire is to regain safety. (Pearson) Carl Jung's archetypal portrait of the Orphan is important in redefining adoption as a journey of the heart for birth parents, adoptive parents and adopted children as they move naturally through the loss and gain, connection and disconnection, sorrow and joy that are inseparable dichotomies in adoption.

We live in a culture that does not readily accept those who are wounded, abandoned or different because those people have a way of poking through the emotional armor we wear to protect our consciousness from the anxiety of our own orphaning experiences. Adoption falls outside accepted social family norms and is a very different way of shaping families. This reality creates a deep cultural anxiety that provokes a societal projection of orphan-fears onto everyone involved in adoption. This negative projection is then denied through the wishful and magical thinking about adoption that we have all heard and experienced:

"When the image of a child in need of a loving home is added to the idealized image of a biological family, an idealized cultural conception of an adoptive family emerges. This image feeds the cultural conception of adoption as 'happy families, comprised of a big-eyed grateful orphan, a pair of loving rescuing parents, and perhaps an enthusiastic sibling or two.'" (Eheart and Power) It is the mythical adoption practice of rescuing helpless orphans, exiling aberrant birth parents (note there is no mention of the birth family that relinquished that "grateful orphan") and rewarding worthy adoptive parents.

In reality, adoption is created out of profound loss for everyone involved in the adoption circle. Birth parents lose the opportunity to parent children they have created, adoptive parents lose the opportunity to parent children they have created, and adopted children lose the opportunity to grow up within their genetic clan, their birth family. Many people who have not experienced adoption personally view us who have as "failures" in important cultural ways. Whether we are adopted people, adoptive parents or birth parents in adoption, we have failed to be part of a family that falls within the narrow definition of "normal." As cultural orphans, we often struggle to feel normal, and we wonder how different we really are from other families.

Popular opinions that perpetuate this conflict are that the idealized nuclear family's influence on children is paramount, that early difficulties or trauma cannot be undone, that adversity always damages people rather than challenges them, and that families in adoption are "doomed." These erroneous beliefs, however, are often hidden and unspoken. To compensate for their secret thoughts, strangers smile at

adopted children and tell the adoptive parents how wonderful, special and admirable they are to have adopted (rescued) them (the helpless orphans). They tell the adoptive parents that they'd always thought of doing "something like that." They walk away, satisfied with their fancied view of the adoption experience, convinced that: (1) adoption is the perfect solution to the Orphan's Fall from Innocence; (2) adoption redeems the Orphan; and that (3) adoption returns the Orphan to Innocence and Paradise.

The truth in adoption (and how I long to yell this after those well-intended-but-ignorant strangers) is that: (1) adoption is not a perfect solution for any of its Orphans; (2) adoption will transform the Orphan through joy and sorrow; and (3) the Orphan cannot return to Innocence but strives to reach a new level of consciousness, truth and faith. "The Orphan calls us to wake up, let go of our illusions, and face painful realities." (Pearson)

I became an Orphan when I was thirty years old and still an Innocent. Life was good and I innocently assumed that the goodness was a reward for working hard and playing by the rules. My husband, John, and I were expecting our first child after several years of infertility treatment. This pregnancy was the miracle that wasn't supposed to happen, and I was pregnant for a little more than eight months. On December 6, 1986 our beloved baby, Sara, died and was born. I was orphaned by my child's death. The psychological characteristics of the Orphan are a profound sense you are unworthy and have been cast out of the natural order of things, a profound sense of guilt and a profound pull toward death. (Pearson) I was cast out of the natural order of things because I was infertile in a culture that values genetic motherhood as the defining virtue of womanhood. I was profoundly guilty because I hadn't even been able to keep my child safe in utero and I blamed myself for her death. I was profoundly drawn toward my own death and the great unconscious as a way out of my misery. After Sara died, I had to consciously decide each day that I would not drive my car into a tree.

According to Jung, the Orphan's desperate search is for rescue from fear and pain. Adoption is frequently offered to grieving infertile people as just such a rescue. John and I grasped at the adoption lifeline, thinking only of how an adopted child might soothe and heal our broken hearts. Well-meaning friends and family congratulated us on the saintly and altruistic family path we had chosen as a means to rescue needy children. I let this nescient cultural chatter swirl idly around me as I prayed to the adoption gods for the relief from my mother grief that an adopted child would bring. I didn't know then that beliefs behind the chatter of the well-intended exile adoptive parents and put us in the margins of "normal and healthy family development."

Later, in 1987, as I rocked my adopted Korean daughter through long nights of her own baby heartache, I finally understood that in adoption we continue to shadow-dance with our mother-child loss. Our adoption journey together would not be a rescue but was a voyage of recognition so sweet and so savage that it would astonish and frighten both of us.

