

# RACE, SEARCH, AND MY BABY-SELF: REFLECTIONS OF A TRANSRACIAL ADOPTEE

Susan R. Harris<sup>†</sup>

## *Introduction*

In these two works, Susan Harris gives voice to the realities of her experiences as a transracial adoptee and the experiences of other persons of color adopted into white families. "Can You Imagine?" is a narrative of stories pieced together and drawn from the stories of transracial adoptees whom Harris has met, counseled, and known. It unmaskes the unique complexities of race and racism, so often ignored, in the lives of transracial adoptees, *and* challenges adoptive families and adoption professionals to honestly confront the role of race in the adoption process. In "Come Celebrate My First Birthday," Harris discusses the painful and joyous revelations of her search for information regarding the first fourteen months of her life—when her "baby-self" spent this "holding period" in foster care. During this search for her baby-self, Harris discovers that her baby-self was very likely the victim of some of the many types of racial assault depicted in "Can You Imagine?" In her telling of her story, Harris points out the need for increased attention to adoptive searches which target the holding period, an area of exploration crucial to an adoptee's understanding of herself.

## CAN YOU IMAGINE?

Have you ever spent time *imagining*  
what it would have been like  
to have been raised amongst individuals who were  
racially different from you?

---

<sup>†</sup> Clinical Social Worker, Judge Baker Children's Center, Boston, MA, and Center for Family Connections, Cambridge, MA. M.S.W. Boston University School of Social Work. I would like to give special thanks to Dr. Alvin Poussaint, Dr. Joyce Maguire-Pavao, and Dr. Leroy Johnson for their helpful feedback regarding this Article, and for their ongoing support. I am also appreciative to Sidney Buxton, Dr. Thomas McCandless, and clinical social workers Raymond Pillidge, Sheridan Robbins, and Denise Maguire for their warmth and support. Lastly, I would like to thank Betty Hung for her insightful suggestions and editing. "Can You Imagine?" was presented at the *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* conference, *Challenging Boundaries*, and at the Cambridge Series conference, *The Many Phases of Adoption*.

What it would have been like  
to have gone FOR YEARS never having  
spoken to a person who was of the same race as you;

What it would have been like  
throughout the course of a typical day  
never having encountered a person  
*who looked like you.*

What it would have been like  
to have EVen your *own PAREnts* be  
of a *different* race from you?

Can you imagine?

Let's think about this even though it might be hard to conceptualize. I am not talking about spending time abroad to experience different cultures or foods, knowing all the time that regardless of how you are treated, you will be able to return home and blend in with your family, friends, and peers. Nor am I talking about hanging out with friends of a different race, class, or culture and feeling different and sometimes uncomfortable for obvious and/or sometimes not-obvious reasons, yet knowing all the while that you can leave, and find a person  
who will  
understand you,  
mirror you,  
and once again, remind you,  
that you are okay being the way you are. I am not talking about the choices you have made to become a more cultivated person. I am not talking about choices. And I am definitely not talking about a bad hair day.

I am talking about growing up in a town where there might be one, two, three or four persons—if you're lucky—who look like you, but are not necessarily your age or even people with whom you are likely to come into contact. This is the situation for many transracial/transcultural adoptees who come from closed adoptions and who are raised in predominantly white communities. The added dimension for African American transracial adoptees is that they have facial features and/or skin coloring which have been historically exploited and oppressed.

Can you imagine an adorable little African American girl in the first grade who comes home daily crying to mommy that the white children were laughing at her funny hair? And one day she arrives home to report that her nickname is nigger, not knowing that it is a racist remark. Can you imagine the pain the

child's parents struggle with after learning that their sweet, innocent child is already being violated at the age of six?

OR how about a little African American boy who is constantly picked on and called nigger by his peers at school. In addition, he has a teacher who ignores him and will not teach him. All the while his parents who are white have no idea of what is happening. Why would they? It is not their experience. How could they think that people would do such things to their child?

OR how about the black child who is singled out by his teacher because he is black and *must know* about black history. Only this causes the child great discomfort because he does not even know another black person, never mind black history.

