

## **Adoption and Forming Identity:**

### **The Importance of Life Stories**

**Tom Frame\***

I was the unplanned child of a seventeen-year old girl whose personal circumstances meant that she was unable to nurture me. Shortly after my birth in October 1962 I was relinquished and placed with my adoptive parents. Partly as a consequence of infertility my adoptive father descended into alcoholism and was violent towards my adoptive mother, adoptive sister and me. Childhood was not a happy time in my life. I was often afraid and confused although not because of adoption. It was the affects of alcohol addiction that were most distressing. Why was my adoptive father treating me so cruelly when I was apparently the child he had 'always wanted'? After nearly five years of searching, I located my birthmother in late 1994. We were shortly afterwards reunited. My semi-autobiographical book *Binding Ties: Experience of Adoption and Reunion in Australia* was published in early 1999. It contains an account of my personal reflections on being adopted, why I sought my birthparents, and what I gained from a reunion with my birthmother. This journey of occasional despair and frequent discovery has given me some insights into adoption and thoughts on reunion. I returned to these subjects in my book *Children on Demand: the Ethics of Defying Nature* which appeared in 2008 as part of a larger work on alternative parenthood that also explored donor insemination, invitro fertilisation, surrogacy and posthumous parenthood.

In considering the conduct and consequences of adoption, of greatest interest to me is the question of identity formation. How do people without knowledge of their biological antecedents gain a sense of themselves? This has led me to consider the fascinating interactions between psychology and philosophy which I want to explore briefly. In the work of the German developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, identity is to be discovered rather than created. Individuals are implored to uncover their beginnings, to locate what is immutable, and to recognise what is fixed. Much of this activity is introspective and retrospective. It seems constricting rather than liberating in concentrating on similarities rather than on the essential differences between people.

By way of contrast, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, depicts a dynamic evolution of identity formation in his acclaimed works, *The Sources of Self* and *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Taylor is concerned with the social dynamics of identity, asserting that identity is formed from a range of available and competing sources but principally 'by the people we love'. This is an important distinction, in that identity and its formation are not contingent upon biology. In a chapter entitled 'Inescapable Horizons', Taylor contends that it would actually take a great deal of effort to 'prevent our identity being formed by the people we love'. While recognising that this might seem repugnant to some, Taylor claimed it is unavoidable because 'the making and sustaining of our identity ... remains dialogical throughout our lives'.

Thus, each person has their own way of being human. However, Taylor comments, this is a new idea because

before the late twentieth century no one thought that the differences between human beings had this kind of moral significance. There is a certain way of being human that is my way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else's. But this gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for me.

In traditionally organised societies, personal identity is conferred on an individual by the society they enter at birth and by which they will be farewelled at death. In modern industrial urban societies, identity is either not conferred or must be discovered or re-conferred constantly. A similar concern lies behind the assertion of uniqueness. This has led to a fresh assessment of what it means to be human in a society which regards individuals as anonymous and treats them impersonally. Thus, the twenty-first century quest for identity must be cognisant of a larger global setting – to see human beings as cosmic entities – in addition to the narrower provincial contexts which locate an individual within intimate and loving personal relationships. Taylor goes on to develop what he calls the 'ethics of authenticity', which rest on the premise that how I understand myself will determine how I relate to others. This is because, for Taylor, the sense of the good and the sense of ourselves are somehow related.

By way of contrast, in Taylor's work identity is created rather than discovered. Individuals are encouraged to discern the range of diverse sources from which they are derived, to interpret

and reflect on those which have been existentially most significant, and to challenge those things which prevent them from being true to what they believe is 'the good'. Much of this activity derives from initiative and ingenuity, as it dwells on differences between people rather than similarities. Taylor describes a process of liberation leading to a proper sense of identity as a means of avoiding dependencies. His approach focuses on factors external to the individual and is even speculative in concentrating on the present and the future rather than the past.

A critical reading of psychology and philosophy, of Erikson and Taylor as representatives of both, leads me to the synthesis that identity is discovered *and* created; that some things are given while others are changing. Identity is therefore best understood functionally. Identity formation is, then, a continuing process of coming to know oneself and others, of recognising oneself and others as being essentially similar but also fundamentally different. Combining the work of Erikson and Taylor also admits a role for both sets of parents – biological and social – to play a constructive role in the formation of identity of the adopted child. Therefore, as personal identity is unavoidably located within history but also inextricably bound to culture, individual biographies or 'stories' are highly significant in beginning to understand those parts of an individual's sense of self and behaviour which are inexplicable in terms of either nature or nurture.

