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# Psychospiritual Development of Female Adoptees Raised Within a Closed Adoption System: A Theoretical Model Within a Feminist and Jungian Perspective

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This article proposes a transpersonal theoretical model suggesting that the embodiment of the voice of the feminine is a significant catalyst for awakening the psychological and spiritual growth and development of female adoptees. Existing Jungian and feminist theoretical models regarding the psychological and spiritual implications for a female adoptee raised within a closed adoption system will be discussed. The author will share her adopted voice about her spiritual and psychological process toward finding wholeness using a hermeneutical process of inquiry. The voices of birth mothers who relinquished their children will also be included. Voice is then explored to be an essential component of the embodied feminine, in turn becoming a catalyst of psychospiritual growth and developmental awakening for female adoptees.

**Keywords:** *hermeneutical, birth mothers, female adoptees, embodied feminine voice.*

About 64% of Americans know someone who has adopted, been adopted, or relinquished a child for adoption (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2002). With this large of a percentage, and considering the large percentage affected and the lifelong effects of adoption for all members within the adoption triad,<sup>1</sup> there is a great opportunity to bring a new and fresh transpersonal perspective into the existing adoption literature. For an adoptee, a transpersonal perspective is important because adoptees pay a high psychic, psychological, and spiritual price when they “grow up feeling like anonymous people cut off from the genetic and social heritage that gives everyone else roots” (Lifton, 1994, p. 8). The disconnection they feel is so deeply rooted in the psyche and spiritual in nature (Jaggard, 2001) that the “primal wound” (Verrier, 1993, p. 1) they suffer is not only from the genealogical loss of their biological origins but also from a bodily incompleteness that remains with them into adulthood (Lifton, 1994; Verrier, 1993, 2003). Hence, there is a significant need to fill in the gap in the transpersonal theoretical literature with a psychospiritual developmental model, which will help transpersonal clinicians, and clinicians in general (especially those who are not familiar with the issues of adoption),<sup>2</sup> gain a better understanding of an adoptee’s “quest of an authentic identity” (Lifton, 1994, p. 10).

Ultimately, a psychospiritual developmental model can help adoptees transform and integrate what adoption and Jungian writer Axness (1998) described as the pervasive shadows of an abstract burden that have woven themselves around their lives.

Several terms regarding adoption need to be clarified. Although adoption can take many different forms in the United States,<sup>3</sup> the primary focus in this article will be on adoptions within an independent or private agency, domestically, and within a closed system. An *independent* or *private agency* adoption involves the official legal transfer of parental rights and responsibilities to adults who are not a child’s biological parents (Miller, Fan, & Grotevant, 2005). A *domestic* adoption occurs when the child is adopted within the country of origin. A *closed system of adoption* is when an adopted child’s biological identity remains unknown to him or her and to the adoptive parents. Adoptive parents’ names replace the child’s biological parents’ names on a new legally amended birth certificate that is issued to the child upon his or her entry into the adoptive family. The adopted child is thought to be “reborn” (Baran & Pannor, 1990, p. 321) into a new family with a new identity and identification. The adoption proceedings, including the original birth certificate and any other information concerning the identity of the child’s birth parents, are

sealed depending upon state court order and supported by statutory law and regulations.

Although closed adoptions were the standard procedure for adopting a child throughout the United States by the end of the 1930s and still are commonly practiced today, current research conducted by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (2009) concluded that contact with birth relatives is the most important factor in achieving a positive adoptive identity in white adoptees.<sup>4</sup> While contact with birth relatives may have a positive effect upon adoptees' development,<sup>5</sup> this paper is not concerned with matters of adoption reform. The discussion will focus solely upon Jungian and feminist theoretical considerations and literature relevant to the psychological and spiritual implications for female adoptees raised within a closed adoption system. Throughout, I share my experience of being adopted and the impact of this experience on my spiritual and psychological development and my growth toward finding wholeness. Additionally, the known effects of the closed adoption system upon birthmothers who surrendered their children will be illustrated utilizing a feminist perspective. Finally, I propose a transpersonal, theoretical model suggesting that the embodiment of voice of the feminine becomes a significant catalyst for awakening the psychological and spiritual growth and development of female adoptees.

#### **Author's Personal Voice**

I chose to focus solely on female adoptees' psychospiritual development within this article because of my own personal experience as a female adoptee raised within a closed adoption system. My focus is further congruent with the beginning stages of engagement with my dissertation and research in which I will use a hermeneutical process of inquiry as well as my spiritual practices of meditation and yoga.

I am curious to know whether other female adoptees have experienced similar somatic, phenomenological, and psychospiritual experiences as I have while embarking upon their spiritual paths. As I began to engage in the hermeneutical research method of intuitive inquiry by reading the adoption literature and listening to the feminine and feminist voices of adoption from female writers such as Axness (1998), Fessler (2006), Jaggard (2001), Lifton (1994), Solinger (2001), and Verrier (1993, 2003), I found they all held a deep feminine embodied wisdom, truth, and voice regarding the issues and ramifications of being adopted. Their voices deeply resonated on a bodily level within me, causing psychospiritual shifts and deepening

my embodied awareness regarding my adoption identity and body.

This process fostered more curiosity about the development of voice and how other female adoptees develop and cultivate their own embodied feminine voice through an embodied spiritual practice, such as meditation, or other mindful awareness practices. In my experience, growing up within a closed adoption system had a severe impact on my ability to find and cultivate my authentic and embodied feminine voice. However, as I began to undertake the hermeneutical journey of my adoption and deepened my mindfulness practice of meditation, my embodied voice grew stronger and continues to demonstrate a wisdom that I never experienced growing up. Additionally, I noticed that each of these practices, including the inquiry into my adoption, which became a practice unto itself in my journal writing and Jungian analysis, became inseparable from one another. Ultimately, these practices helped to sustain a process of transformation and integration of my adoption experience and identity in my life.

#### **My Adoption Story**

The loss, grief, and the closed adoption system's ideologies of secrecy and shame that had been bestowed upon my birthmother became the legacy passed to me. Given the paradigm of silence in the closed system and a lack of information or knowledge about my biological identity, I experienced what adoptee and feminist writer Leighton (2005) stated was "an erasure of details that might contradict what could be read or seen about the body" (p. 163). Due to this erasure, my family upheld the silence in our home by never discussing my adoption or the adoptive status of my older sister. This strict denial of my adoption rendered my adoption identity invisible and my embodied authentic feminine was lost as a result of my hidden biological origins. As a result, it constricted my ability to speak from a known and trusted embodied feminine source, which was especially evident as a teenager and in early adulthood when the "conspiracy of silence" (Lifton, 1994, p. 10) felt like a smothering unspoken force.