Can you imagine being the only person of color in your school and community? Which would set you up to be the black token and likely target for many racist assaults from both peers and adults. Assaults that are overt or covert, intentional or unintentional, conscious or unconscious, direct or indirect. Assaults that many times both child and parent had no idea occurred, not until later on in life. Is this a healthy environment for the transracial adoptive family? Is this the way to integrate a white community?

What happens to the black male when he enters the adolescent years? This of course varies from male to male. How will he be viewed by various white people as he begins to look like a black man? Think of the confusion the adoptee might have if he is surrounded by white people who view him as a token, tell him that he isn't really black, and proceed to talk negatively about those other blacks. Or what must it be like to hear your white peers chat about getting a "black" one in the sack? How does the black male feel if he is viewed as a token one day, and then the next is falsely accused (like so many black males) of being a liar and/or a thief? Will he encounter fearful, racist white men who become angry and retaliate when he gets a position that they feel their white sons should have had? Will any of the white adults become concerned that the black male might date or rape their "superior or angelic" white daughters? Can you imagine the pain, rage, and confusion a black transracial adoptee has if and when he figures out that the environment he was raised in did not and does not value him or what he represents—black men.

What happens to the black female when dating begins? How does the black female feel about herself if all of her friends who are white begin to date and she is left dateless? How does she approach this subject with her white peers and white parents? Will anyone be sensitive to her? Or will people use the colorblind approach? Who knows? It really is the luck of the draw. Can you imagine having

some of your friends say to you—"Maybe the boys don't ask you out because you're not friendly enough?" Could this be the case throughout all twelve years of schooling? I should say not! The black female, however, could easily believe her friends and think there is something wrong with her.

Will the black female lose some friends if she says she doesn't get dates because she is not liked because she is black? Who knows? This can play out in numerous ways. What happens if the black female gets angry with her friends and family for not understanding her situation? Will they think she's crazy because Billy, the boy she likes, would never be prejudiced? Will they think she is just race obsessed, that she always blames these things on race? Will some of her friends feel justified to think of her as or call her a black bitch? Can you imagine going through twelve years of schooling supposedly like all of your white girlfriends, but never having a white boyfriend, or if you are gay, a white girlfriend? Or can you imagine being sexually exploited by so many boys, while all that you wanted was what your friends had—a boyfriend? Can you imagine none of your friends, parents, or even your white therapist (if you have one) ever bringing up the topic of race while things like this are happening to you? On an intellectual level, it would make sense because race does not play a significant part in their lives. But I strongly believe it does for many transracial adoptees whether they or their parents know it.

How does a white adoptive father and his adult black daughter make sense of a situation when they are together and someone believes her to be a prostitute? How does the daughter feel about her sense of worth if this is just one of many times that she has been told and made to feel worthless *just because she wears a coat of color and has features that are African?*

Can you imagine going through life being the target of discrimination when you have never seen or met a black person who is biologically related to you? How does one make sense of this? How can a person be called a nigger or a black bitch when she has been surrounded and only loved by white people? Race must be a social construct. So is this a colorblind society?

Imagine at some point in your life being exposed to your same race and not being accepted because you are acting too "white." Is this an act? Why would anyone think that a child of any color raised by white parents in a white community would be anything other than a white person who has been spray painted one of the various shades of color? How do you think it feels when you begin to see that you have been too "socialized white" to feel "black," and too dark-skinned to ever be accepted as white?

What happens if the transracial adoptee seeks out therapy from within the white community? What is the likelihood that there will be a therapist who is knowledgeable and fluent in race-related issues especially if there are no people of color, particularly African Americans, who work within the agency? Can you imagine having a therapist of any color who is ignorant and uncomfortable talking about race and adoption-related issues, but at the same time is eager to meet with you, to learn *from you* about the transracial adoptee experience? Imagine paying money to a therapist who occasionally causes you to become emotionally distraught (just like so many others have done) because he or she is at times unable to mask his or her racist point(s) of view. This can be an extremely difficult, exploitive, humiliating, and psychologically damaging journey.

Let's think about this for a moment. How long do you think it takes to make a child of color shut down and become sealed over especially when all of the child's support systems consist of white people who visibly mirror the people who have caused him or her harm and discomfort? Or how many racist remarks, attitudes, and/or cues do you think it takes to ruin a child's positive sense of self? One, two, three, four, five racist remarks over the course of a ten-year period? Three racist remarks in the fourth grade? Or how about one extremely powerful racist sexual remark right at the time of puberty? You know what kinds of remarks I'm talking about. The type of remarks that speak to the size of the black man's penis or the ones that sexualize and dehumanize the black woman. I know I cannot answer these questions for you. Can you?

