

SPANNING THE CULTURAL BRIDGE SERIES

Telling Tales: Stories About Our Children's Past

By Jean MacLeod

An adoptive mother's new book illuminates our children's journey of self-discovery and the importance of a life narrative.

"Mommy, why didn't I grow in your tummy?" I looked my almost three-year-old daughter square in the face and gave her the speech that I had rehearsed in my head for as long as she had been ours. The speech was short, gentle, and sweet. I told her about her birth mother in China, how much she had been loved and how much we loved her now.

"But Mommy, why didn't she keep me?" I took a deep breath and explained that I didn't know for sure, but that it might have had something to do with the China rule about having only one child. I described a few other possibilities and ended with my proclamation of faith - that we were meant to be a family, that I was sure that her birthmother wanted her to have a family for always, and wasn't it wonderful that we had all found each other to love.

Coming down from my poetic rhetoric, I smiled wittingly at the tiny figure in overalls and waited for my hug and kiss. What I got: a look of icy outrage, arms folded in disbelief, and an attitude that screamed, "What a load of c***!" I was unnerved. This was supposed to be a mother-daughter bonding moment in which we celebrated becoming a family. A moment of sadness was allowed, but then things were supposed to be joyful and loving. Why was I feeling like I had tried to tell a sixteen year old there really was a Santa Claus? And how could a three-year-old see through all of my carefully worded, positive explanations? I believed what I was telling her. Why didn't she?

She didn't because she had lived her story, and somewhere, deep inside, she knew the whole truth. My old-soul little girl understood

that a happy adoption is built on a heartbreaking loss long before I did, and she was cutting me no slack.

Flash forward five years: my daughter from Nanchang is now eight years old, and I am an older and wiser mom. Somewhere between then and now my daughter taught me the truth about her story and showed me that pain and loss can be more than evenly matched by a small child's ability to bravely face both sides of reality.

What Our Children Teach Us

This realization became the impetus for the book I wrote. *At Home in this World, a China Adoption Story*. I had come to understand that our daughters and sons from China have pre-adoption stories that lay mostly buried in their unconscious, and many parents are oblivious to the story's significance. These stories are important to our children for the impact they have on the foundation of their identity and as explanations for feelings that our children have few ways to describe.

In "[At Home in this World](#)" - which is written from the viewpoint and in the voice of a pre-adolescent child adopted from China and is meant to be read by similar-aged children - I try to raise and discuss some of the questions and concerns I learned about from my own daughters and from listening to the dozens of adoptees from China whom I've had the joy of meeting. In one passage from the book, its main character reflects about her birth mother:

"I think about my birth mother. I don't know her, and yet I do because she is part of me. I know I was connected to my birth mother before I was born, while she carried me inside her. I learned how my birth mother moved, what foods she liked and how her voice sounded. I sometimes wonder if I look like her. My birth parents gave

me my black hair and almond-shaped eyes and my long piano-playing fingers. Maybe I am smart and graceful and good at music because they are, too. They will always be a piece of who I am."

Adoption is happy-sad or, as my daughter would say, bittersweet. Our children deserve to know and understand the duality of their birth/abandonment/adoption story in order to accept and integrate the experiences and emotions they come to us with. Helping our daughters and sons create an honest story about their early lives does what I had hoped my idyllic, positive spin would do five years ago for my (then) three year old. It allows our children to meld both halves to create a whole; it gives them permission to accept two sets of parents; and it gives them a view of a future in which they have the option to feel centered and at home, any place in this world.

This article was first published in FCC-New England's newsletter, *China Connection*. Jean MacLeod is a freelance writer who has been published in *Adoptive Families Magazine*, *Adoption TODAY*, and in the adoption essay book, *Passage to the Heart*. She has co-developed and facilitates a series of parent education workshops on adoptive family issues and is a mother to three daughters, by birth and adoption.

Her new book, *At Home in This World, a China Adoption Story*, was published in September 2003 by HMK Press.

Jean MacLeod is the Director of Our Chinese Daughter's Foundation (OCDF) Institute (www.ocdf.org). Her recent book, *At Home in this World*, has been a wonderful addition to the understanding of adoption, helping children and parents take a new look at the process through the voice of the adoptee. Jean has held leading roles in the FCC-Metro Detroit chapter and has been instrumental in promoting adoption parenting awareness through her workshops and seminars. Jean now coordinates OCDF's outreach to the adoption community - speaking engagements, workshops, seminars, OCDF events, and pre-adoption programs. Also, Jean works with FCC groups, reunion/orphanage groups/lists, adoption agencies, and Chinese Schools to develop customized programs and OCDF China Tours for their members. She is mother to three daughters, two of whom were adopted from China. A graduate of Western Michigan University, Jean holds a degree in English and is working on her master's degree in library science. She has traveled extensively in her prior career within the transportation and tourism industry, and is at home in Grosse Pointe Farms, Michigan. Email Jean at: Jean@ocdf.org

A parent's guide to accompany the book, "Adoption's Lifetime Issues: What Parents Need to Know," is available on the publisher's website at www.emkpress.com