

Case Study/Article:

**The Legacy of Abandonment through Adoption:
Naomi's Story of Transformation**

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The legacy of abandonment through adoption: Naomi's story of transformation

Abstract:

During my doctoral research into Australian women's experiences of menstruation and birth as spiritual phenomena, I interviewed an adopted woman called Naomi. As a birth mother myself, our encounter had a deep impact on me. During our conversation, Naomi described a five day liminal episode during which she had entered into the raw emotion of her traumatic separation from her birth mother. She led me through her experience by reading from her journal and sharing her poetry and artwork from those five days. Along the way, we incorporated her early menstrual experiences and the births of her five children. During my analysis process, I compiled a 'word portrait' of our conversation which I then returned to Naomi for her veto and comment. Her story, shared so generously here, features her experience of the abandonment of adoption, a legacy with which she still contends today.

Keywords: adoption, abandonment, birth, spirituality, transformation.

Introduction

During my doctoral research into Australian women's experiences of menstruation and birth as spiritual phenomena, I interviewed a remarkable woman called Naomi (a pseudonym), who facilitated workshops on menstruation and birth. After inviting me to spend the night at her home in the country, she drove a three hour round trip to pick me up. Whilst driving back to her home, Naomi asked about my study and I enquired about her workshops. Ten minutes before we arrived, she told me that the motivation behind her workshops was her experience of abandonment from having been adopted at birth. As a birth mother myself, her unexpected disclosure took me completely by surprise. Naomi then described a five day liminal episode – a vision quest - during which she had entered into the raw emotion of her traumatic separation from her birth mother.

At the time, I did not disclose my own experience of adoption since I was there to honour her story. However, I was keenly aware of my strong emotional response and found it challenging to maintain my composure. At her home in the rainforest, we settled ourselves in her bedroom for the interview amidst small statues, a beautiful stained-glass mirror, books, shells and other treasures. Although I was aware that I had protectively closed off some of my emotional openness, Naomi's disclosure paradoxically heightened my sensitivity to her inner reality. She described how she had descended into her psychic underworld during that vision quest through journalling, poetry, art, song and movement to face the primal wound of her adoption.

This liminal episode had been a pivotal time of psychic reorganisation for Naomi. She led me through her experience by reading from her journal and sharing her poetry and artwork from those five days. Along the way, we incorporated her early menstrual experiences and the births of her five children. Her story, shared so generously here, features her experience of the abandonment of adoption, a legacy with which she still contends today. The edited 'portrait' of our conversation which follows was returned to Naomi for her veto and comments.

Naomi's Story

My spirituality evolved from reading inspirational women writers. With my adoption background, I was drawn to the Goddess and connecting with the Earth, looking for that larger mother figure. The Earth is a mother image because it's the body on which we live, just as we have a body in which we grow our babies. I had no religious background and would have called myself an atheist for quite a long time but somewhere along the line that changed.

When did it change for you?

When I left my husband fourteen years ago. One day I was driving along feeling fine, then I suddenly couldn't breathe - I had to pull over. It was unbelievably strong. It happened again in the middle of the night. By then, I *did* know that I was adopted.

Did you think it was about that?

Not straight away - I didn't know what I was grappling with. I was staying at a friend's place and thought I'd have to wake her up because I needed to be held so much. It threw me back into a place that had been very closed-off and separating from my husband opened it. That pain drew me to look for ways to survive. I needed to find ... something. When I slip into that baby place, it's too scary for a small person to cope with because for a baby, being completely on your own is death in the end. That level of fear had something to do with the sense of abandonment. In my vision quest, I wrote a poem about it. It seems to me when I read it, I can feel that space ...

Imagine an astronaut outside his ship
 Imagine his thoughts, his fears,
 Imagine his face as his lifeline breaks
 And he hurtles off alone
 In an unendingness
 Alone
 Alone
 Imagine the scream!

It was as close as I could come to an image of how ... there just were no words. With that level of pain, I was drawn to women who were writing these powerful books. I was never drawn to mainstream Christian religion with the male image.

[Naomi's poem moved me deeply. I was stunned by the power of her words and felt a compelling emotional resonance with her acute sense of abandonment. There was a pause before I could summons the words to ask her:]

So although you can't put words on the depth of anguish in that experience, at the same time it's an opening in your spirit ... to healing?