By now I'm sure that most of you think I am completely opposed to transracial adoption. Guess what? You are quite wrong. I loved my parents, and I know that they loved me. I would not have traded them in for anyone, although I would have traded the all-white environment for an integrated one. And I know plenty of African American transracial adoptees who feel the same.

Just because I educate people on the realities of racism that play out in this type of a situation—the realities I have learned through readings, clinical practice, friendships, colleagues, and most importantly my own personal story—doesn't mean that I am opposed to transracial adoption. Life isn't just about BLACK or WHITE, RIGHT or WRONG, GREAT or AWFUL, ALL or NOTHING. Life to me is about GREY MATTER or like being on a continuum. Sometimes it is okay to adopt transracially and other times it is not. Sometimes the environment is great for the transracial adoptive family, and other times it might vary from okay to what I call TOXIC. Some transracial adoptees have done quite well academically and career-wise, however, at the same time shuttling in and out of therapeutic settings. And just because there are transracial adoptees who haven't had major difficulties doesn't mean that there isn't a

continuing need to address the underlying and overriding issues that play themselves out in adoption. I believe that people need to be educated on the issues that are present so that they can make informed decisions.

So who is responsible for making sure that the human needs of the African American transracial adoptee are appropriately met? Who is going to see to it that white adoptive and prospective adoptive parents get educated about such realities so that some of these dehumanizing experiences can be prevented or minimized? I know there are many people who believe education regarding race and adoptee-related issues is not necessary and that love is enough. I strongly disagree. Love is necessary, but how does the black child who will eventually grow up to be a black adult have a chance to love him or herself if he or she is the ongoing target of discrimination? Especially if there is no place for the child and the family to go to regularly to get mirrored, validated, and made to see that it is more than okay to be of a blended family. It is critical that white parents be aware that the power of racism is so great that it can sabotage all the time, energy, and love they put into raising their child of color. If the parent is not astute and able to guide the child through and around the realities of racism and adoptee related issues, and set up a multiracial/multicultural support system or live in an integrated community that includes both children and adults of color, the child can be severely damaged emotionally, psychologically, and sometimes physically. The better prepared the parents, siblings, and extended family are, the better chance the child and the family will have.<sup>1</sup>

## COME CELEBRATE MY FIRST BIRTHDAY

*This paper is written in memory of all the baby-selves who remain missing and unknown. It is also dedicated to my beloved parents, the late Dr. Samuel and Dorothea Rae Harris. For it was their warm bodies, loving arms, and ever-so-gentle voices that eventually embraced and nurtured me in a way that was so desperately needed.*

---

1. To learn more about the complicated life experiences of transracial adoptees, see STEVEN L. NICKMAN, *THE ADOPTION EXPERIENCE* (1985); RUTH G. MCROY & LOUIS A. ZURCHER, JR., *TRANSRACIAL AND INRACIAL ADOPTEES: THE ADOLESCENT YEARS* (1983); Era Bell Thompson, *The Adoption Controversy: Blacks Who Grew Up in White Homes*, *EBONY*, June 1974, at 84. To learn more about the complexities of being a transcultural adoptee, see generally Dick Lehr, *The Riddle of Julia Ming Gale*, *BOSTON GLOBE*, Oct. 8, 1996, at E1; Steve Fainaru, *'Imelda (Gina)' Struggles for Identity*, *BOSTON GLOBE*, July 15, 1996, at A6; Dottie Enrico, *How I Learned I Wasn't Caucasian*, *GLAMOUR*, Sept. 1995, at 106.

*"A tiny, bright-faced child, with skin of a deep tone, luminous eyes, and thin dark hair which curls on top of her head. Her small hands are dimpled. She is well formed, though petite."*<sup>2</sup>

How beautiful! This is what a psychologist wrote about me when he or she saw me when I was in foster care. What a wonderful feeling it was to find out that someone had actually seen me and had written something so beautiful. That I, at that time had provoked a smile and a warm feeling in a person. These childhood realities that many of you have been able to take for granted, I have not had the privilege of doing so.

