

Ghosts in the Adopted Family

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To help all members of the adoption triad, therapists must be able to see the ghosts that accompany them. These ghosts spring from the depths of the unresolved grief, loss, and trauma that everyone has experienced. They represent the lost babies, the parents who lost them, and the parents who found them. Too dangerous to be allowed into consciousness, they are consigned to a spectral place I call the *Ghost Kingdom*. Search and reunion is an attempt by adoptees to reconnect with the ghost mother and father, and live the alternate life.

The novelist Vargas Llosa (1998) once defined erotic love as a collusion of ghosts, a complicity of fantasies. Adoption can be defined in the same way. The story of adoption is a ghost story, full of fantasy, mystery, and missing persons, who, for the most part, are “as if” dead, unlike respectable ghosts, who are unambiguously dead. It is also a story full of erotic love, including genetic sexual attraction, as well as trauma, unresolved grief, dissociation, and regression, much of which everyone in the adoption triad experiences.

The intent of this article is to make adoption ghosts visible, for professionals cannot really see the adoptees, adoptive parents, and birth parents who enter their offices, unless they can see the ghosts who accompany them.

Selma Fraiberg (1975) was aware of the ghosts that haunt every family in her classic article “Ghosts in the Nursery.” However, she did not address the ghosts in the adoptive family nursery, who spring from the subterranean depths of grief and loss that the parents, as well as the adopted child and birth mother, have experienced. They trail everyone through life if no one intercepts them. Fraiberg’s ghosts are the incarnation of repressed emotions, but the adoption ghosts encountered here represent lost babies, the parents who lost them, and the parents who found them.

WHO ARE THESE GHOSTS?

The Adoptee’s Ghosts

The adoptee is accompanied by the ghost mother, eternally young. He is also accompanied by the ghost of the original baby he was before being adopted—the child he might have been had he stayed with his birth mother. The ghost of the golden child his adoptive parents might have had, or the child who died is with him, too. This ghost, his sibling rival, will haunt him through life: He

may try to compete with it, or give up without trying. The ghost of the birth father is particularly diaphanous until the adult adoptee feels the need to search for him, which is usually after he has found the birth mother.

The Birth Mother's Ghosts

The birth mother carries the ghost of the baby she relinquished, who, like her trauma, remains frozen in time. The ghost baby never grows into the terrible twos or scruffy adolescence, but remains cuddly in its crib: It can be a shock years later when she finds that her ghost baby has morphed into an unfamiliar adult. The ghost of the birth father never leaves her, as he did in life: There is unfinished business between them. The ghost of the mother she might have been, had she raised her child, is with her, too. She is painfully aware that no one considers her a mother, even though she has given birth to a child. The ghosts of the adoptive parents hover about. She feels ambivalent towards them: both grateful and resentful.

The Adoptive Parents' Ghosts

The adoptive parents are accompanied by the ghost of the perfect baby they were not able to conceive, who was stillborn, or who died young. That child would have looked like them, shared their talents, and fulfilled their aspirations. They may try to ignore the ghost of the birth mother of the child they are raising, but she has a way of materializing, especially when the child screams: "You are not my real mother!" One adoptive mother called her "the ghost in the closet."

THE GHOST KINGDOM

The ghosts who trail everyone in the adoption triad make up a shadow cast of characters. Think of Hamlet's father's ghost appearing at the stroke of midnight with his chilling admonition: "Remember me!" Think of Pirandello's "Six Characters in Search of an Author," seeking someone to write their story. No one has written the adoption ghosts into the narratives of the extended adoptive family, which includes the birth mother. These ghosts are too dangerous to be allowed into consciousness. Instead they are dissociated, consigned to a spectral place I call the *Ghost Kingdom* (Lifton, 1994). It is not located on a map, but in the geography of the mind.

The adoptees' Ghost Kingdom can be seen as the nursery where the ghost baby remains behind with the ghost mother, even as the adopted child grows up with the adoptive parents in the real world. Doubling has taken place—the splitting of the self. For in order to survive in the family in which they mysteriously find themselves, adoptees dissociate—split off the self that might have been. During a session, a teenage adoptee said: "I feel there are two mes. The me that was born and didn't live. And the me that wasn't born—but lived my adoptive life." Sandra McPherson (1993) expresses this split in a poem when she says to her ghost baby: "I was not born. Only you were."