Lifton (1994) wrote that an adoptee knows something is amiss, missing, not acknowledged, something that is the ramification of her society, and perhaps her adoptive family, who has informed her that discovery of her true biological identity is forbidden and must be kept in a secrecy of silence. Ultimately, the underpinning force of the unspoken was the not knowing womanhood

and the unknowns of biological motherhood. As feminist Cornell (2005) stated, “the struggle of every woman to become who she is demands a confrontation with the connection between femininity and motherhood” (p. 26). For my birth mother who relinquished me and for my adoptive mother who could not bear a child, the connection had been lost within the development of my embodied feminine.

My birth mother’s story is one that adoption feminist writers Fessler (2006) and Solinger (2001) candidly wrote about. My birth mother was a sixteen-year-old unwed mother who became pregnant in conservative Youngstown, Ohio, lived in a Florence Crittenton home for unwed mothers, and then relinquished me upon my birth in October of 1973. Despite the *Roe v. Wade* (1973) decision that gave women the right to choose to terminate their pregnancies or not during the month I was conceived, my fate would have it that my birth mother’s Catholic upbringing most likely prevented even the thought of an abortion within her mind or the minds of her parents. The only conceivable option would have been to relinquish me for adoption, or so I am left to assume. She does not deny nor admit she is my birthmother; I take her denial as evidence that she is indeed my birth mother. Given the circumstance, I am forced to weave my own self-narrative of the details concerning my relinquishment from other stories of courageous birth mothers who have come forth to recall their relinquishment experiences. It is from the shared voices of these birth mothers that I am able to reconstruct and claim their story as my birth mother’s, thus unveiling the unspoken unknown of my adoption and biological identity that has been trapped and confined within the walls of the closed adoption system.

In this psychospiritual process, I am also forced to unweave the unconscious projections and fantasies that my birth mother and I were ever a dyad in order to awaken myself from the limiting confines of my double identity. Cornell (2005) stated:

The beginning of a relationship between mother and daughter, and the celebration of a symbolic distance that makes recognition possible, can occur only once the fantasy that we ever were a dyad is dissolved. Trying to simply reenact the dyadic fantasy gets us nowhere new. (p. 35)

This process of recognizing my projections and fantasies becomes especially difficult when I visit my hometown of Youngstown, Ohio, where my adoption and the closed

system’s patriarchal paradigm is continually reinforced in my life due to not being in a successful reunion with my biological family. Even after having undergone the process of reconstructing my relinquishment story from the embodied voices of birth mothers while consciously deconstructing my unconscious fantasies and projections, time is eerily suspended in my hometown in the year 1973. It is as if the attitudes and the secrecy of the closed adoption system still deeply permeate throughout my identity and voice when I am there, and my biological identity begins to form a force of its own in its strong desire to search and connect with my biological origins and roots. However, my adoptive identity still feels trapped and helpless in doing so due to Ohio’s laws that deny me access to my original birth certificate.<sup>6</sup>

### **My Conscious Journey Into and Apart from the Closed Adoption Circle**

I manage the two psychic forces of my split identity and the unconscious fantasy and projection that my birth mother and I are still merged together within the closed adoption system’s confining space by experiencing the felt sensations of tension and ambiguity in my bodily awareness while engaging in a hermeneutical process of inquiry. The realization that I am separate from but not value-free and independent from my adoption experience arises in my consciousness. Lifton (1994), herself an adoptee, wrote about adoptees’ mythic return to their true selves:

Adoptees must weave a new self-narrative out of the fragments of what was, what might have been, and what is. This means they must integrate their two selves: the regressed baby who was abandoned and the adult that baby has become. They must make the Artificial Self real, and allow the Forbidden Self to come out of hiding. They must integrate what is authentic in these two selves, and balance the power between them. (p. 259)

In my experience, the balancing of powers becomes a possibility for psychological integration and healing with embodied mindful awareness practices of meditation and yoga. Both mindfulness and yoga help me to draw attention and awareness to the present moment without judgment or criticism. This helps support me to call back my authentic power and feminine body from the overwhelming adoption force. A more creative and transformative power naturally occurs with the greater spaciousness in my mind, psyche, and body to permit me to further explore what further felt sensations, thoughts,

images, and feelings arise from my adoption experience, body, and identity.

Similar to my process, adoptee and feminist Leighton (2005) wrote that the adoption experience is not about identification with an unknown lost family but rather as an “identity of possibility” (p. 147). For her, it is “a way to make sense of the tensions produced by being both at once the product of one’s environment and someone whose meaning always exceeds that environment” (p. 147). She stated, “being adopted’ opens up a space of non-identity between the self as a subject and the self as an object such that one cares about the processes (social, historical, cultural, political, and relational) through which one has come to be” (p. 147). Leighton’s experience closely resembles a hermeneutical process of interpretation.

Five levels of interpretation are found in intuitive inquiry (Anderson, 2004), the research method I have chosen for my dissertation project. I chose intuitive inquiry for my dissertation research because of its personal exploration and transformative potentials. The researcher is deemed a co-participant. The first cycle of interpretation that I have completed has led me to learn about the preconceived lenses through which I view the social, familial, and psychological interaction of my adoption within the closed system. Interpretative researcher Addison (1989) wrote that a hermeneutic cycle begins when the researcher identifies and names her lenses, perspective, and beliefs about the subject matter she is investigating. This is called the forward arc. After each area of exploration is complete, such as the literature review and data collection, the researcher evaluates her old lenses and decides whether to discard them or establish new ones. This is the reverse arc of the hermeneutical circle. Overall, the process of a hermeneutical cycle encourages the completion or continuation of the researcher’s own self-reflective narrative and truth through the lenses she possesses. Alas, “truth is seen as an ongoing and unfolding process, where each successive interpretation has the possibility of uncovering or opening up new possibilities” (p. 56).

