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Who Are You Also Known As?

By Hollee McGinnis

Like many adopted people I never had a simple answer to the question, “Where did I come from?” For most people raised by their biological parents, this question can be answered by simply gazing at their parent’s face. There in the turn of a nose and the curve of the eye they are reminded of where they came from. bounded by blood, a part of a human continuum passed from mother to daughter, from father to son.



The author, the day she arrived in the United States, walking off the plane at J.F.K. airport. (Photographs courtesy of Hollee McGinnis.)

I, on the other hand, seemingly dropped out of the sky on a Boeing 747, walking, talking and potty trained. I was adopted in May 1975 at the age of 3 ½ with just the clothes on my back: a little red pant suit and vest, and white sweater trimmed in red. I have no memories of that day I arrived in America – but I have been told stories so many times that I feel like I remember: running up and down the escalators of John F. Kennedy airport after being cooped up in an airplane for 28 hours; my parents giving me lollipops because I was too big for a pacifier to quiet me on the ride to my new home in the suburbs of New York City; and pushing the Uncle Ben’s white rice on the floor the first morning and eating the Entenmanns’s coffee cakes instead.

My parents told me that summer of my arrival I would sing and talk in Korean. Of course they never knew what I was saying. They also told me that in those first weeks I would run up to the front door, throw my body up against it and cry and cry and say in Korean, “Jip e ka le!” My sister, born to my parents and age 9 at the time, thought it might be some strange Korean game. So she would run up to the door, throw her body against it and say, “Jip e ka le!” I can imagine my sister doing this over and over – and turning my tears into laughter. Years later my parents learned what my Korean words meant: I want to go home.



The author, front row lower left in the red outfit at the orphanage on Tok Chok Island founded by the Maryknoll priest, Ben Zweber (center).

This illustrates two things: first, that no matter how old a child is when adopted – whether as an infant, a toddler, or young child – they come with a history, a past that is real. Secondly, it illustrates that when we adopt, there is movement. There is a movement from one place to another, from one culture to another, from one family to another, and in these movements there are both losses and gains. The only way a child gains a family through adoption is by losing another family in some way. This paradoxical nature of adoption raises serious questions that need to be resolved: What are adoption gains and losses? And do the gains outweigh the losses?

Growing up, I was not aware of the losses in adoption, just the gains: parents and siblings and friends who loved me. Like many adopted people who have the fortune of being raised in a supportive home, I did not think much about the fact of my adoption. I thought of my adoption as one thinks about breathing – it was simply part of who I was. I was not necessarily conscious of it as a child growing up unless someone pointed it out to me. And I certainly did not feel like there was anything “wrong” because I was adopted. I grew up knowing very clearly who I was: I was Hollee.

My personal awakening to the losses of adoption began in my late adolescence when I became aware that strangers assumed I was not an American because I did not have blond hair and blue eyes or assumed I spoke Korean (or Chinese or Japanese) or complimented me on my English. I, on the other hand, did not think of myself as Korean – although I felt pride that I was – because I was raised by a non-Korean family. I felt like an imposter because people assumed I knew Korean culture based on my race, but I only knew American culture.

Thus, in my first year of college I sought to fulfill the stereotypes and assumptions people had of me based on my race. I studied Mandarin – because my college did not offer Korean at that time – and took classes in Asian art and history. But it angered me that people would make assumptions about who I was based on things I could not change: my gender, my race, my adoption status – and judge me not for the individual I was. And so in my sophomore year I changed my major to American studies because I wanted to understand how I, as an Asian woman with an Irish last name and blond-haired mother, could be an American too.

Ultimately I realized this conflict about my identity arose because I felt I had only two choices: Korean or American. The reality was that I was both. I felt to identify simply as being Asian would be to deny the love and nurture of my adoptive parents; and to identify solely as American, I would be denying my Korean ancestry and

heritage. When I began to embrace both identities rather than trying to “fit in” I realized the gains in my life that came from this duality. I realized, “Well, hey, not everyone gets to be adopted internationally and have two countries and two families.”

Learning about the history of intercountry adoptions, I knew I was not the only person who might feel caught between these two worlds. In fact, I was inspired by the fact that there was such a large community of adult international adoptees – an estimated quarter million in the United States – who could share their experiences, especially with the younger generation of families being formed through intercountry adoption. I felt that as a community we could truly create a space in which we could explore, and come to embrace and celebrate our dual heritages given to us by birth and adoption.

Thus, two years after college at the age of 24 I started a non-profit organization for adult intercountry adoptees in New York City – Also-Known-As. The goal of the organization was and is to share the unique experiences and identity of intercountry adoptees and their families and to celebrate the broader transcultural community. The organization works to empower those who have been adopted internationally by providing mentorship to adopted youth, building cultural bridges through awareness and appreciation of one’s birth culture, and transforming racial stereotypes.

In accepting my identity as an international transracial adoptee, and rejecting the identities imposed upon me, I realized the question, “Who am I?” can only be answered by my declaration “Who I am.”

Who I am is a transcultural, multicultural, interracial, hybrid, bridging worlds, being. I am Hollee McGinnis also-known-as Lee Hwa Yeong. I have an Asian face, an Irish last name, a blond-haired mother.

But who I am is not just about who I know myself to be, but who I want to also be known as in this world. At its best, intercountry adoption demonstrates to me the greatness of our human spirits to love across race, nationality and culture. But I also know that it takes a lot more than just love to make a success; – it requires courage, honesty, and commitment.

This means we must be willing to talk about the hard stuff – the discrimination, inequalities, and prejudices that exist in the world. We must also be willing to change and challenge our societies so that the gift we give our children – adopted or not – besides the love and security of a permanent family is a world that values them for who they are and who they will be – regardless of race, nationality, culture or circumstance.