The adoptee's Ghost Kingdom can also be seen as an alternate reality. It is the Land of What Might Have Been. Adoptees visit it in their daydreams and spin out myriad fantasies—both positive and negative—about the life they might have had. One adoptee, a latch-key kid, told me she imagined finding her birth mother sitting in the living room each day after school. Her mother had a private plane waiting to take her home, which would sometimes be a mansion, sometimes a

shack, but was always filled with the same eleven children, to whom the adoptee had given fanciful names. This ghost mother would fluctuate between being kind and abusive to these siblings, reflecting the good mother/bad mother images that the adoptee held.

The birth mother's Ghost Kingdom is also her nursery, where she keeps the secret baby, who never grows up, and the baby's father, who never ages. She will live as if she never had this child, and should she have another, she will pass it off as her first. She may avoid visiting her friends' babies because it is too painful, knowing that her baby stirs restlessly in the Ghost Kingdom, waiting to be picked up. She may visit the Ghost Kingdom on her baby's birthday, or when she has another child. Still, there are some birth mothers who do not dissociate, carrying the baby with them over the years. They look for their child in the faces of children they pass in the street or see on a bus. One put an age-appropriate present for her daughter in a closet each year, from the rattle on up, until the day they were reunited. The daughter was thrilled to know she had not been forgotten, and to see that the ghost baby had the same pattern tea set as she had when she was growing up.

The adoptive parents' Ghost Kingdom is the nursery where they keep that fantasy baby who never was. They may visit it furtively while they wait for the adoption to go through, and over the years when they realize that the adoptee, no matter how beloved, neither looks nor behaves like the child they might have had. Their phantom child, who grows up with the adoptee, never throws tantrums, drops out of school, experiments with drugs, or totals the family car.

THE GHOST MOTHER

All the ghosts in the Ghost Kingdom are powerful and can dispense comfort or wreak havoc. But the most primal, and therefore most influential, is the ghost mother. According to Winnicott (1965), there is no such thing as a baby, only the mother-baby dyad. I believe there is no such thing as an adopted baby: only the ghost mother-baby-adoptive mother triad.

The adopted baby experiences a profound trauma when it loses the original mother whom nature had programmed it to be with; the mother who links the baby with its forebears. The psychiatrist Florence Clothier (1943) believed that this trauma is at the "core of what is peculiar to the psychology of the adopted child." According to Harry Guntrip (1969), a baby who is filled with anxiety retreats within: it is left undeveloped, in a state of being unborn. Many adoptees report feeling unborn.

Still, the baby feels not only longing, but rage at the abandoning mother. This rage must be split off, along with the anxiety, as a way of holding onto a good mother who does not desert—the all-loving ghost mother. She is the one who sustains the adoptee when anything goes wrong. She is the comfort zone, the protector. She stands beside the child when he shouts at the adoptive mother: "You are not my real mother!"

Girls look for the ghost mother in their teachers or older women, and may even seek her in the arms of men or women who seem to love them, or feel abandonment-proof. Boys look for her in nurturing men and women, and later in a girlfriend, wife, or partner, whom they may abandon when she or he does not live up to the all-loving ghost mother.

Some adoptive parents believe they can avoid the birth mother by adopting abroad. They do not understand that ghosts also trail children involved in international adoption. The unidentified birth mother may not travel by plane with her child, but her ghost does, and is with the child when he or she arrives.

Even in what we call “semi-open” in domestic adoption arrangements today, the ghost mother is not banished. Although the adoptive parents may have met the birth mother, the child has not. By prearranged agreement, the adoptive parents send the child’s pictures to the birth mother for the first two years through the office of the lawyer or the agency. Direct contact with the birth mother and/or father is usually cut off after the baby is in the adoptive home. The birth mother will not be invited to visit the child, come to his birthday party, or have Thanksgiving dinner with the rest of the family. Children are not fools; they are aware of this. An eight-year-old boy cannily asked if his birth mother could stay in the guest room or live with them, even though he knew the answer. He worried, like generations before him, that his birth mother had nothing to eat because he had been told she was too poor to keep him. These children in semi-open adoptions are in the same quandary as those who grew up in the closed adoption system. They are followed by the same ghosts, and retreat in secret with them to the Ghost Kingdom.