Yes, it did work like that. The wound can drag us down and make our lives black and miserable and bitter, or if we turn it around, the wound is where the power comes from. For me, that was the five days to turn it around.

Do you want to talk about those five days?

I'd been reading about a vision quest and somewhere inside me was this wise woman ... About eleven years ago, I belonged to a women's co-operative and we did a weekend retreat. One woman did a guided meditation where she led us on a journey to a fireside. By the fire was a hooded woman, elderly and lovely. I couldn't see her face but she said she'd been waiting for me for a long time ... it was as if meeting her would mean I was operating more powerfully in the world. She had faith that I was going to get there one day, but I wasn't there yet. Then she looked up and when we looked into each other's eyes, I realised she was an older me, that somewhere inside me the person I wanted to be was waiting. That was the background to this cathartic five days.

Tell me how that was triggered for you.

It was New Year's Eve. I'd been visiting friends and I felt separated from people, noticing that I was different. Something was going on, almost like this wise woman giving me a kick-start. My partner and I had a misunderstanding. I got distressed and felt totally separate, so he took me home and then left. When he left me, I got ... disturbed really. I frightened myself. I started breaking tiles on my head, trying to distract myself. It was better to start smashing things around the house than turn it on myself. I could have done something worse because the pain becomes so big ... It's a tunnel and you can make sensible decisions up to a point and then, if reality slips enough, you're no longer ... What worried me was I'd already stepped to that point and then there'd be no ... I rang a friend who knew my history and she knew straight away what was happening. When she said: 'you can ring me any time', I felt a huge relief. It was like that astronaut had his lifeline back. I was able to go to sleep and when I woke up in the morning, I was writing this poetry. The first day was about rage.

How many of us feel the terror of the rage
That killed our mother
Or rage that came to save us
From the stark and desolate endlessness of
Emptiness
The rage that came to fill an abandoned landscape
That haunts us still
A rage that screamed and clawed and
Shred and rent and roared
A rage that killed them all
Frightened them away and left us alone
And very very small

A rage that left us shivering
As the tears tap out 'my fault, my fault, my fault'
A never ending pity-filled refrain
Casting us to hell and leaving us the blame
And the terror grips again
This time without the comfort of the rage
To shield the pain

The emptiness is everywhere and unending
 Except for the child, except for the scream
 Resounding relentlessly
 Tearing through her mind

[As a birth mother, the effect of these words on me was electrifying. I thought instantly of my relinquished son and wondered if he had felt similar things. Inside, a turmoil of emotion surged through me and yet outwardly, I appeared composed and attentive. It was a paradox of immersion in a high voltage emotional response that was deeply personal and yet simultaneously being spellbound by the power and originality of the way Naomi told her story.]

I realised the rage was hiding the pain because it was too much at the time. I had this huge raging cat inside me, a black tiger ... I could feel claws ... I found myself on hands and knees and I explored that rage, that caged wild cat, and eventually, I played with it and became familiar with its capacity. I called it Black Tiger Woman to acknowledge its essence and that it wasn't trying to damage me or anybody else. It was a protective device to keep me from being a baby lost in an unfathomable ... it was an ally to give form to the emotion. That night I needed a body far larger and more powerful than a baby's ...

To contain the rage that came to fill a void
 A void that threatens to turn me inside out
 So there is void within and void without
 And me?
 Where am I?

When I rang my friend, there was a voice inside me like a drum: ring somebody, ring somebody ... It was like that wise woman recognised it wasn't a situation to be left alone. Through this poem I realised the rage meant I had to replace the fear with something else.

What did you replace it with?

Eventually I replaced it with the workshops. It's brought a lot of healing. During my vision quest, I also drew anything I liked. I did one called the Crying Madonna. It was about inheriting the wound, recognising that our children are born from us and the wounds are passed on.

Warning to parents hurting children
 With voice or deed
 So many times I've stilled my tongue
 Remembering with sympathy and guilt
 The things I have done.
 No more.
 Children should never have to suffer
 The venom of the bite
 Manufactured from our pain.