As I began to engage in the first hermeneutical cycle of interpretation, I recognized that the embodied expression of my voice was left paralyzed and my projections, which interpretative researcher Addison (1990) considered part of the person’s existential structure, were unevaluated and unbeknownst to me. The possibility of moving my arc forward within a

hermeneutical cycle remained stuck because of my lived-felt experience of being psychically drowned in the unconscious mothering attitude of the closed adoption system. It was also the unconscious bonds I shared with my two mothers within the closed adoption circle that stunted the arc’s forward process.

The weight I felt describes what Jungian writer and analyst Woodman (1990) wrote is an unconscious bond that can create an insurmountable block if the daughter feels guilty when the time comes for her to outstrip her mother, to go beyond the level of consciousness her mother achieved. The adoptee not only has one mother with whom to face this challenge but two—her adoptive mother and her biological mother. I faced guilt with both of my mothers by breaking the silence about my adoption experience to my adoptive mother, making contact with my birth mother, and speaking my truth about the closed adoption system to fellow adoptees. However, as I had the opportunity to listen to the various conscious embodied voices from other adoptees, as well as from birth mothers and feminists, my inner sense of freedom and creativity about my adoption experience was being restored, resulting in feeling less and less guilt about examining and expressing my adoption experience. As I see it now, I was engaging in the reverse arc of the hermeneutical circle by evaluating other women’s adoption experiences against my own neglected and unexamined psychological projections and fantasies. Thus, the conscious process of embodying my adoptive identity and voice completed the first full hermeneutical cycle in my research method of intuitive inquiry, resulting in feminine growth, awareness, and development. Ultimately, my lived felt experience of my adoption story was transforming itself.

### **An Adoptee’s Conscious Mother and Crone**

My Jungian analyst has told me that I am working through the bi-valent nature of the mother archetype—the terrible mother and the good mother. This has been demonstrated with my unconscious fantasy and splitting that my adoptive mother is the good mother who loved me so much that she rescued me from my birth mother who is the terrible mother who could not raise me. There was another story, however, that was never voiced yet continuously felt, held, and reenacted in my unconsciousness: my adoptive mother is the terrible mother who took me away from my birth mother who is the good mother that can save me from my deep longing

for connection. This latter fantasy reflects Jaggard's (2001), Lifton's (1994), and Verrier's (1993) accounts of adoptees' unconsciousness experiences. Similar to my experience, these authors' accounts reported that many adoptees feel a bodily experience of disconnection. Unwittingly, these authors' accounts invoke what Jungian scholar and adoption writer Severson (1994) described as the Mother/Child archetype, especially Verrier's concept of the "primal wound" (p. 1). The primal wound is the trauma that many adoptees experience due to relinquishment in infancy. The primal wound can be experienced as a split off baby part of one's self and can have long-lasting effects upon an adoptee's psychological, emotional, and spiritual life.

In my own personal process toward healing and wholeness, Lifton's (1994) and Verrier's (1993) accounts began to form an invocation of the Mother/Child archetype for me through the power of reading adoptee's voices. My primal wound was being put into words and the process of the hermeneutical circle's forward arc began. Although reading adoptees' voices played an important role in my process of healing, I still experienced a disempowerment in my adoption story and voice. This shifted, however, when a fellow adoptee invited me to attend the Alliance for the Study of Adoption and Culture conference in Cambridge, Massachusetts. At this conference, I discovered a new level of my feminist identity as I listened to the voices of birth mothers who relinquished their infants. As a result, my unconscious fantasy and projections about the archetypal mother that society has constructed about birth mothers were deconstructed, ultimately leading to a more realistic representation of my own personal birth mother and consequently, my adoptive mother.

In addition, my conscious mother began to fully emerge as I listened and took in various birth mothers' experiences. I was greatly impacted by feminist writer, researcher, and documentary filmmaker Fessler's (2010) seminar. I viewed her documentary based on her courageous and landmark book *The Girls Who Went Away* (Fessler, 2006). The book and documentary present the voices of birth mothers who relinquished their children in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. Another powerful seminar presented a discussion by birth mother Lynn Lauber (2010), who held the voice of the conscious crone. Woodman (1990) stated that the conscious crone can afford to be honest, for she is not interested in playing games. This was the case with Lauber. She was

not interested in perpetuating the games of the closed adoption system. She spoke from an embodied place about her pregnancy experience, the relinquishment of her child, and of her pain, loss, confusion, and devastation. Her voice held the unwavering truth that was silent and steady. It held great somberness, grief, loss, and sadness. Her steady eyes, her gaze, and her unwavering lips conveyed a lost part of herself that she had determined to reclaim and resolve again and again.

As I am able to see it now, up until the time I listened to birth mothers' experiences of relinquishing their children, my ego was not ready nor able to hold the tension generated by the opposites of the Great Mother, one who is nourishing and containing and one who is also devouring and restrictive (Woodman, 1990). What made this so difficult was the dualistic projections of the opposites of the Great Mother upon both mothers—my adoptive mother and my biological mother. My embodied voice and sense of identity had been devoured, smothered, swallowed up, and drowned. It is the closed adoption system's web of silence and secrecy that created this constant felt experience.

#### **A Feminist Perspective on the Closed Adoption System**

Adoption is a social construction (Lifton, 1994) and is deeply embedded and cannot be separated from feminism. Adoption practices reflect sociopolitical, economic, and moral attitudes and changes in history that pertain to the second-wave feminist movement. The attitudes pertaining to adoption and the closed adoption system prevailed until unwed mothers became politically active in the 1970s, speaking out about the ramifications of relinquishing their children,<sup>7</sup> and until abortion was legalized in 1973.<sup>8</sup> Before this time (after World War II and during the 1950s and 60s), childless married couples, who desired to parent and conform to the social and familial expectations of the time, turned to adoption in record numbers. Approximately one and a half million babies were relinquished for nonfamily or unrelated adoptions between 1945 and 1973 (Fessler, 2006).<sup>9</sup> In turn, the rising demand for adoptable children intensified the pressure for young unmarried pregnant women to surrender their children within the closed adoption system. Despite popular opinion, feminist writer Solinger (2001) explained "It is very rare in this country to think about relinquishment as a coerced act, forced on a mother who wanted to keep her child" (p. 74). However, that was often just the case.

