

Adoptees as mothers

I became a first time mother at age 28...12 years prior to learning of my adoption. The revelation of my adoption occurred when I was 40 years of age. It was delivered to me by my husband, after he had left the marriage and having kept this knowledge a secret from me during the 12 years of our marriage.

Following revelation of my adoption, matters which had previously lain dormant in me, took on a new meaning and made sense.

I have always loved babies and small children and had an almost insatiable urge to become a mother. When my then husband and I made the decision to begin a family, I went off the contraceptive pill and was pregnant within a month.

On confirmation of my pregnancy, I sought an obstetrician who was committed to natural birth. I found such a doctor who was warm, open and practiced delivery by the LeBoyer method. Dr Frederik LeBoyer, a French obstetrician, pioneered this delivery method. He believed babies should enter the world gently, without any intervention if possible, with lighting and noise in the delivery room at a minimum. Following birth, the baby is placed on the mother's belly still connected to the mother by the umbilical cord. After mother and baby have had some time to become acquainted, the cord is cut and the baby is given to the father to bath in water while the mother looks on. The baby is then weighed and returned to the mother and remains rooming in with the mother at all times.

In 1979, the time of my first pregnancy, very few births were conducted in this manner. For me, I had an overwhelming compulsion which I could not explain, that following my baby's birth, he/she should not leave my side. So it ended up that I was the only woman on the ward at that time who had her baby rooming in with her. I can still recall sitting on my hospital bed several hours after his birth, with lights dimmed, looking at the face of my newborn son. I marvelled at the myopic pools of his eyes which stared at me with a deep knowing, while I fell head over heels in love with him.

Twelve years later after learning of my adoption, the context in which I had been and felt so insistent that my son not leave my side, suddenly made sense. I believe my spirit intuitively knew I had been removed from my birth mother. I believe as a way of healing, although consciously unaware of my adoption when my first and second sons were born, my spirit encouraged me to keep them with me.

I have had a life long struggle with attachment and separation issues. In previous relationships, I attached very quickly which can cause suffocation and invasion for the other party. Separation issues plagued my childhood, particularly involving commencing school, separating from my adoptive mother and at times when staying overnight with family and friends, causing me anxiety at being away from my adoptive parents. I was an only child in my family and grew up a very sensitive child, unaware of how to deal with the rough and tumble teasing I experienced amongst siblings in other families.

Such was my anxiety at even a small separation from my adoptive mother, that I would be consumed with anxiety. I still recall at around age 5, being placed in a small fishing

rowboat with my aunt and uncle. My mother remained in sight, on the beach while we left the shore for a short time. I was so consumed with anxiety that I remember biting my thumb nail until it bled.

In my marriage, my former husband a professional musician, travelled extensively on tour and was often away for weeks at a time. The days leading to his departure were for me, fraught with anxiety far beyond that of knowing I would miss him during his absence. After his departure, I once again settled into a routine of work, caring for children and home. It seemed that it was the imminent departure that contributed to my anxiety. Once that had occurred, I was able to self correct and immerse myself in daily routines.

My first born son had digestive problems which meant as a feeding duo, we were a disaster. I had plenty of milk and he loved to feed, doing wild projectile throw ups and screaming continuously after feeds. There seemed no successful way I could soothe him and felt a total failure as a mother. My adoptive mother had died many years prior to his birth, I had no sisters, my friends with babies appeared competent, capable mothers in comparison to my view of myself and my mother in law was singularly unsupportive of me. I soldiered on, determined to breast feed as long as I could, continuing for 10 months. At age 3 months we found our way to a paediatrician, a suggestion by a kindly neighbour who was a nurse, who had heard my baby continually crying and seen me desperately attempting to settle him. The paediatrician diagnosed my son as having an immature digestive system. The simple solution was to sit him upright in a special plastic seat to aid his digestion after feeding. He also slept in this position for a few weeks. The result was an almost instantly settled baby and a calmer mother.

When my elder son was a few weeks old, I had a nightmare that I had had placed him in a full sized water filled bath where he became a vacuum cleaner. I woke in horror at my dream actions, rushing into his room to check on him, flooding with relief that he slept peacefully. Following this dream, I developed the habit of poking a small mirror under his nose while he slept, to ensure his continued breathing. This habit also persisted following the birth of my second son.

The impact of my own ingrained anxiety and over protectiveness of my sons, seems to have impacted my elder son more than my younger. For that, I feel a heavy responsibility. However, the wheel of life has also contributed to my elder son's anxiety with the departure of his father from the marriage when my sons were aged 10 and 5 years. Also they have been impacted some years later by the death of my then partner from suicide, followed by my experience of breast cancer - life events which have imprinted my sons.

When I became pregnant with my second son, life had settled and I felt more confident and capable as a mother of a healthy, active 4 year old. Two months into my pregnancy, my 8 year old nephew was killed crossing the road on his way home from school. The son of my husband's brother, he was part of a large extended family who were devastated by the loss of a vibrant young child. Once again, my anxiety went out of control, with me developing irrational fears that my elder son would be injured or something catastrophic happen to him.

Over the years while participating in my own psychotherapy, I have faced my feelings of separation and anxiety - the latter I was unconscious of as anxiety, raged through my life like a torrential river. Before being able to identify it as anxiety, I would have referred to it as stress. So many of my behaviours and reactions to life, people and events, now fitted into a context I grew to understand. I learned to identify my anxious feelings and associated behaviours when triggered by events and manage any resulting anxiety.

A great test of my separation and anxiety issues arose in 2001. I won an around the world trip and travelled overseas for 10 weeks. My sons, then aged 22 and 17 years, elected to remain at home and not accompany me. It was a massive leap of faith, trust and belief in the process of life to spread my wings and fly and leave them behind. I just had to believe that they would be safe and well during my absence, which of course they were. It was a very freeing experience for us all. I had a wonderful trip and they learnt autonomy and mastery of taking care of themselves in every way and attending to household necessities.

In a paper that Sarah Armstrong wrote in 2001, relating to mothers as adoptees, she referred to feelings of being "desolate". I had a strong resonance to those words. Many, many times in the early years following revelation of my adoption, feelings of desolation and despair arose and remained with me. The feelings had a quality of hopelessness, silence and aloneness contained in them. My therapist and I revisited these feelings over time. As uncomfortable and distressing as they were to sit with and examine, I am now so pleased I did so...letting them run their course and be healed without controlling me. I now know and believe that these were cellular memories from birth, my removal from my birth mother and the following 6 weeks of being left in the nursery at Crown Street Women's hospital, awaiting adoption.

The distress of knowing a newborn was left in those circumstances without bonding to any human being, only to be mechanically handled for changing and feeding, has now been healed within me. Facing my fear and discomfit of those feelings has ended their grip on me. The healing process has strengthened my inner processes of nurturing and nourishing that inner baby/child, loving her and reassuring her and my adult self, that I will never again, allow us to be abandoned.

Margaret Watson

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