I realised that my wounds had caused me to ... give them to others. Then came the young maiden and the older wise woman ... addressing issues about menstruation. That was mainly about my self-concept, growing up thinking I was ugly, and how that really coloured my choices in life. My mother didn't make my womanhood seem important. During the vision quest, there was a section where I acknowledged how wonderful it was having this time where I was just me. I wasn't a mother, I wasn't a daughter, I was just me. Ha! That's curious: the me that is for me alone. The word 'alone' is coming up but in a different context. I was moving past the pain.

So you've come through the rage and your black tiger into solitude?

Yes, and then it moved on to memories. Not having been encouraged to appreciate my qualities by my mother, I moved onto my husband not seeing me in any special light. Once I asked if I was beautiful and he said: 'not everyone can be beautiful'. I wanted to be acknowledged as special to someone. Then I moved on to the lover, exploring that relationship and the need to be wanted. I realised that what I was looking for from men was really only a level up here. There was something deeper that I needed and that was the Grail Queen. And the heart of the matter was:

A baby needs a loving touch from her mother.
 So she doesn't have to seek it over and over from a lover.
 A baby needs to hear words of love and worship from her mother
 So she doesn't have to plead them over and over from a lover.
 Is it the loving caress of an adoring mother
 That I've craved relentlessly still?
 Did I fail to be told way back then
 Just how beautiful I was?
 Did I fail?
 What a choice of words!
 The failure was not mine.

By then I was processing how much a baby can take in from that moment. A baby needs to know she is totally accepted ... I don't know what happened with my birth mother.

Did I look in the adoring eyes of the mother
 Ready to receive that worship as my due
 And was it there?
 Perhaps I saw the eyes of one much too young
 Who wasn't ready
 Who'd never had her fill
 Of this sort of love

And so I crave it still
 To be treated just once
 As the most beautiful, most adored
 Most welcome baby
 That there has ever been
 Thank God
 I gave my babies that at least

I was pleased that whatever had been going on with me before I was aware of all this, I was drawn to homebirth and I made sure my babies were with me.

How did you decide on home birth?

I was concerned about going to hospital; I'd heard birth stories that didn't sound good. Then I met a midwife who had just started doing homebirths. If I'm honest, the first two were awful ... (long pause) ... I suffered with each contraction, rather than welcoming the energy. I was really frightened. With the third one, it was different. I had been at another woman's homebirth. She didn't have a partner and during her birthing, she was in my arms for about three hours, totally making eye contact. I never forgot the way her eyes looked, there were no barriers. She was amazing! After seeing what it could be like, something changed inside me, so when I had my next child I came to a whole different energy. My last two were both perfect twelve hour labours and they were born into my own hands. It was exactly what I wanted.

The last poem I wrote in my vision quest was called Finale when I finally realised what I was going to do.

Where do I go from here?
 What will I do with all of this?
 Does this mean I'm safe for evermore
 From the pain, the rage and the emptiness?
 No, all that is still a part of me
 But I love it now.
 It forms the body of a precious babe
 That is mine forever more.

What I've gained is clarity and understanding
 During my time of retreat on my own
 While shedding tears of bitterness, grief and joy
 I've earned the insight and the strength
 To be my own loving mother.

I think when next that babe deep within
 Cries out in fear
 I'll recognise the labour signs
 And take me: mother and babe
 To the safety of my room
 And there in quietness and solitude
 Give birth
 And receive that babe
 With all the love on earth

[As Naomi read these words, I thought how relevant her insights were not just for the experience of adoption but for any kind of abandonment experience – inadequate parenting, being born after a previous stillborn baby, the death of a parent. Here too healing involves learning the art of self-nurture, or as Naomi described it, how to be a loving mother to oneself.]

Did you feel different when you came out of those five days?

Yes, I felt much more powerful and I knew that the wound wouldn't have to stay a wound, that I could do something with it. Some of the people I'd read about had experiences they had to turn around and I realised I could do that too and that it would be the source of ...

Power and strength?

Yes, it's one and the same place, and it's been a creative thing for me. The last part I called a Sacred Pledge.

For the hero
The place of wounding
Has become the source of power
And a binding vow must be spoken
For once the hero discovers
The nature of the Holy Grail
Forevermore must the hero swear allegiance
For knowledge exacts a price
The price is to honour the Holy Grail
And that honouring requires the hero's life.