In her landmark interviews with women who surrendered their children between the end of World War II and 1973, Fessler (2006) illustrated how these women were not ultimately given a choice and consequently denied their right to keep their children. Many of these women did not make a “decision” to surrender but instead were rendered powerless<sup>10</sup> in their ability to choose what was best for them and for their children. The only choice presented was the one that was available to them: living in an unwed mother’s home, immediately surrendering their child, and legally signing away their right as a parent. It was the only option prescribed within the patriarchy’s<sup>11</sup> definition of what it meant to be a mother. According to authorities and those who enforced the closed adoption system’s extreme policies, such as social workers and parents, these non-marital pregnancies were treated as evidence that young women were unfit to be mothers. It marked them as bad choice makers and poor prospects for becoming or raising good citizens (Solinger, 2001).<sup>12</sup> Motherhood was not determined by biology or by giving birth. Rather, it was determined by marriage and the “commodification of their babies” (p. 78). Solinger explained that “adoption is rarely about mothers’ choices; it is, instead, about the abject choicelessness of some resourceless women” (p. 67) and about the economic resources of other women.

It is typically overlooked that “economic and cultural degradation can cancel a woman’s ability to assert the biological claim to motherhood” (Solinger, 2001, p. 75). Young pregnant girls were not given a realistic picture of the responsibilities and costs of raising a child. They were denied information that could have saved them and their motherhood, thus preventing them from participating in making an informed choice. Despite the fog of their despair and helplessness, some women recognized that when adults denied them motherhood and their babies, it was about power over one who is less socioeconomically and sociopolitically influential in society. As a result of their lack of status power, the only choice was to conform to the enormous societal pressures of the middle-class values of the time. Middle-class parents were quick to agree that the only choice for their young daughters’ problem was relinquishment and adoption. Solinger added:

When daughters became objects of their own parents’ terror in the era of “family togetherness,” they felt absolutely resourceless. Mothers and fathers worked

quickly to erase these girls as social actors; what the daughters wanted for themselves was completely irrelevant. (p. 72)

Hence, there was no other acceptable solution than for pregnant girls to go along with family wishes or risk being permanently ostracized from family members and their communities.<sup>13</sup>

### **Consequences of Birth Mothers’**

#### **Lack of Choice**

The legacy cast upon birthmothers in the closed adoption system left deep scars in their lives, especially considering the common societal myth and psychological split cast upon a young girl’s psyche after she surrendered her child:

Following this course, their daughter would be given a second chance. Her pregnancy would effectively be erased from her history and she could expect to go back to a normal life, as if it had never happened. Without her child she would be able to marry a decent man and have *other* children. She would not have to live with her mistake. (Fessler, 2006, p. 148)

Unraveling this myth forty years later from accounts of “women who tell stories that force us to gauge the relevance of biology when biology is denied” (Solinger, 2001, p. 75), Fessler (2006) found that surrendering a child for adoption was described by many of the women she interviewed as the event that defined their identities and shaped their entire adult lives. Despite the ideal hope for a better future, their experience felt like a lifelong, psychologically wrenching burden to them. In a study by Winkler and Van Keppel (1984), birthparents regarded the surrender of a child to adoption as the most stressful experience of their lives. Young unwed mothers were made to carry the full emotional weight of circumstances that were the inevitable consequence of a society that denied teenage sexuality, failed to hold young men equally responsible, withheld sex education and birth control from unmarried women, allowed few options if pregnancy occurred, and considered unmarried women unfit to be mothers (Fessler, 2006). Many women who went through this experience have said that when women lack such fundamental controls, their lives can be ruined (Solinger, 2001).

Studies have concluded that relinquishing mothers are at risk for long-term physical, psychological,

and social repercussions (Askren & Bloom, 1999). The pain of the surrender remains as intense as if the adoption just happened yesterday and intensifies over time (Winkler & Van Keppel, 1984). Relinquishing one's infant can become such an intense experience that the loss has been likened as a form of trauma (Fessler, 2006) and PTSD (Verrier, 2003). Cornell (2005) wrote that the closed adoption system unfortunately "blocks any hope for the recovery from this trauma" (p. 21) due to the legally enforced, absolute cut of a birthmother from her child. Not only is the closed adoption system to blame for these women's trauma but also many of the younger women who were sent to a maternity home, such as the Florence Crittenton home for unwed mothers,<sup>14</sup> confirmed that it was a traumatic experience for them (Fessler, 2006). Solinger (2001) depicted one birthmother's experience:

I left my heart and soul, as well as my baby, in that drab little institution. I left my youth, my innocence... my trust, my laughter, and my love.... Pieces of that girl who entered the Home in August, 1962 are still missing today.... I have not been and never will be whole again. (p. 79)

Another birthmother's words capture the experience that many of the women identify with deeply: "I was a singing teacher, but I lost my voice after the relinquishment. Losing my voice was the result of almost dying of a broken heart" (p. 79).

Because surrendering a child is not commonly recognized as a loss by society (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982), birthmothers were not permitted to talk about or properly grieve the loss of their child. From a feminist perspective, "this protection from public exposure of the adopting mother's failure to be a woman because she has failed to meet the symbolic meaning of womanhood demands erasure of the birth mother" (Cornell, 2005, p. 24) as well as erasure of her voice. Regardless of the reason for the underlying societal motive:

When a young woman surrenders an infant for adoption we set her apart from us. Sworn to secrecy and admonished to return to school or work as though she had been on holiday or helping with an unfortunate relative, the privilege of grief is denied. (Brodzinsky, 1990, p. 311)

Due to this lack of privilege, a birthmother's grief becomes exacerbated, and sometimes chronic. In her qualitative study, Davis (1994) found that all

15 birthmothers she interviewed experienced a lack of support and encouragement from others for the need to grieve following the relinquishment of their infants. The loss they face continued to intensify over time and had similarities to the loss experienced after a death. However, with death there is closure, but with adoption there is no end to the loss, and thus, no closure to the loss experience (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982). As a result of having no closure for the loss of their children, many of the women faced depression, lost their jobs, and had difficulties in their relationships because, as Solinger (2001) candidly wrote, "dignity and independence are, in fact, the life enhancing ingredients that tend to be incompatible with relinquishing a child" (p. 23).