SEARCH AND REUNION

Fraiberg’s (1975) nursery ghosts depart when the child’s parents can get in touch with the emotions of their past suffering and resolve not to reenact them with their child. But how do adoptees get their ghosts to depart? How do they exorcise them when they are so deeply internalized?

One way is for adoptees to literally cross over into the Ghost Kingdom and lure their ghosts out into the bright light of the real world, where they become flesh-and-blood people. Adoptees often do this after some major event in their lives—marriage, the birth of a child, losing a job, the death of an adoptive parent—when their dissociation lifts, and they have access to their psychological need to reconnect with the past and know where they came from. When this happens, adoptees embark on what is known as The Search.

Professionals should understand how resistant most adoptees are to actually crossing over into the Ghost Kingdom. Some may take years because of the complex organization of the adopted self, with its early trauma and dissociation. One should never press adoptees to search; they may not be ready. They are only too aware of the dangers: They could be rejected again by the woman who abandoned them; they could lose their adoptive parents, who might feel betrayed. They could lose their adopted self: Imperfect as it might be, it is the only functional self they have. And there is the peril that the search could uncover their psychic split, beneath which lies the threat of fragmentation and annihilation, which they have spent a lifetime trying to ward off. Still, an increasing number of adoptees, after much ambivalence and delay, take the risk and cross over.

We call this crossing-over Reunion, but it could also be called Return from Exile. Adoptees often feel exiled from the life they might have had, and seek return to the parents who are their blood kin. But no matter how prepared they think they are, they discover that reunion is an extreme experience, connecting them not only to the joy of knowing their birth family, but to the trauma of the separation that took place, with its feelings of unresolved grief and abandonment.

Catherine McKinley (2002) writes of her Reunion experience in *A Book of Sarahs*:

I called all my ghosts to the table. They had sat with me and feasted. The party went on for days. Until we all took a good look at each other, wiped our mouths, and got up from the table, kicking open an exit through the door marked Grief. I had disrupted who I was. No one could have prepared me for the confusion of that, or the immense reservoir of feeling I’d collected over those years.

An adopted man described his Reunion with wry humor: “You think you’re going to do a weekend chore of repairing a sidewalk crack. And then you discover the Grand Canyon. And you stand there with your little shovel. It is awesome.”

REGRESSION

One thing that makes Reunion so awesome is that during the early period, everyone regresses, as if they have stepped into a time machine that catapults them back to their past selves. The adult adoptee regresses to the infant fresh from the womb; the birth mother regresses to the young mother who relinquished her baby. And so, in the early stages of Reunion there are not two people, but four: the adult adoptee and the original baby, and the mature birth mother and her younger self.

At first, adoptees may confuse the mother they meet with the idealized ghost mother. This is known as the Honeymoon Period, when mother and child become obsessed with each other, comparing physical resemblances and talents. Parting after each visit feels as if they are losing each other again. During this period, the birth mother can do no wrong. “I give you back all your privileges,” one man told his mother at their initial meeting. But when his dissociated rage kicked in a year later, everything the birth mother did was wrong. He took away her privileges—prohibiting her to send presents and controlling how often she could call or write him. He became what I call the “mad/sad baby” (Lifton, 2007), prone to temper tantrums that the adult self cannot control. All those split-off emotions come rushing at him, like birds in a Hitchcock film.

The success or failure of a Reunion will ultimately depend on how the adoptee has put together his post-surrendered self, how the birth mother has put together her post-surrendering self, and whether or not they have the resilience to put together new selves that incorporate their new relationship. During the early stages of Reunion, no matter how successful, adoptees often feel lost between their two selves: the self that grew up adopted and the self that might have been. And the birth mother can feel overwhelmed with grief, as if she is “eating fire” (McBride, 1996).

With all the emotional confusion they are undergoing, mother and child may have trouble having empathy for each other. The adoptee feels that the birth mother cannot understand what it felt like to have been abandoned. The birth mother feels that the adoptee cannot understand what she suffered in giving up her baby. They often withdraw from each other for a while. “I came, I saw, I fled,” one adoptee declared, after struggling for a few years to fit into his birth mother’s family and be one of the kids. It was as if his adult self had been on hold all that time, while the ghost baby was experimenting with the alternate life he might have had. Yet, although this adoptee could cut off for over a year, his ghost baby could not resist going back for another try.