We adopted two Korean birth brothers in 1989 at ages four and five, two little boys with real memories of a real past spent with their birth parents. Rescue wasn't what they wanted from us - they wanted us to help them "go home" to the life from which they had been exiled. Over the years, John and I have had to face the painful truth that adoption does not fix the losses that bring birth parents, adoptive parents and

children together. Instead, the veil of our self-image is pulled away and at times the original wounds are revealed more fully by the new adoptive relationships.

My oldest son is now almost sixteen years old, and he and his brother have been with us for ten years. He and I traveled to Korea this summer on an adoption homeland tour. We were lucky enough to meet my sons' birth mother, birth grandmother, birth aunt and birth sister. Each time we were together, I would watch birth mother gaze at my/her/our son, trying to soak up from our visits the ten years of his life spent without her. I realized how orphaned she had been losing her sons to adoption and how lonely and exiled she was in her grief. Her mother told us through our interpreter that she had thought about the boys every day for the past ten years but that she had never shared those thoughts with her daughter because she was afraid to add any more hurt.

Another archetype, the Warrior, lives in us all and can provide a necessary counterpoint to the Orphan that will allow us to grow and heal. The Warrior can free us from the magical thinking and secrecy that may trap us as perpetual Orphans who will spend our lives powerless and waiting for rescue. Eternal Orphans deny their feelings and refuse to take responsibility for the direction their life journeys are taking. The Warrior archetype is an evolved Orphan and is the part of the adopted heart that learns that rescue is not coming, at least not from any external source. Our Warrior gently reminds our Orphan: you don't always have to look for someone outside yourself to save you. The Warrior in adoption is the soul's resilience that comes from enduring and surviving great suffering. Emmy Werner, a renowned expert on resilience, acknowledges suffering when she says that true resilience is the ability to "fall down seven times and get up eight."

Werner's 38-year resilience research study has focused on 210 at-risk children on the island of Kauai. As young children in the 1950's, the risk factors for these children were poverty, perinatal stress, family discord, divorce, parental alcoholism and parental mental illness. These are the same risks that many families in adoption have experienced. Werner found that one-third of these children developed into "caring, competent, confident adults." (Werner and Smith) Werner found that the children's environment and the children's innate temperament affected their resilience. As Warriors in adoption, we must work to create open adoptive relationships that honor the importance of both the genetics of nature and the intention of nurturing in fostering adoption resilience.

Many of the developmental challenges for adoptive parents, birth parents and adopted parents as they evolve from Orphans into Warriors have been pathologized by mental health professionals as being deviant from the cultural norms. Although I am a family therapist, I fear we are too quick to refer adoptive families for professional help at the first sign of pain or struggle. Werner's study indicates that those who overcame early adversity did not tend to seek out much formal or institutional help such as professional therapy. Werner found that the resilient children turned to the adults in their lives they had grown to trust, such as teachers, coaches and clergy, because these were people they saw regularly. Perhaps adopted children would similarly benefit from the opportunity to know and learn to trust all the important adults in their adoption circle.

Possibly the most intriguing aspect of Werner's resiliency research are her findings about reading skills. She found that fourth grade reading skills were a key indicator of resilience -- the higher the reading score, the more resilient the child. She

encourages parents, teachers and schools to put their resources into improving reading skills. It appears to be a more effective way of fostering resilience in children than putting money into "self-esteem" programs that emphasize "feeling good," rather than academic success and life skills.

There is also interesting research on resilience being done by Steven and Sybil Wolin. They are the authors of *The Resilient Self: How Survivors of Troubled Families Rise Above Adversity* (Wolin and Wolin). Their research shows that at-risk children are very often viewed as simply passive objects in their own lives with no power to impact their own success or failure. The Wolins refer to the cultural view that children are powerless, passive objects as the "damage model" of at-risk children. In their book, the Wolins encourage us to reject that model and to look at children as being active participants in their own lives. This is the "challenge model" that may enhance resilient responses in adopted children and their families. "With challenge-based thinking, pride drives the engine of change, whereas with the damage-based thinking -- and its exclusive emphasis on the hurts of the past - shame all too often jams the gears." If the 500,000 children currently in our foster care system were viewed and taught to think of themselves as challenged rather than damaged, their chances for successful permanent placements would be greatly enhanced.