### **Ramifications of the Closed System upon Adoptees**

Despite the intention to erase the stigma of adoptees' pasts to insure their equal status and treatment among their nonadopted legitimate offspring (Brodzinsky, 1990), some of the psychological problems observed in adult adoptees appear to be directly related to the secrecy, anonymity, and sealed records of a closed adoption system (Baran & Pannor, 1990; Lifton, 1994). Ultimately, the closed system diminishes what leading adoption expert and adoptee Lifton (1994) wrote are the civil rights of adult adoptees. She stated that adoptees are "second class citizens" (Lifton, 2010, n.p.) due to a large majority of adult adoptees in the United States who are denied access to their original birth certificates.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, adult adoptees who are denied access to information related to their births and adoptions experience potentially serious negative consequences to their physical and mental health (Baran & Pannor, 1990; Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2007; Lifton, 1994).

Aside from denying adoptees full access to information regarding their biological origins,<sup>16</sup> the message cast upon birthmothers was that they should feel grateful that other women could mother their children better, which was translated into the message to adoptees that they were "chosen," "picked," or "special" for being adopted and that their adoptions were no big deal (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992). Another message sent to adoptees was that speaking about their biological origins was "forbidden territory" (Hartman & Laird, 1990, p. 236).

These attitudes imparted within the closed adoption system encourage a more secretive and avoidant communication style among adoptive parents. It was, and



sometimes currently is, common for adoptive parents to treat their adoptive children as if they were their own biological kin (Brodzinsky, 2005). Given fictitious and nonexplicit narratives of adopted children's stories, many adoptees experience a "ruptured" (Hartman & Laird, 1990, p. 236) continuity of personhood and identity. Consequently, "adoptees must weave a new self-narrative out of the fragments of what was, what might have been, and what is" (Lifton, 1994, p. 259). They are on a quest to search for the missing parts of their narrative, for their origins, for meaning, and for a coherent sense of self (Lifton, 2007). This usually manifests in an adoptee's search to reunite with her biological origins. The meaning of the word *search* is important to adoptees, whether they have made contact, have had reunion with their biological family, or have no desire to search for their biological family. Schooler (1995) stated:

The word *search* for an adopted person carries with it multiple layers of meaning. The word *search* for many is not limited to its literal meaning of a physical effort to make a connection. The meaning expands to include all that is part of the adoptee's quest, for it is an emotional, psychological, and spiritual quest. (p. 24)

The quest for an authentic identity among adoptees can reinforce feelings of disconnectedness (Bertocci & Schechter, 1991; Jaggard, 2001; Lifton, 1994; Nickman, 1985; Verrier, 1993). Schechter and Bertocci (1990) wrote that the lack of connection can become so intense that it can be equivalent to "starvation" (p. 85). Adoptee and adoption researcher Jaggard (2001) made a similar conclusion in her qualitative study with 14 midlife female adoptees. Jaggard suggested that female adoptees' disconnection was "deeply rooted" (p. 158) and contained spiritual components. In addition, she concluded that connectedness is not solely due to the adoptive family relationship but that it comes from a physical, emotional, and psychological "genetic core or template" (p. 159). This conclusion is also highlighted by adoptive mother and clinician Verrier (1993), who stated that a deep identification with the adoptee's ancestors' genes are "stamped into every cell" (p. 102) of an adoptee's body.

#### **A Proposed Psychospiritual Developmental Model for Female Adoptees**

**B**ased upon the narratives of other adoptees and my own experience, I propose that a developmental

model is relevant for understanding the psychospiritual journey of female adoptees. The psychospiritual process of development and integration for female adoptees involves what transpersonal theorist Levin (1985) described as a retrieval of one's body.<sup>17</sup> For women, it becomes a retrieval and awakening of one's feminine body, thus leading to the embodiment of the conscious feminine (Zweig, 1990); this entails the embodiment of the conscious virgin, mother, and crone. Female Buddhist writer Feldman (1990/2005) echoed that awakened women are embodied women and that the very first step toward ending estrangement from their true selves is reclaiming their bodies. She stated, "We do not begin on a spiritual path divorced from our sexuality, or lives: all of this we bring with us" (p. 5).

A female adoptee searching for wholeness brings all aspects of her adoption experience and story with her on the journey of awakening her feminine body: an extreme longing for connection (Jaggard, 2001), cumulative losses (Axness, 1998), and broken narratives (Lifton, 1994). She courageously begins to inquire and examine these areas, which is the forward arc of the hermeneutical circle, thus transforming her lenses and perspective, representing the returning arc of the hermeneutical circle. Analysis, conscious embodied spiritual practices such as meditation and yoga, and journaling can all activate the process of transformation and growth. Eventually, her mother projections are deeply revealed and the most painful feelings of abandonment and rejection can be dealt with. Then, a female adoptee's feminine wisdom, including her conscious crone, mother, and virgin, can be born from her "conscious suffering" (Woodman, 1990, p. 99), and she can discover and retrieve her forbidden feminine body amidst her primal wound and the smothering "conspiracy of silence built into the closed system" (Lifton, 1994, p. 10). The process becomes a lifelong journey for adoptees.

As a female adoptee walks into what fellow female adoptee and child expert Axness (1998) described as the emptiness inside an adoptee's self, she can feel her suffering from the separation from her biological and feminine origins deeply and then grieve her loss. Feldman (1990/2005) added that any spiritual journey asks a woman to cultivate a deep, inner aloneness as the first step in reclaiming inner wholeness. The journey for inner wholeness happens when a female adoptee can sit in her inner aloneness, listen, and be with the deep inner voices of her adoption experience. Her hidden Forbidden

Self can be retrieved, and a coherence of her experience and story can be integrated.

Transpersonal theorist Washburn (1995) wrote about this process of human awakening and development using a transpersonal perspective. In his view, development begins in “an original dynamic, creative, spontaneous source out of which the ego emerges, from which the ego then becomes estranged, to which, during the stages of ego transcendence, the ego returns, and with which, ultimately, the ego is integrated” (p. 4). This process highlights what Zweig (1990) called “the life-enhancing potential for more transpersonal” values in a person’s life versus the destructiveness of egocentric values (p. 5). She wrote:

For women, whose source of ego identity is our mothers, this developmental process unfolds in one way. We identify with our mothers as our origin, both biologically and psychologically. So, to be a woman, we need to face the paradox of breaking the personal identification yet remaining grounded in the Feminine. (p. 5)

Only then can a woman provide her adult self with the essential qualities that she may have missed as a child. Those qualities will nourish and sustain her feminine embodied growth and development.