Adoptive parents usually feel left out when the adoptee is in Reunion. They regress for a time back to the infertile couple they once were, and feel childless again. “What are we, baby sitters?” they might ask the adoptee. Or “Weren’t we good enough for you?” They do not understand that even if they are not included in the early stages of the Reunion, and have to share holidays and grandchildren, they are still the parents, just not the exclusive ones. They will learn that they cannot lose their child. Often the relationship grows stronger because there are no secrets cutting off communication.

It takes years, however, for everyone to adjust to what is happening, for Reunion is an ongoing dialogue between the past and the present. A search for the birth mother activates the ghost of the birth father, then the grandparents, siblings, and other relatives. It is a lifelong drama.

THE THERAPIST AS GHOST BUSTER

Anyone who works with adopted children and adolescents knows how hard it is to get them to talk. Everyone has seen the shrug and heard the line: "Adoption means nothing to me." This statement signals the splitting off that has taken place from an early age, for how could anyone who has not shut down his feelings say that it means nothing to be separated from the mother who gave birth to you? The professional who accepts her patient's denial joins the conspiracy of silence that exists within what I have called elsewhere "the adoption game" (Lifton, 1988), in which everyone plays at not playing a game. Yet, therapists who see the ghosts find themselves in a bind. They are the child's advocate, but they often have knowledge given to them by the adoptive parents that is to be kept secret from the child. They end up feeling that they are colluding with the parents against the child. If they suggest to the parents that their child seems to be expressing a need to know more about his background, that it might help to get updated information about the birth mother, the parents may feel threatened enough to pull the child out of therapy.

Therapists can also experience another bind. Even if they are aware of their patient's ghosts, they may not know how to gain admission into the Ghost Kingdom, where the fantasies are to be found. It helps if the therapist brings up the subject of adoption, without waiting endlessly for the child to do so, and lets it drop that she understands the child's need to know who his birth parents are. These code words can open the gates. Once permitted inside, she can form a therapeutic relationship with the child, and help him with his confusion about his adoption issues, which may surface as aggression.

The therapist should be aware that the adopted child might transfer to him or her as a birth parent. And that in the countertransference, the therapist might become inflated and imagine that he or she is more understanding than the adoptive parents. The downside is that the child might eventually project his anger at being abandoned onto the therapist, or that the adoptive parents might get jealous of their child's closeness to the therapist and end the treatment.

Adoptive parents usually bring the young adoptee into therapy as if his problem has no connection to them or adoption. They speak of being taken by surprise when their once-perfect child became depressed, cut school, dealt in drugs, or acted out in other antisocial ways. The professional's task is to include them in the therapy—to meet them separately and together with the adoptee. It is an educational process, helping the parents see their own ghosts, so that they can get insight into what the child is experiencing. The mother learns not to respond angrily to the child's outburst: "You are not my *real* mother!" with "I *am* your *real* mother!" but rather to see it as a chance to ask what the child imagines his "real" mother might be like. It enables her to acknowledge that her child has two mothers, and to start a discussion that will allow her a glimpse inside the well-fortified Ghost Kingdom. Adoptive parents with troubled children often say they wish someone had told them what their children would be feeling as they grew up. They were given no counseling, just told to live as if they were a biologically related family.

The Adult Adoptee

Adult adoptees come into therapy on their own, but often with no clue that their problems and behaviors are related to being adopted. They may say that they cannot shake their depression, form lasting relationships, or keep a job. They present as people at a dead end, with something dead inside them. It comes as a surprise when the therapist brings up questions their former therapists

never asked: What age did they learn they were adopted? What were they told? What fantasies did they have about why they were given up? Adoptees often have a hard time remembering when and what they were told since so many of their feelings were split off. But once they get in touch with the vulnerable child they were—so alone and with no one to talk to about what they were experiencing—their memory returns. They begin to understand the strategies they used as a child to survive: strategies that have not worked for their adult self.

One man, trying to recall his childhood, pulled a picture of himself at the age of five out of his wallet, propped it up on the table between us, and began to sob uncontrollably. The loneliness of that young child overtook him and opened up a floodgate of feelings. He began a search for his birth mother to learn the truth about where that child came from. Unfortunately, she would not answer his letters or take his phone calls. She was one of the rare exceptions, for in my experience most birth mothers are relieved to know what happened to their child, even if they have kept him a secret until then.

When a birth mother refuses contact, I try to help adoptees understand that the mother is not rejecting them, but the trauma of the past. It is not easy for birth mothers, those who have never had other children and those who have, to overcome their shame and reveal their dark secret to family and friends. They also fear having to confront their unfinished business with the birth father, who abandoned them along with the baby.