There is thus nothing surprising in the number of biographies featuring the subtitle 'The life and times of ...' Human beings recognise that they are captives of time and place. This makes struggle a central theme in human existence, because all people strive at some point in their lives to defy some boundaries while learning at another point to respect limitations. The boundaries and limitations people recognise are as important as their appreciation of personal abilities and potential. This process of virtually grasping one's humanity is tied to the circumstances of one's birth and the condition of the world one enters. Thus, personal biography is indispensable to how individuals understand themselves and how they perceive themselves in relation to the world. When a child expresses an interest in knowing about the circumstances of their birth, we are faced not just with curiosity but with fundamental questions about human identity. As Charles Taylor properly observes, the question, 'Who am I?'

can't necessarily be answered by giving name and genealogy. What does answer this question for me is an understanding of what is of crucial importance to us. To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the

commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the identity within which I am capable of taking a stand.

This makes personal biography important for all adoptees. Our stories are invaluable because each imparts a sense of identity and 'prevents us from being lost in a world where the story is often that we have no story'. Identity is also related to feelings of affinity and consciousness, and the development of values and preferences. It makes us intelligible to ourselves. Our lives, therefore, are bound by many stories but those which incorporate our parents – our forebears – are crucial and primarily formative of identity and individuality. This has been affirmed by developmental psychologist John Sants' work on the concept of 'genealogical bewilderment' and Erikson's exploration of 'identity formations'.

Uncovering our stories is part of a continuing process which is not restricted to late adolescence. It is a curiosity of human society that individual lives are continually interpreted and reinterpreted. As the French social theorist Henri Bergson has shown, memory itself is a 'reiterated act of interpretation'. Consequently, we understand ourselves in terms of both where we are now and where we have come from. This has led some adoptees to claim that the secrecy surrounding their birth parents' stories has deprived them of a vital component in understanding who they are, and has prevented them from formulating an authentic identity for themselves. I am sympathetic to this claim. Nor is there any reason for children born through donor gametes to be denied their linkage to the physical world and history of those donors. These donors are a reference point and part of the individual's life narrative. Having been born in a particular place at a particular time, these circumstances should not be overlooked in an individual's struggle to decipher the meaning of their life.

Identity is more than merely a matter of nature and nurture, as might be suggested by uninformed readings of Erikson and Taylor. Indeed, there is much argument within the nature-nurture debate about their relative and absolute influence on identity. Genes may modify the effects of other genes; they may modify the effects of the environment. Environmental events, both internal and external, may modify the effects of genes, and may modify the effects of other environmental events. But as a synthesis of Erikson and Taylor shows, there is a need to stress that

the development of a healthy sense of identity is not entirely dependent upon knowledge of biological antecedents, or limited to the experience of nurture, as though these were self-evident givens. The interpretation of this information is an integral part of a larger undertaking. As British ethicist Ian Ramsey notes:

the unity of personality ... is to be found in an integrating activity, an activity expressed, embodied and scientifically understood in terms of its genetic, biochemical and endocrine, electronic, neurological and psychological manifestations. What we call human behaviour is an expression of that effective, integrating activity which is peculiarly and distinctively ourselves.

In undertaking this activity myself, of greatest interest to me has been my biological father's identity and character. In what ways did I resemble him? Where did he live? What did he do? How did he handle life's struggles? What were the values and virtues that animated his life? When I met my biological mother in late 1995, I asked the first in a series of questions about my father. She told me his first name and eventually his second name. She thought he was a lawyer. Although she did not know it at the time of my conception, he was already married and had two children. This was and is all I know of my biological father. And that his name might be Charles Murphy and that he was probably born in 1937. At the conclusion of her final letter to me before contact between us ceased in 1997, my biological mother wrote: 'I guess I owe you an apology for everything I have done to you ... and I apologise to you'. There was no need for her to apologise. She had given me the gift of life and I will always be grateful for that. I continue to hope that my father might one day materialise as the missing piece of the mosaic that is my life.

Some years ago I read the autobiography of the great British actor Sir Alec Guinness, entitled *Blessings in Disguise*. Guinness explained that he 'was born to confusion and totally immersed in it for several years'. His father's name was not recorded on his birth certificate and his mother married several times, each marriage prompting a change of name. Several men were possibilities but he never gathered enough evidence to be sure. As he came to the end of his story, Guinness said: 'I have to admit that the search for a father has been my constant, though fairly minor, speculation for fifty years.' Guinness purchased a gold pocket-watch with earnings from a play after his dream of receiving something from his father when he turned twenty-one did not materialise. He had engraved on the inside, 'The readiness is all.' It seemed a rather odd sentiment

until he explained: 'Not that I have ever felt really ready for anything; but in an obscure way I suppose I felt I had arrived – somewhere, somehow, and from God knows where.'

From time to time every adoptee asks the question: 'who am I?' Adoptees are often more curious than most people to know something of their origins, purpose and destiny. Lacking information about or experience of their birthparents, they want to know how and in what ways they are different from other human beings. There is also an interest in knowing whether some of those differences, like fingerprints, justify the belief that each human being is unique and, therefore, of infinite value.

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