

In Appreciation Of "The Primal Wound"
How this understanding can help adoptees and their parents

by Marcy Axness, Ph.D.

...enrolled in fate like all the others...
-- Rilke

☞ ***Pain With a Name Is Easier To Bear***

A few years ago my husband was suffering from mysterious pain in his heels. The pain, and its intrusion on his lifestyle, was depressing for him, and even more depressing was the sense that this seemed to be one of those things that might never get explained but would, hopefully, just go away on its own. It didn't, and he continued chasing down relief. One day he came home from the podiatrist happy and hopeful. He had seen his problem on the X-rays, he had seen in black and white exactly what was causing his pain. Real, tangible. There was a name for what was hurting him.

There are no X-rays for hearts, for souls. There are only courageous people willing to step forward and speak of certain difficult truths. I'll never forget the evening when I first read Nancy Verrier's preliminary paper on her theory of "the primal wound," in which she details how abandonment and loss is indelibly imprinted upon the unconscious minds and the biochemistry of those who have been separated from their biological mothers at birth. Verrier invokes established research to propose that bonding doesn't begin after birth, but is a continuum of physiological, psychological and spiritual events beginning in utero and continuing throughout the post-natal bonding period. It is the interruption of this natural evolution, due to post-partum separation of mother and child, that creates a primal wound, according to Verrier, who went on to publish her findings in *The Primal Wound: Understanding the Adopted Child*.

The descriptions I read in Verrier's article sounded chillingly familiar, and I felt relief down to my bones, that someone finally knew me, saw me, understood the impossible ache/not-ache, this me/not-me that I had been living for so many years, in solitary.

☞ ***Fostering Victims or Voicing A Difficult Truth?***

Many people worry that the notion of the primal wound fosters victim status in adoptees. I propose that it simply acknowledges an existing condition through which we often already feel like victims!

There are those who consider the primal wound to be a platform for adult adoptees to do yet more blaming and complaining, rather than "getting on with their lives." The message I've gotten all of my life is "Count your blessings, stop whining, get on with it." I have had a fundamental problem with most self-help modalities and methods which stress changing behavior, changing attitude, and "re-framing" as their primary bases. They only added to my frustration and self-flagellation because I just couldn't make those changes and re-framed realities "stick." Yes, these approaches have been incredibly useful to me, but only after having walked into that emptiness inside me, and felt it--finally, deeply--and grieved it. This, in my hard-won experience, is what effective healing work is about: not "fixing" it, but facing it.

Research powerfully supports the idea that a newborn adoptee has a deep, body-mind knowledge that his original mother isn't the same woman who's holding and feeding and cooing at him. Many studies show that a newborn knows its mother and will work very hard to obtain her over anyone else.

Throughout our childhoods, although this deep knowing prods us down deep, telling us that something is vaguely, intangibly askew, we come to embrace out of sheer survival instinct the acceptance that everything is “fine,” because that’s what everyone says, everyone upon whom we depend. We gradually become alienated from our own inner knowing, which not only leaves us vulnerable—without our essential “inner compass” of what’s true—it can lead to a hollowness inside, a hollowness that can’t be filled by the busy details of our lives.

Instead of sympathy, which *will* foster victim status, what a hurting child needs from a parent is *empathy*. “I can see that you’re hurting. I wonder if you’re missing your other mother, that connection you had with her.” “It was sad for both of you that you couldn’t stay together. But it was happy for both of us that we ended up together. I’m here for you and I’m going to stay here with you.”

Another wonderful way to affirm the young adoptee’s experience of separation is through appropriate fairy tales: I think I’m sane today because of *Thumbelina!*

∅ *Destiny and Compassion Can Co-Exist*

There is a certain philosophy which proposes that we “choose” everything that happens to us, that each of our souls has a blueprint which selects life experiences and circumstances for that individual which will forge his or her soul to its true, rightful shape and hue. I would propose—regardless of whether we are living according to such an individual destiny or one accorded us by God—a paradox which requires that we step out of our either/or, linear ways of thinking into a more inclusive, lateral-thinking mind-set: What if, for my true self to become manifest, I not only needed to experience being separated from my original mother at birth, but also needed acknowledgment and empathy for that very painful experience? For that has been my experience: prior to reading about and addressing the primal wound in my own life, I felt simply bound up by a vague constriction, what Jungian analyst/author Clarissa Pinkola Estes calls “the grinning depression.” Once Verrier’s words set a healing process in motion, I truly felt like the unfolding self I was designed to become, unfettered finally, and able, as Hillman challenges, to “notice the fathering and mothering afforded by the world every day in what it sends” my way.

∅ *Burden or Blessing...or Both?*

A onetime student of Hillman’s, Randolph Severson is an eloquent philosopher, author, and therapist in the field of adoption. He has cautioned, with regard to the primal wound, that “too much psychologizing about the burden and wounds of adoption alienates those who have suffered genuine pain and losses from their own psychological resources and spiritual strengths. Too much pathologizing of adoption forgets that every burden can also be a blessing. The psychological/spiritual goal is for the two to coexist, with one feeling or idea prevailing for a time and then the other, without either ever being negated or ignored.”

I believe these to be very wise words. But to truly own that feeling of a burden, one needs to understand the nature of the burden. However, many adoptees have gone through their lives in the grip of an intangible burden, but a burden with no definition, no resolution. It isn’t coincidental that to *resolve* means to render distinguishable the individual parts of an object, and it also means to solve. One, I believe, must precede the other.

But there have been few opportunities in the lives of most adoptees to achieve the first kind of resolution. All eyes in our adoptive families were on the blessings, so ours had nowhere else to look. “We were so blessed that you came to us” was never balanced with “It was hard for you that

you had to leave your other mother.” “You’re a precious part of our family” didn’t allow for, “I wonder if those blue eyes come from your birth mother or birth father.” The burden, experienced by the adoptee pre-verbally and pre-cognitively, had no context, no language through which to be recognized as such.

Dr. Severson says “to separate [blessing and burden] adds to the internal blights that we know as depression and denial.” But we are pressed into separating them through the simple non-acknowledgment of the burden. *No one named our burden!*

∅ Not to Blame, But to Understand

Some object to the primal wound idea because it heaps “blame” upon birth mothers. I have never met a birth parent who feels that Verrier has assigned blame to her; only those who appreciated the difficult truths she has finally spoken, which often validate their own instinctive understanding of the profound effects of relinquishment on their children.

This is not about guilt, and it is not about blame. It is about information. It is about knowing what really happened to you. That is what makes you *sane*.

As an adopted person, I feel blame for no one. This is only possible after good, empathic healing work. I hold a deeply cosmic and karmic view of my adoptive experience. And I agree that to treat our adopted children as victims would cripple them in their ultimately solitary task of integration and healing. But even courageous lone travelers need the guidance of honest folks offering directions.

I am grateful to have been offered just such a beacon, a map of one kind of injured soul. I thank Nancy Verrier for having the guts to stand up and speak aloud, finally, a gritty truth about adoption that has been lived silently in many, many hearts and souls.

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