

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

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

It is the internal secret that I am concerned with here, the secret that is kept from the adopted child. We also find this secret operating in stepparent families when children are not told the identity of a deceased or divorced parent (usually, but not always, the father) who disappeared from their lives when they were too young to remember. We find it in survivor families when children are not told that the mother or father raising them is not really their parent; that the real parent died in the Holocaust.

They paint pictures of babies falling through space, trailing umbilical cords still attached to shadowy female figures. "We were on a descent downwards," is the way one man explained it. "We may have been lucky to be saved by being adopted— but we still experienced falling." This sense of a terrifying free-fall through the universe is a consequence of adoptees' not feeling rooted in their own factual being and history.

In his book *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child*, the psychiatrist Thomas Verny, one of the pioneers in prenatal work, tells us that the unborn child is a feeling, remembering, aware being, and that what happens to it in the nine months between conception and birth molds

and shapes its personality, drives, and ambitions in important ways. By the sixth or seventh month, it is capable of making fairly subtle discriminations in its mother's attitudes and feelings, and, more important, it starts acting on them. He describes the fetus's comfort as it listens to the reassuring rhythm of the mother's heartbeat, which is one of the major constellations of its universe. Its steady thump-thump comes to symbolize tranquility, security, and love. In its presence, the unborn baby usually flourishes.

The child is really asking for the beginning of her personal life narrative, a birthright that everyone takes for granted. The narrative starts anytime after conception, and even before if it tells how Mommy and Daddy met. It grows as we grow, changes as we change. It usually includes how we kicked in the womb, the ease or difficulty of our birth, and what kind of baby we were.

For most children, like my friend's daughter, their narrative is as much a part of them as their shadow; it develops with them over the years and cannot be torn away. Unless, of course, they are adopted. Narratives can be broken by historical or personal events, such as war, divorce, death, or desertion. Or by infertility and adoption.

"The particular human chain we're part of is central to our individual identity," according to Elizabeth Stone, who writes on how family stories shape us. Not to know our full story is to live with some of the disorientation and anxiety of the amnesiac. She refers to the persistent need of many adopted children to know more about where they "really" come from. Something intangible and crucial is missing. To know themselves, they seem to need more of the collective family experience that predates their birth.

Harriet Lerner once told me while we were discussing the harm secrets can do to a child. "When you cut off a child's birth parents, you cut off that child's birth." You also cut off what Daniel Stern calls the "narrative point of origin."

If your personal narrative doesn't grow and develop with you, with concrete facts and information, you run the danger of becoming emotionally frozen. You cannot make the necessary connections between the past and the future that everyone needs to grow into a cohesive self. You become stuck in the life cycle, beached like a whale on the shores of your own deficient narrative.

Separation is associated with the visceral feeling of loss from the time of that first separation from the birth mother.

The rights of the adopted child, along with the rights of all children, have been addressed in the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that the child has a right from birth to a name, to acquire a nationality, and, as far as possible, to know and be cared for by his or her parents. A separated child has the right to maintain contact with both parents.

If we believe, as Amery did, that exile is a loss of biological and psychological identity, then adoptees have been in exile since their separation from the mother. The original birth certificate—that universal passport that connects everyone to his or her origins—is lost to them.

The pre-birth knowledge was “as if locked into a shell - in a protected nucleus capable of evolution at a later, safer time” Reunion (or restitution, as they call it) permeated the protective cloak of the shell, so that the child felt an innate sense of familiarity with the mother’s surviving family members.

As we have seen, American psychologists working in prenatal studies have come to similar conclusions. They speculate that the fetus has stored away cellular knowledge of its mother, which can be retrieved.

The journey is the adoptee’s heroic attempt to bring together the split parts of the self. It is an authentic way of being born again. It is an act of will; a new dimension of experience. It is the quest for the intrinsic nature one was born with before it got twisted out of shape by secrecy and disavowal. It is a way of modifying the past, of living out the script that might have been. It is a way of taking control of one’s own destiny, of seizing power. It is a way of finding oneself.