The archetype of the Warrior also has relevance for adoptive families. The Warrior within us gives us strength "to confront the overwhelming obstacles of life." (Sagor) In adoption, we may feel frightened that adopted children won't be able to cope with losing their birth parents, that they have been moved too many times or that their early disrupted attachments will never mend. Adoptive parents may fear the lingering yearnings of infertility, and birth parents may dread their intense longings for the children they have relinquished.

William Allman's research encourages us to battle dread and fear by using the challenged response to develop and enhance resiliency. He found that when we act with a damaged or fearful response, our body produces a "cocktail of hormones heavily laced with cortisol." Cortisol is the hormone the brain releases when we are under stress or in danger. Too much cortisol can interfere with short-term memory, learning and social relatedness. Allman believes that in the challenged response, the body is "flushed with adrenaline and sugar, which is most likely responsible for the sense of heightened awareness and 'flow' characteristics of a peak performance." (Allman)

Too often, adoption is viewed through the damage-model lens as the "Save-the-Child Drama." (Wolin and Wolin) This drama allows people to see adopted children as the fortunate recipients of some benevolent adult's interest and attention. As an adoptive mother, I know I have been cast in this drama when a neighbor exclaims, "Oh, aren't your children lucky!" Many times, I have repressed the impulse to say snidely, "No, nobody is lucky in adoption. In a perfect world, there would be no need for adoption" or "Oh yes, my children thank us on a daily basis for taking them away from a familiar culture, language, homeland and birth family to come to the Land of Opportunity."

I much prefer the "Resilient Child Drama." In this drama, the appealing child meets the potentially interested adult. This drama describes an ongoing attachment process rather than an event. It does not limit people in the adoption circle as passive objects simply in need of rescue. It also reinforces the notion that an adult's potential interest is a necessary first step -- the cultural expectation of "love at first

sight" in adoption is an unrealistic expectation that too often leads to disappointment and self-doubt.

What can the study of resilience tell adoptive parents, birth parents and adopted people about attachment in adoption? Dr. Marian-Radke of the National Institutes of Health wrote a research report entitled, "Hard Growing: Children Who Survive." In that report, she describes how some resilient children shift between connecting with a caregiver and straying from that caregiver - "selectively shifting between asserting their own independence and striving for a relationship." (Radke) The Wolins refer to this behavior as "straying" and emphasize that straying may be a strong indicator of resilience. Think about children who have been abused or neglected -- that is often the reason children are moved into the foster care and adoption system. Abused and neglected children must maintain some kind of connection to an abusive or neglectful parent because they depend on that person for their very survival. It's actually quite resourceful for a child to move in close to a caregiver for nurturing and connection during the times when it is safe -- mom isn't drinking or dad isn't hitting. But at the first sign of stress or danger, these children are also masters at moving out of range until it is safe again. Adoptive parents are too often told by the well-intended that the sign of a "well-adjusted" adopted child will be instant, unambivalent attachment to their new caregivers. Yet, if we understand a stressed child's survival skills of straying and connecting, attaching and distancing, we can respect adopted children's need to use that behavior from time to time as they learn to love and trust again.

Using what has been learned in the study of resilience, we can now redefine some of the current theories of attachment in adoption. Instead of using contrived, forced techniques that encourage infantile connections between adoptive parents and adopted children, we can understand their "I hate you/don't leave me" behaviors as a learned life skill that can help them become resilient. Instead of perpetuating the destructive myth that the attachment between an adopted child and that child's birth parents must be severed before new attachments can grow, we can include birth parents openly in the process of transitioning children in adoption. We can teach therapists, teachers, doctors, friends and family that in adoption we modify our attachments to others from time to time as a protective mechanism against separation and loss. We can teach from our Warrior hearts that it is normal in adoption to sometimes fear that love will lead to hurt and that the Warrior is caring for the Orphan by acting cautiously. It is this commitment to self that is so misunderstood in the adoption community. Adoptive parents, birth parents and adopted people who connect and stray demonstrate a resilience and commitment to their own survival and a willingness to deal with problems around them. An informed attachment theory should emphasize this positive and active attitude in adoption. When we recognize that connecting and straying is a normal, although different adoption behavior, perhaps we won't take our family's need for occasional distance so personally. Over time, the Warrior (adult) can increase the times the Orphan (child) moves in for nurturing and connection and decrease the times when the Orphan is straying or distancing. Remember, it takes a long time for children to rebuild their trust in the adults who care for them. It takes time for people living in adoption to entrust others with their safety.