I have often wondered where the numbness comes from. Why, when I look at parents playing with their babies—as if everything else in their world is secondary—I am happy for them, though at the same time I feel numb inside. I now know that the numbness has a lot to do with my not having any memories or voices for that period of my life, the time spent in holding.<sup>3</sup> Well it is time to heal and give voice and memory to my first year of life.

Notes made by a nurse who visited me at the hospital and foster home:

*"4/11/63 This is a normal newborn, "active and alert." Her skin is white and clear. Okay for foster home placement. At time of discharge, the baby weighed 5 [pounds]-14 [ounces]. Her formula was evaporated milk 8 oz., boiled water 16 oz. and 2 1/2 tbsp. Karo syrup. There is a probability that the father of this infant has a negro Indian racial background."*

*"4/13/63 The baby is nursing well. She takes 2 - 2 1/2 oz. at a feeding. There is no vomiting and the stools are normal."*

*"4/23/63 The baby weighs 6 [pounds] - 4 [ounces]. She takes 3 ozs. of formula every four hours. There is no spitting or vomiting. She has black hair. Her skin appears to be white."*

*"4/30/63 Today the baby's general skin tone looks somewhat dusky."*

*"5/8/63 Baby weighs 7 [pounds] - 2 [ounces] and is 20 inches long. [I had to have been so cute.] Her skin coloring has become definitely dusk[y]. [T]he palms of her hands are pink. She follows with her eyes, but does not smile yet, in response to attention."*

---

2. This and the following excerpts are taken from notes I found in the file containing information about my stay in foster care during my first fourteen months of life.

3. I define the "holding" period as the time after a child is surrendered for adoption until the child enters the adoptive home. It is common for a child in the United States to spend this holding period in the care of the State.

*"6/20/63 Today the baby really smiles in response to attention."*

*"8/21/63 The foster family has been away on vacation. The baby weighs 12 lbs. She is negroid in appearance, particularly the skin tone, which is quite dark. Her hair is sparse, black and tends to curl. Her eyes are brown. The nares are broad, but the mouth is small. Her social responses are definitely slow. She does not smile spontaneously, even to foster mother."*

Interesting. Was it coincidental that the day the nurse found me negroid in appearance was the same day I was found to be "definitely" slow in social responsiveness? Why the ongoing attention placed on the question of my race?<sup>4</sup> It was one thing for the nurse to state that I am African American, or at that time negroid. The way in which this nurse focused on my racial appearance, however, would make me believe that I was defective. Is a white child observed like this? With a focus on the child's nares, hair, and mouth? What did these findings mean to the nurse?<sup>5</sup> Didn't she understand that my features and skin coloring were nothing out of the ordinary? I was just a Jewish multiracial baby in a foreign place—being viewed by a person who could not relate.

Remember, this is the only information that I, an adoptee, will ever have about my first year of life. The thought that someone might have objectified me at that age was very painful for me to learn. Being a transracial adoptee who was raised in a white environment, this type of objectification has been a familiar theme in my life. But to again encounter the racism of others in my search for my lost roots, to realize that I as an innocent, vulnerable baby was the victim of racism adds another complicated and deep layer of sadness and pain to my search. This is not to say that the nurse was racist on a conscious level; she could have made unconscious racist associations. But the harm to me today and to my baby-self cannot be undone.

*"A tiny, dark complexioned child, with luminous eyes, and thin, curly, dark hair. Her skin is of a deep tone, her features small, in keeping with her build. She is well-formed, with dimpled hands."*

I think I will hold on to this, the psychologist's description of me—it is very comforting.

---

4. Why was the nurse so interested in the "probability" of my birth father's racial background? There was no "probability" that he was of African and Native American descent; if she had looked in my records file, she would have discovered he was "definitely" a person of color.

5. Would my being negroid bring in less or no money for the agency? Would this delay my adoption process or categorize me as an "unadoptable or undesirable" baby to a white Jewish adoption agency?