Genetic Sexual Attraction

Birth mothers who seek professional help describe their reunions much as adoptees describe theirs—like being on a roller coaster of emotions, with the happiness of being together dipping precipitously into sadness at the time they have lost. They are also surprised by their regression: that their awakened maternal feelings are merging with the erotic attraction they felt toward the birth father, until the two seem inseparable. Some are in danger of falling into an incestuous relationship with the regressed adoptee, who feels the yearnings of the infant for its mother (Lifton, 1994). Therapists can help mother and adult/child understand that what they are experiencing—genetic sexual attraction—is not uncommon in reunion. They should be cautioned that intimate physical contact, which is appropriate for a mother and her infant, can be dangerous when the baby has an adult body.

Female adoptees, in a state of regression, can feel an attraction to the birth father, who himself regresses back to the young lover he once was, envisioning this daughter he has never known as a younger version of her mother. When everyone, including siblings, who can also be drawn to each other, understand what is happening, and talk about the dangers of incest, they can usually, not always, avoid acting it out (Lifton, 1994). Should they seek help for having crossed the taboo line, the therapist should understand that they will be resistant to ending what they describe as the deepest, most meaningful relationship they have ever had.

A GHOSTLY CONUNDRUM

The question has been asked: After Reunion, are the former ghosts still ghosts? The answer is both yes and no. No, they are no longer ghosts, but, yes, because the separation has been so long, they retain a ghostly aura. It takes time for everyone to become real to each other, for at first the whole

experience of meeting feels unreal. "I can't believe this is happening," adoptees and birth mothers will say. They both go in and out of ghost status, as the relationship becomes more or less intimate over time.

Adoptees who have formed a self around the fantasy of the idealized ghost mother may or may not be able to adjust to the reality of the mortal woman they have found. Even if the mother is welcoming, adoptees may feel like a ghost with the rest of her family, with whom they have no shared experiences. And they often find that their desired Reunion with the birth father is blocked by his wife, who is threatened by a love child accompanied by the ghost of her husband's former lover. The adoptee may have to withdraw back into the Ghost Kingdom as a way of holding on to fantasy parents.

As for the birth mother, if she cannot accommodate to the person the baby has become, so different from the child she imagined, she may prefer to hold on to the ghost baby. So, too, the adoptive parents might choose not to hear about or meet the birth mother or father, as a way of relegating them back to the Ghost Kingdom, and living as if the Reunion never happened.

CONCLUSION

It is important for therapists to see the ghosts that accompany everyone in the adoption triad, and to understand the grief, loss, and trauma that they have all experienced.

The goal of therapy is to help the adoptive parents keep the communication lines open with their child so that he does not have to retreat into a Ghost Kingdom. To do this, the therapist must enable the parents to see their own ghosts and loss, and not feel threatened by their child's need to know about his birth mother, and even to meet her eventually. The therapist should encourage the parents to get updated information on the birth parents, through the Internet or a private searcher, so that they can give it to the child at the appropriate time. Parents with children adopted from abroad should be encouraged to return to the country of origin, with or without the child, to learn what they can about the birth family, even when it might seem impossible, as it does now in China.

Those adoptees already in Reunion need help in integrating their two selves—the one who grew up adopted and the alternate one who might have been. Adoptees are vulnerable during this period, for they often feel they have no self at all, as if one has obliterated the other. They also face the danger of identifying with the psychological and physical vulnerabilities of the birth mother because of the value they have given to the blood tie. If the mother now has a successful career or marriage, they often need help in understanding that this is not the younger woman who was unable to raise a child.

Birth mothers can be overcome with grief and guilt after Reunion, wondering how they could have given up their baby, as if they do not remember their circumstances at that time. They need help to forgive themselves, and also to forgive their parents, who usually were the ones who pressured them into the relinquishment. Eventually, both birth mothers and adoptees need to realize that they can revisit the past, but they cannot change it.

Therapists need to understand that the ghosts accompanying their patients cannot thrive on openness. As the closed adoption system becomes more open (Melina & Roszia, 1993)—with open arrangements and open records—the Ghost Kingdoms, those dark, isolated places with no windows to the outside world, will gradually be dismantled and the ghosts will depart (Lifton, 1994).

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