A female adoptee’s process of retrieving an authentic relationship with her feminine body or what Woodman (1990) called a woman’s “embodied spirituality” (p. 98) can unfold as a female adoptee makes her own identity distinct from her birth mother, from her adoptive mother, and from the closed adoption system that holds the virgin, crone, and mother unconscious. It is essential that a female adoptee “re-mother” herself (Zweig, 1990) and develop the mature feminine and the “conscious virgin” (Woodman, 1990, p. 105). Part of this re-mothering is consciously working through and owning responsibility for her mother projections and fantasies in order to arrive at what Woodman referred to as a female’s embodied conscious virgin. Woodman described the conscious virgin:

The virgin lives her own essence. Like the virgin forest, she contains the seeds of countless possibilities. She reflects the Divine Feminine that resides in and resonates through all the senses of our body so long as we live on earth. She is the maturing and mature soul child, the feminine container, strong enough

and flexible enough to receive the masculine spirit. She is the consciousness that radiates through matter and lives after matter returns to dust. (p. 105)

Woodman (1990) stated that a woman’s journey to find her embodied spirituality and to bring the birth of the virgin in her life entails “finding those lost parts, standing to their truth, and living them in our everyday life” (p. 99). Upon the adoptee’s realization of her biological heritage, also named by Lifton (1994) as her “Forbidden Self” (p. 56),<sup>18</sup> the conscious mother and virgin can embark upon a more authentic relationship. The conscious crone’s voice is thus heard, understood, and embodied.

A female adoptee can differentiate her feminine nature from the closed adoption legacies of secrecy and silence when she discovers, listens, celebrates, and connects to the internal rhythms of her forbidden body. She had not grown up connected with the bodies of her biological mother, and any other biological feminine family members such as her sisters, aunts, and grandmothers. Thus, how can a female adoptee begin her psychospiritual journey that is necessary to retrieve her conscious feminine body when her biological body and its rhythms were not reflected and mirrored back to her by her biological feminine ancestry? Feminist writer Thanos (1997) claimed that women in general do not know how to listen to their own natural bodies. An adoptee’s task of deeply listening to her biological body and aligning with its natural rhythms is challenged with her Forbidden Self trapped within the closed adoption system. Considering this, what are the tasks that a female adoptee needs to accomplish in order for her to be able to deeply listen and connect with her biological body when she never had it reflected back to her?

Lifton (1994) wrote that the task for adoptees is to retrieve their Forbidden Self versus succumbing to the “Artificial Self” (p. 50), who was created out of the false messages and myths within the closed adoption system. The retrieval of the Forbidden Self happens when a female adoptee can distinguish, identify, and pursue inquiry into her adoptive identity distinct from her biological and Forbidden Self. From this practice of deeply listening and being mindful of her Forbidden Self and body, she creates more openness and receptivity to the conscious feminine. The possibility of more connection to her own internal rhythms arises when she relates to her birth mother and adoptive mother

without unconscious projections and fantasies of them. If a practice of mindfulness and deeply listening is not sustained, her projections and fantasies will succumb to the closed adoption system's psychic split and loyalty binds that created her Artificial Self. Her lifelong work of finding wholeness is both psychological and spiritual.

Another way for a female adoptee to retrieve her Forbidden Self and biological body is by listening to the authentic stories of birthmothers who surrendered their children for adoption. Deeply listening and connecting with their stories creates a new perspective and deepens her feminine bodily receptacle for the female adoptee's voice to be expressed and heard.

In my personal experience, my feminism was deeply illuminated as birth mothers shared their authentic stories. My deeper feminist perspective became apparent as my adoption experience was intimately connected with birth mothers' experiences. At last, my adoption identity became more fully embodied and integrated, allowing open expression and inquiry into my adoption experience. Jungian feminist writer Young-Eisendrath (1990) stated that the "adoption" of a feminist perspective awakens an appreciation for the fact that beliefs influence perception, and that whatever one takes to be real—what one assumes to be "really true" (p. 160) of one's self and of others—is true from one's vantage point at that moment. This feminist awakening and its appreciative stance reflect the forward arc of a hermeneutical cycle; one begins to own and take responsibility for one's projections. As previously stated, for a female adoptee it is her projections upon her birthmother and adoptive mother. She can begin to dissect her known lenses as they currently reveal themselves. A practice of mindfulness with meditation, journaling, and/or analysis helps support the process of establishing one's current lenses.

The returning arc of the hermeneutical cycle is when one compares fresh and new information with one's established lenses. In my hermeneutical process, I was given the choice of either rejecting the new feminist perspective that saw how my birthmother was given little to no choice about relinquishing me, or accepting this perspective. I noticed that when I "tried on" and was open to this new perspective, it provided me tremendous relief from my suffering and guilt. Integration quickly happened as I felt held and supported by other feminists and adoptees. My familiar and unconscious lenses from the closed adoption system that I had been carrying around and felt chained to for my entire life had been

challenged and thus a deeper feminine receptacle was created to allow my forbidden voice and body to feel stronger and more alive.

As I reflect upon my experience, this particular cycle of the larger hermeneutical process toward finding wholeness liberated part of my Forbidden Self from the unconscious and oppressive bonds of the closed system, within which my birthmother is still confined. I gained an embodied felt sense and connection of autonomy and strength from my newly expanded conscious feminine container. Young-Eisendrath (1990) stated:

Until a woman is offered a feminist explanation of her felt condition of personal inadequacy, from a theory that accounts for the function of gender stereotypes and the reality of female experiences, she is necessarily in a double bind about her own strengths and authority. (p. 160)

This conscious feminine strength and authority is in radical opposition to the unconscious mother that is created in the closed adoption system. The unconscious mother alienates and disconnects the Forbidden part of the Self from the biological and adoptive mother, and from the female adoptee's feminine and feminist expression of voice and body. Thus, a feminist perspective helps support the adoptee's psychospiritual development and growth.

### **Voice as a Path to an Adoptee's Psychospiritual Development and Awakening**

Woodman (1990) explained a woman's path of self-realization is the hero's journey out of the unconscious, like the dragon slayer on the way to finding personal power. For a female adoptee, her dragons are the "ghosts" (Lifton, 1994, p. 11) of the closed adoption system that continue to haunt not only her feminine body and voice but also those of her birth mother and adoptive mother. When she develops a new perspective and voice that is aligned with other adoptees and feminists, one which connects the cultural movement with a personal meaning system, a female adoptee can consciously discover the hidden ghosts that have caused her great suffering. She then has more internal room to allow her Forbidden Self to exist. The conscious virgin, mother, and crone can be awakened.