On 9/13/63, when I was five months old, the psychologist administered Gesell Normative testing. S/he determined that "*her quick social responsiveness is appealing.*"

Soon afterward, the nurse wrote:

*"10/4/63 The baby weighs 13 lbs. She has spurted ahead in her development in the last 6-8 weeks and was most sociable and responsive. She rolls to navigate, and gets to a creeping position and rocks. She bears full weight when held upright. She eats well, and is on a full diet, 3 meals a day."*

Interesting. Was it coincidental that the nurse suddenly observed that I had spurted ahead developmentally after the psychologist had found my social responsiveness appealing? Or was the nurse's initial impression of me subjective and possibly racist, so that she quickly changed her opinion of me once the report came back? Who knows? We will never know. I can tell you that the tears I shed while absorbing this foster care information about myself contained both joy and sadness. Joy for discovering the positive qualities I possessed at that age, and sadness thinking about how vulnerable my baby-self had been in foster care.

Do any of you actually have any idea of how powerful an impact search and finding can have on the adoptee?<sup>6</sup> That immediately following my first conversation with my birth mother, it dawned on me that I had been walking on my knees my entire life, and that I no longer had to do so because I had just been given my feet. That for me finding both my birth families helped me make sense of so many things. For example, I now know who I resemble in looks, personality, and talent. I also know what makes me *unique*. Meeting my birth mother gave voice to the fact that I really came out of a real woman's body, not an imaginary one. That pregnancy can be a beautiful and natural experience. That I had a real beginning to life similar to yours. That my life did not begin when I was adopted; that in fact, my life began when my birth mother gave birth to me.

One might think that because I found my birth families years ago, my days of searching were over. But after years of knowing my birth families and being able to integrate the similarities and differences into my life, it became apparent to me that there was still something missing. And it became much more obvious to me while I watched parents playing with their babies that the numb feeling I felt came from not knowing anything about that particular time in my life. That time period was non-existent to me, to my birth families, and to my adoptive family. It

---

6. To learn more about the experiences of adoptees who search for their birth families, see Phyllis R. Silverman, et al., *Reunions Between Adoptees and Birth Parents: The Adoptees' Experience*, SOCIAL WORK, July 1991, 329-35.

was a lengthy period of my life that had never been talked about. It had never been made real to me because no one I knew had ever been with my baby-self during those first fourteen months. This lack of information, stimulation, and discussion regarding my baby-self, I now know, through the years had an injurious emotional effect on me.

The interplay between parents and babies really made me think. Who held me at that age?! Was I held? Did someone find my baby-self absolutely irresistible? Who talked baby talk to me? Did someone cheer for my baby-self when she made various movements or when her *first tooth erupted*?! Did someone help her regain composure after she was relinquished at birth? So many questions unanswered. So many feelings dead and asleep.

The importance of pictures, lifebooks, and other works that so many professionals and parents have created to chronicle children's time in foster care, and which are now used to soften the difficult journey for foster children and adoptees, cannot be overstated. These aids attempt to create an ongoing narrative for children to forever have as they travel through placements, preventing them from having more gaps and unknowns in their lives than need be.

Think about how common a phenomenon it is that a parent of a newborn pulls out her baby pictures to proudly show others how the adorable baby resembles her mother or father or some other relative. When a child is raised by her biological family, the parent(s) are able to observe their child's development and pass on their observations of the child's similarities and differences as compared to themselves and other family members, creating a life-long conversation between parent and child. By the time the child becomes an adult, she may take for granted all the knowledge about herself which her family has shared with her. But this child, now adult, may in turn tap into this base of knowledge about family heredity when she herself bears a child. All this which most people take for granted, adoptees cannot. This is not to say that all adoptees have an interest in discovering information about the holding period, or that they are the only individuals who do not have this information. But it is important to recognize that for adoptees who do conduct this type of search, the cognitive-emotional process of searching is complex and can be painful.

The search can be especially difficult for the adoptee if family members and counseling professionals minimize the process.<sup>7</sup> They may dismiss the adoptee's

---

7. This search process can also be difficult for the birth parents and adoptive family. For birth parents, particularly birth mothers, this search by the adoptee for foster care data can immediately place them once again in a place of guilt, shame, and anger. They might have thought that they were through learning of what had happened to their child, never thinking that the adoptee would actually seek out additional foster placement information. For birth mothers of color and white birth mothers impregnated by men of color, who were made

search for information about the holding period, believing that finding this information is not that important. But these people, who were likely raised within their biological families, overlook the fact that they have had access to this type of information throughout the years. They have baby pictures. They have been able to ask family members about their early childhood.