I began writing the workshops through my last pregnancy. I wanted to give women a chance to realise how important they are in their baby's life, that a bond exists and they have a huge influence. Women need nurturing to be able to meet the baby's needs and I've supported mothers so they can do that.

When we are pregnant we stand at the veil between life and death. We are the portal for another human life to come to live among us. To do that seems to me both beautiful and terrible. A woman who gives birth should not be the same as before she fell pregnant. If she is, how can she be ready for the awesome responsibility of motherhood? When a woman is supported to be in touch with her pregnancy and encouraged to dive into its spirituality, she will change. Pregnancy is a rite of passage to prepare us for a new role. The nine months aren't just to grow a baby. They are to grow a mother too.

Birth is such an awesome event. Women are using their bodies to bring new life into being. When we take the time to consider what we are doing with our bodies, we can allow ourselves to be in awe of the process. We are sacred; we are as a Goddess when we give birth. We are always part of the sacred but we forget. Pregnancy is a time to remember.

Discussion

Before I could give Naomi her portrait, I needed to disclose my own adoption experience to her. When I phoned, she told me she had been depressed for months. After I recounted my personal adoption experience, she was dumbfounded. I spoke

of the episodic grief and depression I undergo as a birth mother. I told her about the Maori belief that separating a baby from her biological kin inflicts a grave and irreplaceable loss on both the adopted person and the community into which the child was born (Rockel & Ryburn, 1988, p. 6). As we talked, Naomi expressed her relief, realising that her ongoing struggle with depression was not a personal failure but the lifelong legacy of her adoption.

A key theme in Naomi's story is the spiritual connection between a mother and her infant, and the lifelong repercussions when that bond is ruptured as it is by the practice of closed adoption. This practice denies a profound existential truth: "There can be only one birth. It is never superseded. That birth unquestionably concerns a mother and child. They shared a momentous event with enormous cultural meaning which, under ideal circumstances, would have resulted in continuing contact and knowledge of one another until death" (Inglis, 1984, p. 11–12). The collective denial of the irrevocable spiritual connection between a mother and her baby has created immeasurable suffering for those caught up in the web of closed adoption, Naomi and I included.

The policy of closed adoption was promoted during the post-war years in Australia to eliminate illegitimacy and ensure a reliable supply of babies for infertile couples (Gair, 2008). It developed out of a historical period characterised by patriarchal moral values that extolled marriage and the family, prohibited sex outside marriage and ensured 'clean' lines of progeny (Shawyer, 1979). Whilst appearing to address the situation of illegitimacy and infertility, it left a sometimes disempowering and soul destroying legacy for birth parents and adopted people alike (Gair). Sue Gair's study exploring the links between suicide and adoption found that for many adoptees and birth parents, the requirement to 'perform' the approved adoption story provoked "a deep despair and misrelation in a true sense of both their ontological self and correct biological relationships" (2008, p. 22). Depression, mental health issues, suicide attempts and completed suicides were the consequence. Naomi described her borderline suicidal experience when she smashed the tiles on her head: "I could have done something worse because the pain becomes so big".

When adoption was developed as a policy, it was believed that babies should be removed from their mothers at birth before a relationship had begun (Robinson, 2000). However, research in perinatal psychology and foetology has shown the intricate relationship that occurs between mother and baby during pregnancy (Wirth, 2001; Chamberlain, 1988; Verney, 1982). For example, from the seventh month in utero, each phoneme spoken by the mother switches on a precise muscular movement in the baby which paves the way for future language development (Pearce, 1992). For a baby born of a particular mother, that woman is the baby's entire universe.

Pearce (1992) saw this bond as profoundly influential for both the newborn and the mother. He maintained that our triune brain structure (reptilian, limbic system and neocortex) corresponded to three different states of consciousness: physical, subtle and causal. He described the subtle sphere as "the infant's actual world-environment" (Pearce, p. 118) from which develops the brain maps through which a child constructs their worldview. Pearce argued that when maternal and infant subtle spheres overlap for an adequate period of time, as they do with secure bonding and physical closeness, a major block of intuitive communication passes from mother to infant, enabling the baby's physical and emotional development. While this communication may occur below a mother's awareness, the subtle sphere "is the only level of awareness fully active in the infant" (Pearce, p. 117).