As stated, a female adoptee's psychospiritual journey provides an opportunity for her to reclaim what was lost and forgotten in the closed adoption system's belittling attitudes by consciously embracing her feminist

expression of voice. In female writer Gilligan's (1993) study on women's psychological descriptions of identity and moral development, voice takes on an embodied and lived experience quality in the women she interviewed. Voice describes when people speak about the core of the self. Gilligan wrote: "Voice is natural and also cultural. It is composed of breath and sound, words, rhythm, and language. And voice is a powerful psychological instrument and channel, connecting inner and outer worlds" (p. xvi). Whether it is a woman's own voice or the voice of other feminists, the instrument of voice is always there to access more development and growth toward finding wholeness.

For female adoptees, the catalyst of discovering their feminist voice, thus expanding and deepening their embodied feminine container, begins as a deep inner longing to find a sense of belonging and connection with something outside of themselves; predominantly, the longing manifests in the search for their biological family. Despite the many successes or failures that can be involved in reunion with her biological family, a female adoptees' feelings of inner disconnection can continue because she searches for love and acceptance from relationships outside of herself. She has not begun the conscious journey of unraveling, disengaging, and distinguishing her own sense of self from the Great Mother archetype and its gripping unconscious projections and fantasies regarding her birth mother and adoptive mother that are held in her psyche. The adoptee feels a groundlessness and lack of security due to the primal wound and due to the false messages in the closed adoption system. Neither sustain nor nourish a conscious feminine container, body, and voice.

Spiritually, the adoptee cannot connect with the voice of her "inner mystic" (Feldman, 1990/2005, p. 34). Buddhist writer Feldman stated that the awaited inner mystic voice for women is discovered when a woman asks questions that are crucial to her growth and freedom. Because the unconscious gripping forces of the unchallenged Great Mother have smothered her feminine voice, the adoptee's feminine growth and freedom is lost. With a practice that cultivates mindfulness, however, the adoptee's inner mystic can be discovered and can begin to examine, question, and discard the various social and spiritual values that undermine and limit her sense of worthiness, acceptance, and sense of self. A feminist lense and perspective held in mindful awareness can cultivate deeper questions about the closed system's

patriarchal motivations and the ramifications it has upon the adoptee's psyche and spirit. Hence, the female adoptee's inner mystic is the wise conscious crone that questions and is courageous enough to speak out and be heard. Her new awareness can cast light upon her invisible loyalty binds between her adoptive parents, her biological parents, and the closed adoption system, thus freeing her of them.

Moreover, Gilligan (1993) found that in women's psychological development, a woman's identity becomes a lie when girls and women alter their voices to fit themselves into images of relationship and goodness carried by false feminine voices. The closed adoption system carries this false lie with the adoptee's identity of the Artificial Self and the image that the adoptee is the natural child of her adoptive parents. The legislature and laws reinforce this lie by endorsing shame and secrecy with the concealment of her original birth certificate. This creates massive confusion and doubt within the adoptee, and furthers self-defeat when she is not granted access to her identifying birth information. The closed adoption system's voice conveys she is a second-class citizen and not an embodied woman who can know, embrace, and connect to her biological heritage. Despite these false messages, she can disengage with nonjudgmental awareness the psychic and spiritual lies of the closed adoption system when she engages in her embodied spiritual practice, such as in yoga, meditation, analysis, and journaling. The conscious crone's voice replaces the lies of the closed adoption system and helps support the female adoptee's deep attunement to her embodied biological rhythms.

Once the adoptee cultivates an attunement to her feminine biological rhythms, this can deepen psychospiritual awakening and embodied feminine growth within her. She is listening to the voice of her authentic and conscious feminine inner mystic. Shuttle and Redgrove (1978) reflected this by writing that if mental experiences reflect, as they often seem to, bodily ones, then there are many possibilities of experience if one opens up to one's own bodily rhythms. Due to the psychological reflecting the somatic, when a female adoptee aligns herself with her feminine inner mystic and voice, an authentic and conscious narrative regarding the impact of the closed adoption system can take form. Her mental ability can make more sense of her adoptive experience as deeper and deeper recesses of the psyche and spirit unfold. Through this process, a female adoptee

can connect to her feminine container and body and nonjudgmentally acknowledge the difficulties that her adoptive status has had in her life.

With her new found freedom, awareness, and voice, a female adoptee's adoption story can become more fully integrated with compassion because she has been able to gather up the missing pieces of her Forbidden Self with her own fecundity. Thus, her adoptive identity is no longer hanging in the shadows of the closed adoption system's outdated patriarchal framework. Her voice can tell her full adoption story without the weight of shame and secrecy. Her adoption story and its effects upon her can be one of coherence, curiosity, and inquiry. She is now on the conscious path of awareness. Jungian writer Hancock (1990) wrote about a woman arriving home to her feminine consciousness. In her words:

When a woman carries her conscious virginal girl across the threshold into womanhood, when she speaks in her own idiom as naturally as she mouths the language of the patriarchy, when she hits on the deepest truth about who she is and tells her story of becoming whole, she gains access to a world that is as fertile and abundant as the most verdant gardens. (p. 63)

For a female adoptee, her practice of mindfulness and a hermeneutical circle of inquiry help her gain access to the world of her authentic biological self, and feminine body, container, and voice, all of which are fertile and abundant in her search for wholeness.

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### Notes

1. The adoption triad members include adoptee, adoptive parents, and biological parents. Each one experiences loss at the hub of the adoption wheel, then rejection, guilt/shame, grief, identity, intimacy, and control (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982).
2. The psychodynamics of an adoptive family life are often overlooked by professionals (Lifton, 1994). However, Sass and Henderson (2000) conducted research with over two hundred practicing psychologists, asking them to assess their preparedness in treating members of the adoption triad. Only 22% responded as "well prepared" or "very well prepared" to work with adoption issues, while 23% responded they were "not very prepared" (p. 355). The researchers concluded that psychologists need more education concerning adoption triad members, considering that a large proportion of adoption members seek psychological services and are affected by the dynamics of adoption.
3. One major distinction falls between domestic and international adoption. Shortly after World War II, a large number of Americans began to adopt from abroad, reaching out to war orphans, those in poverty, and others facing unmanageable social conditions. To date, South Koreans comprise the largest group of internationally adopted persons in the U.S., and adoption from South Korea into this country has a longer history than from any other nation (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009). Adoptions from Russia have increased over the years.