*“In prone she mounted on hands, tilting her head and smiling. From this position she is reported to turn over. She came to sit, from supine, her face eager, and she sat alone briefly. She also bore her full weight actively. Impressive was her quick interest in the cubes, her eyes traveling to the single one, and her attention sustained as she subsequently grasped, dropped, and secured another. Her right hand was most active, but when she finally secured one left, she held it longer, and retained a second. [Of course, I am left-handed.] Her only recurrent interest in the bell its ringing and cup, seemed to stem from fatigue, her effort spent on the cubes.”*

How can I not overflow with teary delight as I think about how my baby-self mounted on her hands, tilted her head, and smiled? I now have somewhat of a visual picture of how I moved and how absolutely irresistible I must have been as a baby.

So it is with these foster care notes that I have been able to piece together part of my life history, and put together various images of my baby-self that I will forever have. And it is these images that will over time help dissolve the numbness.

This is the last entry in the notes made by the nurse prior to my first birthday:

*“3/24/64 Baby is really adorable, definitely negroid in appearance. The nares are somewhat broad, her mouth comparatively small. Her first tooth erupted two weeks ago, and three more since that time.”*

I can't help but to glow! We all know how adorable babies are when they are showing their first teeth. Can't you just see my baby-self right now? With two tiny teeth on the top of her mouth and two tiny teeth on the bottom. Yes! It is time to regress, to integrate, to heal, and to celebrate.

---

to believe that their children would be immediately adopted, learning detailed information of a lengthy foster care stay that is tainted with racism can be additionally painful.

For the adoptive family, there may be a sense of – here we go again. Family members may feel guilt and fear that they have not met their child's needs because once again, the child is searching for more. Sadness and pain regarding infertility issues of the adoptive parents may also resurface. Of course, one cannot generalize how families are going to handle this part of the search. It can be a very positive and non-threatening experience.

Just as finding my birth mother gave me my FEET, obtaining foster care information about my holding period has given me my ANKLES.

When I contacted my former foster mother, a white Christian woman who had over a twenty-year period parented only Jewish babies, I asked her if she remembered me? She said “no” without emotion. I immediately knew that I could not get emotional because it appeared as if she had dealt with foster care in a rather robotic way. When I asked her if she could have been the one who named me, she replied, “No, I wouldn’t have given you that name.” When I asked if she had had a difficult time when children left her home, she said, “It was a matter of fact. I knew that none of you would be staying because you were Jewish so there was no reason to become attached.” I thought to myself, how could a person not become attached to newborn children, especially one who had been there for fourteen months? It was at this time that I realized there was a great possibility that I had never had a *first birthday party*. That my first birthday might have just come and gone without any type of acknowledgment or celebration.

*My tiny bright-faced child, with skin of a deep tone, luminous eyes, and thin dark hair which curls on top of your head. You, with your four teeth, and an adorable Jewish/Black/Indian nose, no longer have to deal with the bittersweet alone. Tossing and turning, without anyone watching over you who truly loves you.*

*I know that those first fourteen months were hard and that not all of your needs were met. You see, I know you quite well, and know that at the time of adoption, you were delayed and starved for attention.*

*The fact that you had a nurse and caretaker who did not love and adore you was by no means a reflection of you. You see, you were and still are so very lovable and worthy of all that is good. HAPPY BIRTHDAY! Precious One! Any parent would have been fortunate to have had you.*

# RITUAL

Susan Soon-Keum Cox<sup>†</sup>

*"You are the eldest child, you go first."*

*It's true, I was born first. I am the eldest. But I am new to this. I do not know how to lead in this ritual of respect and honor to our mother.*

*"You go first." The words are spoken again and my two brothers step back and motion me toward our mother's grave. I step in front of the mound of earth that comes nearly to my shoulders and is covered with stiff grass. Even the burial place of my mother is foreign to what I know from my life in a different place.*

*"You bow four times."*

*I am grateful for the direction, but feel awkward too. "Like this?" I bow stiffly. They nod "yes." I bow three more times, more aware of them than the spirit of our mother who receives this ritual.*