This perspective provides a penetrating insight into what happens when that intimate connection is disrupted. Without the vital communication from the mother, Pearce (1992) claimed the infant experiences a profound sense of abandonment and that as a consequence, the full potential of that development is not actualised. Naomi's words graphically illustrate the baby's perspective of this abandonment - an astronaut without a lifeline, cut adrift in the vastness of space. In an irretrievable way, the fabric of her 'actual world-environment' had been torn apart. The abrupt separation from her mother at birth amounted to psychic annihilation, as she described: "for a baby, being completely on your own is death in the end". Pearce pointed out that what happens during this developmental window is of huge significance because it establishes a precedent in the infant for all future movements into the unknown.

The abrupt removal of a baby from her biological mother during the first tender moments of life has been described as inflicting a 'primal wound' (Verrier, 1993). Bonding is a continuum which begins in the womb and continues after birth. When disrupted, "the severing of that connection ... causes a primal or narcissistic wound ... which manifests in a sense of loss, basic mistrust, anxiety and depression, emotional and/or behavioural problems, and difficulties in relationships with significant others" (Verrier, 1993, p. 21). Naomi's experience bears this out. She described feeling "separated from people" and "noticing I was different", experiencing relationship problems and suicidal impulses. Verrier further maintained that the rupture of kinship ties is something from which neither baby nor mother fully recover, a view also held by some Indigenous societies who practice adoption quite differently.

Continuity of kinship and access to one's biological heritage is a basic human right that most people take for granted. Closed adoption with its secrecy and enforced separation is a fundamental violation of that human right. The human toll of this failed social experiment began to be articulated during the 1980s, when birth mothers broke the taboo of silence about the enduring pain of their enforced separation from their children (Inglis, 1984). As a consequence, changes were made to legislation and many Western countries including (most states of) Australia have reformed their practice to open adoption which provides for ongoing relationships between birth parents and adoptive families. While not utopian, there is more chance of conflicts being addressed honestly as they arise. Dorner noted: "When birth parents and adoptive parents know each other and no longer see each other as a threat, they are more likely to honor the place that each has in the child's life. Instead of competing with each other for the child's affection, they can now allow the child to love them all" (1998, p. 15).

Adoption reformer James Gritter maintained that while open adoption "can work beautifully ... it does not erase the original pain" (1997, p. 23). He identified two kinds of pain associated with adoption: the pain of separation and loss intrinsic to the experience, and the pain resulting from fear and inadequate preparation. With the former, the goal is to find ways of soothing and offering relief. The latter however, can be eliminated by honesty: "Where secrecy formerly bred shame, candor now generates trust; and where there is trust, there is potential for intimacy" (p. 80). The aching need for intimacy, which Naomi described as 'the heart of the matter' is poignantly articulated in her poem: "A baby needs a loving touch from her mother, so she doesn't have to seek it over and over from a lover". Through her vision quest, she discovered that self-nurture and self-love are the antidotes to her primal wound of abandonment. Naomi's story shows the transformative potential of 'turning the wound around'. In her liminal experience, she descended into her personal

underworld, embracing its stark pain and re-emerging with the light of consciousness: "What I've gained is clarity and understanding."

When I sent her this 'portrait' of our conversation, Naomi told me: "I was able to see objectively how much my life has been influenced by my early experiences. I saw how part of my drive to bear more babies was to experience those first moments of total love and acceptance I felt for them. I craved the closeness to the sacred which I experienced intensely in those early days with my babies. I wondered if some part of me was trying to recover a moment from my own first days, to relive a sacred time of connection with my mother."

Naomi's feedback about her portrait also revealed her enduring struggle for self-worth, the ongoing legacy of her primal abandonment: "I found myself thinking that perhaps I am a little 'mad'; I guess the truth is that sometimes I am. I notice how much I view life through filters, how often unpleasant refrains are played in the background of my mind and how much I respond to and interact with others from those thoughts. My spirituality can be overwhelmed by my raw soul wounds if I am not vigilant."

While Naomi has courageously worked to transform her painful dowry of abandonment, its abiding influence is a fact of her life with which she must contend. Her story shows that the gossamer strands of a baby's 'actual world-environment' comprise a fragile web that, once rent asunder, does not easily mend. As a birth mother dealing with the ongoing repercussions of my son's adoption, I recognise my enduring sense of loss and rupture as the other side of that coin.

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