Within the category of domestic adoptions, there are several different kinds: stepparent, second-parent, foster care, private and independent. Stepparent is the most common form. Second-parent adoptions provide a way, at

- least in some states, for same-sex couples to adopt. With private and independent adoptions, there is the choice of closed or open adoption systems. While this article focuses on the psychospiritual ramifications of the closed adoption system, it is worth mentioning briefly the open system of adoption because contemporary adoptions often occur within an open system, with varying degrees of openness. An open adoption system is a process in which the two parties meet, exchange identifying information, and the birth parents have some degree of contact with their expected adopted child. In some states, openness arrangements are legally binding, in other states they are not. Openness of communication between the parties can be a fluid process and system, leaving greater and lesser degrees of contact between the parties (D. M. Brodzinsky, personal communication, February 16, 2010).
4. Despite public and scholarly opinion, there still remains considerable controversy regarding the impact of open adoptions on the various members of an adoption triad (Brodzinsky, 2005).
  5. It has long been accepted that adoptees live with a dual identity, yet if they have knowledge about their biological origins, it positively contributes to their emotional and psychological well-being (Baran & Pannor, 1990).
  6. In an updated report by Howard, Smith, and Deuodes (2010), the authors wrote that barring adopted adults from access to their original birth certificates wrongly denies them a right enjoyed by all others in our country and is not in their best interests for personal and medical reasons.
  7. A small group of unwed mothers who relinquished their children formed the organization called Concerned United Birthparents (CUB) in 1976 in order to reconstruct themselves and claim their personal strength. They gathered together to provide mutual support for birthparents. Today, CUB members include birthparents, adoptees, adoptive parents, and others affected by adoption. Their ongoing work includes supporting adoption reform, preventing unnecessary family separations, and assisting adoption-separated individuals in search of family members.
  8. Roe v. Wade was announced on January 22, 1973. The ruling was a landmark for changes in adoption attitudes. The legalization of abortion had a lot to

do with the rise of single mother families (Solinger, 2001). As Baran and Pannor (1990) explained,

Unmarried, pregnant women expressed the feeling that if they completed the pregnancy, it was because they planned to keep the baby. Otherwise, they would terminate the pregnancy. They began to express the thought that having a baby and giving it up left lifelong scars. There was no way, they said, that a woman could truly resolve relinquishing her child. Keeping a baby and raising a child as a single parent had become much more acceptable. (p. 323)

9. Solinger (2001) wrote that no one really knows how many women gave their babies away in adoption before *Roe v. Wade* (1973). Estimates suggest numbers in the neighborhood of a couple of hundred thousand a year in the 1950s and in much of the 1960s.
10. Cornell (2005) wrote that a birth mother who was forced to give up her child obviously was not granted the protection of her right to represent her own “sexuate being” (p. 30). Her decision was thrust upon her either by economic circumstances or because of the sexual hypocrisy that dominated the United States in the 1950s and 1960s.
11. Borrowing from Cornell’s (2005) definition of patriarchy, the current usage indicates the manner in which a woman’s legal identity remains bound with her duties to the state as wife and mother within the traditional heterosexual family. Relinquishment has historically been enforced and felt by many to be necessary in the protection of these “family values” (p. 21). Cornell demanded a full release of women from this legal identity that defines and limits what it means to be a woman.
12. This was true for both black and white unwed mothers, yet black and white unwed mothers were treated very differently from each other by their families and communities, by social agencies, and by the government. After the war, a black single mother typically stayed within her family and community and kept her child to raise herself, often with the help of her family.
13. The intense social pressures that families felt during the 1950s and 1960s and the stigma associated with unwed pregnancy have waned dramatically over the last forty years. The same language used today, such as “selfish” and “incomprehensible,” to describe the women who initiate adoption of their own child is the same language used forty years ago against young mothers who did not want to surrender their children.
14. When the maternity-home movement began, the nurses and staff of the homes helped encourage a mother to bond with her baby with breast-feeding and would help find mothers employment. However, after the end of World War II, maternity homes became a place to sequester pregnant girls until they could give birth and surrender their children. By the 1950s, the message they sent was one in which an unwed mother’s interests were best served in giving her child up for adoption. Solinger (2001) stated that the homes developed a raft of strategies, some quite coercive, to press white, unwed mothers to relinquish their babies to “deserving” (p. 70) couples. The strategies were astoundingly successful.
15. While many states still keep these records sealed, other states such as Alaska, Kansas, Alabama, Delaware, Maine, New Hampshire, Oregon, and Tennessee allow adoptees unconditional access to their original birth certificates and records when they reach the age of 18 or 21. An additional 11 states allow adult adoptees access to their identifying birth certificate under certain conditions, such as if their adoptions took place before or after a certain date, or if a birth parent signed permission for her relinquished child to have access to his or her identifying information.
16. In the 1970s, through the impact of the Adoptees’ Liberty Movement Association (ALMA) and other organizations, adoptees claimed the right to own the truth about their origins. They explicitly tied their cause—their right to search for their biological parents—to the civil rights movement. By the mid-1970s, “adoptee liberation” (Solinger, 2001, p. 82) was referred to as a “civil right.”
17. Levin (1985) also wrote that the retrieval is a hermeneutical process. He stated, “It is no mere return to bodily life as it was experienced during early childhood but is rather a regathering of this life at a higher transpersonal level, a level that integrates bodily life with our cultural and personal histories” (p. 4).
18. Lifton (1994) coined the terms “Forbidden Self” (p. 56) and “Artificial Self” (p. 50) in the adoption literature to describe the psychological phenomenon of an adoptee’s divided self. She stated the Forbidden Self is the adoptee’s self that might have been, had



it not been separated from its mother and forced to split off from the rest of the self. It goes underground and keeps itself hidden; whereas, the Artificial Self is artificially created, compliant, and desires to please. Lifton stated, "It is a social construct, an as if self living as if in a natural family" (p. 52). It tries to structure its psychic reality to match the reality of the family in which it finds itself. "Some adoptees are so successful at splitting off a part of themselves that they stop asking questions about the birth mother early and do not fantasize or dream about her" (p. 53).

### **About the Author**

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### **About the Journal**

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