*It is my turn to step back, and my brother, the second-born, moves forward to bow low and reverently several times. He moves with grace and sureness. He has done this many times before. I watch him and realize that I did not bow properly.*

*It is the turn of the third-born, and he follows his brother in bowing, clasping his hands together solemnly. They kneel in front of the grave together, and I echo them.*

*Without words they pass around pieces of dried fish between us. I wait and carefully watch what they do next. After placing the remaining fish on our mother's grave, they nod to me that it is time to chew. I put the fish in my mouth and chew. I do*

---

<sup>†</sup> Susan Soon-Keum Cox was adopted from Korea into an American family in 1956. She has worked with international adoption and child welfare issues for more than 20 years. She was a participant in the panel on transracial adoption at the *Challenging Boundaries* conference. She is currently the Director of Development at Holt Int'l Children's Services.

*everything exactly as I see them do before me. I feel like a shadow.*

*Still, without words, they pour rice wine into three glasses for us and one glass for our mother. They hand it to me to place gently at her grave. I wait for them and then we all drink together. We are silent. The only noise is the grass waving softly in the cemetery.*

*This ritual, so clearly familiar to my brothers, is foreign to me. More Baptist than Buddhist, I have never honored the dead like this before. But it feels comforting. I look out over the rice fields that surround my mother's final rest and I am grateful to be here. I am certain this moment would bring happiness to our mother, wherever she is. I raise my glass to my brothers and say, "To our mother, Chung Kwan Ja. I am sure this would make her happy—the three of us here together."*

*The interpreter repeats my words in Korean. Hearing them, my brothers shake their heads vigorously. "No, no! Not Chung Kwan Ja. Chung Kwan Ja. You are not saying it correctly." As if they were speaking to a child they put their faces close to mine and say it slowly. I repeat it back to them. "No, no, still wrong." We go back and forth until I get it right, or they give up on me.*

*At first I am hurt. They did not hear what I said. All they heard was the wrong accent as I attempted to say my mother's name in a tender salute. And then it passes . . . I did say it wrong. It is because I did not have her to show me. I did not hear her name everyday as they did. But I am here now. With them, with her. And that is what matters in the big picture.*

*I reach out for my brothers' hands and we sit together quietly before our mother's grave.*

*"Was it like this for you?" I wonder. "Did you have to work hard to be as you were supposed to be?"*

*I pray. Wordless, voiceless, prayers that are sad, thoughtful and happy. All at once. It is how I feel. All of those emotions at once.*

*"I was always your secret." I whisper to her. "It is not necessary anymore. I will find the right words. I promise you. It will be for both of us . . . ."*

---

In 1956 Harry Holt was in Korea tenaciously working to save the lives of Korean children. Children who were abandoned. Orphans. Many of them were of mixed race. One day an orphanage director from In Chon called Mr. Holt. "I have more babies than I have beds. Can you help me?" Mr. Holt replied, "I can take five." He drove to In Chon to bring the five children back with him to Seoul. One of the children Mr. Holt took back with him to his orphanage was a little girl about four years old. That little girl was Hong Soon Keum, she became Susan Gourley, and today I am Susan Cox.

When I first arrived at the orphanage I would wake up in the night from bad dreams. It was Mr. Holt who personally came in and comforted me. He rocked me, sang songs to me, and when I wasn't frightened anymore, he took me into the kitchen and made us jelly sandwiches. He was my "grandfather," even before I had a mother and father of my own.

I left Korea for my new life on October 9, 1956. I remember little about that trip. I do remember looking out a small round window, sitting next to a woman I could not understand, and feeling very, very scared.

I was the 167th child to be adopted from Korea. More than 60,000 Korean children in the last forty years have made the same journey. That trip across the ocean is much more than a journey of several thousand miles. For those of us who have been adopted, it is the birth into our family.

I grew up in a small rural community in Oregon. I was my parents' first child. A year later they adopted a son from Korea. We were followed by three biological siblings, so I am the oldest of five. Although we didn't look the same, I always knew I was very much my parents' daughter.

