



## WHAT'S MY STORY?

## THE QUESTION THAT WON'T GO AWAY

FOR 15 YEARS, **DR JOANNA NORTH** HAS RUN AN ADOPTION SUPPORT AGENCY, HELPING CHILDREN PLACED IN THE CARE SYSTEM AND THEIR FAMILIES, WHILE SUPPORTING ADULTS LOOKING FOR THEIR BIRTH PARENTS. SHE OUTLINES HER WORK

**A**doption has changed so much over the past 60 years. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was common for young, unmarried or underage women who became pregnant to feel under pressure to hand their babies over, often transactions completed quietly and speedily in order to manage the social shame of teenage pregnancy or illegitimate children. In the 21st century these social demands are often of less consequence and it's hard to imagine the emotional pain inflicted through enforced separation, often from the day of birth.

Today children are placed in care due to extreme conditions that surround their lives and put them at risk. Often these conditions are exacerbated by poverty and lack of support. This is controversial in our field – some will argue that support should be put in place to help failing families, others that adoption is the best option.

There is no doubt that adoption offers new opportunities to children who may otherwise live confusing and deprived lives where they cannot develop in a safe environment. However, there is a lifelong consequence to removing children from their birth families. There are daily challenges and barriers that arise when people work through the complex issues that emerge for children as they are transplanted into their new family.

There are also major implications for those adopted people who choose to trace their birth family later in their lives. The impact of this massive separation runs across the lifespan and adopted people can be freed from any distress about this if there are people there to support them.

### LIFE STORIES

In contrast to best advice in the last millennium, children adopted in this era are told all about their birth parents from an early age. This practice is based on a deeper understanding of the psychological and emotional impact of 'not knowing' as it helps the child to start to integrate this idea into their brain from early on, rather than experience it as suddenly alien. Indeed, it could be said to be a human right in keeping with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child that we all have the freedom to know about our birth parents and their lives – if we wish to<sup>1</sup>.

As psychotherapists, we understand the value of family narrative work combined with life story work when helping families



### DR JOANNA NORTH

is a UKCP-registered integrative psychotherapist and current Chair of Ethics for UKCP's College for Children and Young People. She runs an Ofsted 'outstanding' adoption support agency and works as an expert witness for the UK's Family Court. As well as being the author of several books, as former chair of the BPS' Psychotherapy Section, North won the 2017 BPS' award for Distinguished Contribution to Psychology in Practice.



**What do you think?**

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and individuals integrate their story for increased wellbeing. It's all about getting to grips with the lived experience of your very own story and the way you interpret that and represent it in your life. A comfortable resolution in our minds rests with a sense of acceptance of our memory of our life and how we match it to the felt sense of ourselves in the here and now. We all need our story to make sense.

So imagine if a piece of your jigsaw is missing, or even kept from you. Where you can't trace yourself to your genetic inheritance, the memories in your body mind, your racial or ethnic origin or why you cannot see anyone in your family who looks like you. These are the complex constellation of realities that I address.

I have learned that adopted children are constantly listening to a voice that calls them to who they feel they are in the fabric of their being as well as who they are in their conscious lives with their adoptive parents and the immediate context of their lives. We need to help them to integrate those voices and help the adoptive parents feel proud of their part in helping their child be raised in their home with all the love and advantages that they can offer, while combining this with building a base for them around their own unique genetic code and inherited characteristics.

**TENSION AND UNKNOWNNS**

In 2018, I joined forces with Dave Oates and Ryan Shaw's international tracing agency, in response to the many requests they'd received from people to find their birth parents. They couldn't fulfil these requests unless they had Ofsted registration, which my agency has. We seek to help adults with an unmet quest in their lives to find a missing piece of their story and have worked with hundreds of people who wish to find their genetic tribe and complete the picture of their life story.

**'It's all about getting to grips with the lived experience of your very own story'**

Since 2005, birth relatives have been able to ask an adoption support agency to make contact with an adopted person on their behalf, under the 2002 Adoption and Children Act. This was a massive leap forward for adoption law, but also created complications. Aside from the technicalities of tracing, we have to provide counselling for everyone who wishes to trace a subject or indeed for the subject themselves. The journey for our clients is fraught with tension and unknowns and may be anxiety-provoking for even the sturdiest and most robust individual. Nobody could be untouched by this process.

That includes us as practitioners and we have to take good care of ourselves in this psychological and emotional process because we just never know what the outcome is going to be. Will we find a birth mother who is elderly and was full of shame at having a baby adopted at the age of 16? Will we find a birth father only to realise that he is deceased and that our client has to grieve for the parent he/she never had? Will we find someone who did not know they were adopted? Or will we find someone who tells us to leave them alone? If we do, we never blame people for this decision and it is not our job to change their minds. We have to help them to close the matter down successfully so that they are not distressed.

**ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT**

Our agency has these scenarios and more to deal with every day. It is stressful, disturbing and sometimes incredibly joyful. Our systems and procedures are set up to cope with all of these outcomes, but most of all, people require sensitive human responses every step of the way and they need counselling to help with the unfolding story that affects the whole of the rest of their lives. En route we share the client's emotional highs and lows, defences, anxieties and sometimes downright disappointment. One thing I have learned to do is teach people that their lives will eventually return to a new form of normal. They will integrate the reality of their birth parents within themselves and this experience takes on many mantles.

The idealisation of the person you never saw seems a natural defence against loss or the strain of trying to



**References**

- (1) <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

imagine the unimaginable. Sometimes birth families, I warn people, can simply be ever so ordinary and they can also be disappointing. So some of our stories involve people who meet up with all the excitement in the world and then, after a while, leave the birth family behind again, finding that their own experience of life is so very different that they simply cannot match this with reality. That's hard! And we have to be there for that possibility. Like life, there are no real fairytale endings.

Sometimes we get a very brief window in which to support clients before they are on their way. My favoured models for this type of work are those that provide for a brief therapy ranging from one session to up to six. Steve Haye's Acceptance and Commitment Model (ACT), including features such as grounding, facing mental and emotional experiences as ultimately being our teacher and healer, combined with mindfulness, really fits.

**INFLUENCING ADOPTION POLICY**

We also work actively with the Consortium of Adoption Support Agencies (CASA) to give feedback to the Department for

Education policymakers for adoption, as well as Ofsted and the General Records Office – all of whom are involved with the journey of our work. Currently, adoptive families receive a yearly allowance from the Adoption Support Fund but adopted adults who want to trace their birth families receive no funding at all, despite the fact that their life circumstances were imposed by the state. It is expensive work to support people through this process and we will continue to try to influence the government to fund this search for people.

We continue to research our practice as we move forward in this field of work – undertaking qualitative surveys into the responses that service users make about the process of a search. We particularly want to know about the most stressful areas of the adoption search journey, the stresses caused to the subjects of the searches and how we can better buffer their experience and reduce anxiety. But we will also evaluate quantitative data such as traffic flow through the service, measure outcomes based on subjects who will respond when adopted people reach out and the quantity of those not responding. ●



**Case study**

**Belle's story**

**Belle\*, aged 50, came to us to find her birth mother. She had never been told about her birth parents and had never liked to raise the subject in case it upset her adoptive parents.**

Even now they did not approve of her search and she asked us not to tell anyone. Once we found her records with the appropriate adoption agency we found her mother had given birth to her when she was 16 and the baby was taken from her within a day of the birth.

We traced her mother Jean, now aged 66, who broke down at the thought of being reunited with her daughter. She said not a day had passed when she had not thought of Belle and she could not believe she

would ever see her again. They were reunited over a cup of tea at a hotel in Brighton and talk every week on the phone. Belle never felt able to tell her adoptive parents about the joy she felt over this. She loved them both dearly but she said they would have felt betrayed if they had known about the contact with Jean.

Our work with Belle involved using a solution-focused brief therapy model combined with a brief ACT. We encouraged Belle to think about her adult right to make autonomous decisions, including keeping private information about her life as private, if that was what she wished. This helped her put boundaries around her relationships so that she could enjoy a connected and respectful experience to both her birth mother and her adoptive parents.

**Case study**

**Brian's story**

**When we found Brian\* for his birth father he was aged 40, a successful engineer and father of two. Brian told us very kindly that we must have made a mistake as he had not been adopted.**

His birth father Gordon was 62 and had been searching for his son for years having known he was adopted at birth. We were very shocked and thought we had made a terrible mistake. We told Gordon we had found the wrong person and had to search again. But Brian phoned about a week later and said he had got in touch with an uncle in his adoptive family who told him the truth about his life and he had in fact been adopted. He had not known for his whole life. We were relieved that we had

not just made a bad error and gave Brian a lot of time as he came to terms with the new information that completely altered his whole sense of who he thought he was. He was very responsive to our support and was, after a few weeks, delighted to meet Gordon. They have remained good friends.

As we had done with Belle, we used a solution-focused brief therapy model combined with brief ACT. We spent several supportive counselling sessions helping Brian reflect on memories from his life story that in effect had to be reconsidered in light of this new information he had received. He realised that there had been many times when he might have guessed that he was adopted. This took several weeks. Once he had completed this supportive experience he was able to make clear-minded plans about his life now and how he wanted to move forward to meet new relatives.

\*Composite case studies