As we make the arduous journey of attachment in the adoption circle, we must also master the resilience skill of detaching from the "damage model" of traditional adoption. "One discovers that destiny can be directed, that one does not have to remain in bondage to the first wax imprints on childhood sensibilities. Once the deforming mirror has been smashed, there is a possibility of wholeness. There is a

possibility of joy." (Anais Nin) The developmental task for adopted children is to learn how to forgive and to maintain compassion for their birth family and yet remain detached from that family's troubles. It appears that resilient adopted children ultimately understand that their birth parents' problems had nothing to do with them. This comprehension allows them to view themselves as being different from and connected to their birth parents. Wolin writes that children are challenged by family troubles to experiment and respond actively and creatively. "Their pre-emptive responses to adversity, repeated over time, become incorporated into the self as lasting resiliencies."

Adoptive parents and birth parents can play an important part in developing this resiliency in their children. The way kids learn to cope with adversity is by observing how their parents handle difficulty. (Webster) As Warriors in adoption, we can model positive and proactive ways to face tough times. Luckily, this kind of resilience seems to be a learned behavior. Stephen Suomi of the National Institutes of Health has studied resiliency in monkeys. He found that genetically stress-prone monkeys raised by calm foster parents became more resilient than those infant monkeys who merely inherited a low stress response from their parents. The adaptive infant monkeys learned from their adoptive parents to distinguish truly threatening situations from non-threatening ones, and they also learned to develop and use networks of social support. (Allman)

This stress resilience and response is learned by watching. It is estimated that children learn 70% of what they learn from us in nonverbal ways. Only 30% of what we teach them is taught verbally. Again, children are watching us cope with life's daily realities. Adoptive parents and birth parents need to talk about their life experiences with adopted children to let them know that there are difficult times in life even for adults. We can share with adopted children how we felt during those times, what we thought at those times and what we did to cope. Adopted children must learn the important developmental skill of connecting their feelings with their thoughts and actions. Stress resilience must be experienced by our children as well as taught to our children. As adoptive parents and birth parents, we can model behaviors for successful coping such as task commitment, the ability to dream and to set goals, and the ability to adapt to life's changes. Warriors seize every opportunity as resilient people to share with adopted children concrete and current evidence of successful coping -- the feelings, thoughts and behaviors that help keep things in perspective and that enable us to overcome adversity and to achieve our heart's desires. We must show them that they are valued members of their family and their community by giving them opportunities to make real and valuable contributions.

Resilient adoptive families value their experiences of loss and growth, joy and sorrow, pain and pleasure because resilience is not created out of only happy times. Mary Tyler Moore, whose son died by suicide, has said that pain nourishes courage. "You can't be brave if only wonderful things happen to you." Hemingway wrote that "the world breaks everyone. And afterward some are strong in the broken places." But as resilient families, we can't buy into the current cultural definition of resilience. Many politicians want to take away social supports and shelters from those (mostly women and children) who most need them. These politicians justify their decisions to wipe out social programs by insisting that people need to make it on "in-born strengths, fierce independence and rugged individualism. In the larger world of politics, admiration for the resilient now goes hand in hand with contempt for the vulnerable." (Schwartz)

Our adopted children are vulnerable, the birth families they come from are vulnerable, and adoptive parents are vulnerable because we are not thought of as normal. We need to model a resiliency that is created out of compassion rather than contempt. Compassionate resilience is the approach that strengthens adoptive families, especially when life is hard. Resilient adoptive and birth parents show their adopted children how to move toward, rather than away from, their pain and sorrow. (Schwartz) Warriors learn to channel their feelings into action and they refuse to give up! Warriors model the compassionate ways we have learned to deal with our own adoption pain -- what we learned about ourselves, each other and our commitment to being parents through the infertility, relinquishment, child loss and other dashed dreams that led us to adoption. It is not only adopted children who have experienced pain and trauma. Adoptive parents and birth parents are wounded healers. Pema Chodron, a Buddhist nun, writes that "it is unconditional compassion for ourselves that leads to unconditional compassion for others.... Only to the degree we've related to pain at all will we be fearless enough, brave enough and enough of a warrior to be willing to feel the pain of others." By living a life that is compassionately resilient, we can model doggedness, mastery, moral courage, love and hope.

Once we are able to accept that we are all Orphans in adoption, we can live in community with other Orphans and loudly proclaim that the game of Make-Believe in adoption is over! As Orphans we will discard any old beliefs that we are one-down culturally. We will no longer look to the status quo for rescue, we will look to ourselves and to each other. As Warriors, we will build our belief that we deserve equal cultural recognition as healthy and normal families. Adoptive parents and birth parents will refuse to be pitted against each other in a cultural tug-of-war over who "owns" the adopted child. Instead, our Warrior hearts will make friends with our Orphan hearts to create lasting connections and attachments in our adoption circles, and the reward for the battle will be our coming home to love.

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