When I came to my parents, international adoption was considered as foreign an idea as the children who were being adopted. People were concerned. My parents were pioneers in this process. "Your daughter is American now," they were told. But they knew I was also Korean. In my community, I grew up knowing little about Korea, or my heritage. I rarely had an opportunity to see other Korean people. I did not eat Korean food, see beautiful Korean fan dancing, hear Korean music, or hold celadon pottery in my hands.

What my parents did give me was the essence of how they felt about Korea. It was unwavering and unconditional. I always knew they thought Korea was a most important place. They treasured its people, its history, everything about it; for the simple reasons that Korea was where I was from and I was their daughter.

As an interracial adoptee, I believe in the absolute appropriateness of interracial adoption for children who would otherwise be denied their birthright to have a family. My adoption experience was positive. I consider myself to have had a typical, normal childhood. I did not consider being Korean, or being adopted, as the most important aspects of my life. From my own personal life experience, however, I also believe that race is an issue. To deny that reality is naive, at best, and dishonest and condescending, at worst.

I am profoundly aware of how different my life might have been. I acknowledge and accept that my early life circumstances were difficult. The reality that I could not stay with the mother who gave birth to me was a sadness that I shared with my parents. They spoke of my life in Korea, and of my birth-mother, with nothing but respect and dignity.

I was in the first grade when I became a U.S. citizen. At six years old, I did not truly understand the importance of that day, but later I became aware of my identity as a Korean-American and what it means to be a part of two countries. I see my "dual citizenship" as an opportunity for my life to be richer and more expansive. It is something to be cherished and treasured, not feared or regretted.

I was 26 years old when I returned to Korea for the first time. It was exciting, but also frightening. The last time I had been in Korea I had carried a Korean passport. Twenty-two years later, I was returning with my husband to visit this place I could barely remember. Would it be familiar? Would I come to remember how to speak the first language I had known, but had since forgotten? I expected it might feel like an echo of an earlier time.

It did not feel familiar, but it did feel welcoming. I was filled with enormous pride by the wonderful spirit and graciousness of Korean people. I loved knowing that this was also my heritage.

I cannot adequately describe how it felt to visit an orphanage for the first time. It was 1978 and Korea was a very different place than it is today. I was not prepared for how it would feel to see those children. As I looked into their faces, I remembered, "I was one of those children," waiting, needing to be loved, deserving a family. I thought of how it must have been for Harry Holt.

It was the first time I had seen Molly Holt, Mr. Holt's daughter, since I was a little girl, but I recognized her immediately. We went through old spiral notebooks of adoption records her father had carried around in the bib of his overalls. As I turned the pages in the twilight of that spring evening, I found my four-year-old face looking back at me soberly from one of the books. At the bottom of the page in Mr. Holt's handwriting was written, "went to America, October, 1956."

I realized the international adoptee's unique experience. The melting together of being Korean and American. American by osmosis and experience. Korean by birth and ethnicity. Shared by both.



This was the first of many visits to Korea. I have returned with my husband, my mother, my son and my daughter. All of us are connected to each other and, through me, to Korea. I am proud of that simple fact.

There are a million moments, big and small, that describe the unique and complicated tapestries of families. It is the shared history of those moments woven together that make each of our experiences distinctive. These experiences include school, music lessons, summer camp, sports activities, family vacations, proms, grandparents, college, marriage, and children.

While my experience cannot be exactly the same as anyone else's, I do believe that many of the feelings of adoptees are similar and shared. We know that we are loved and cherished by our families, that we are truly our parents' sons and daughters, as deeply loved as if we had been born to them. I know how much my parents love me, because I know how much I love my children.

If you are adopted, you are an adoptee forever. It doesn't stop when you leave high school or college, get married, and have your own children. There are moments in your life that adoption is more significant and relevant, but it is always a part of who you are, your personal and unique history that you bring with you throughout your life.

I have completed the full cycle of families. As a daughter, sister, grandchild, wife and mother. Two years ago I completed the full cycle of adoption. Thirty-seven years after I left Korea at age four, I met my Korean brothers. We share biology through our birth mother, but no shared history, since we did not grow up together. I did not see my birth mother again. But I did find her. She died in 1978. I learned that her last words were to my younger Korean brother: "You have an older sister. She went to America." I cannot express what that means to me. To know I was my mother's last thought as she was dying. "Ritual" is a picture of all our lives rejoined all these years later. My family has been extended.

