

More than just a survivor

VIV FOGEL

Viv Fogel was born in 1948 and adopted at ten months old by traumatised Holocaust survivors and this experience formed her. Years of psychotherapy - and later training to become one helped her to repair the damage of a broken attachment and to function in the world with trust, entitlement and a resilient sense of self. Making art, writing and teaching also helped. Viv has painted murals in Hackney, taught art in Islington, been a screen-printer, community worker, poetry events organiser and performer. Her poems have been published in various anthologies and magazines since the mid-70s. From 1980 to 1982 she was one of the Evettes, a feminist performing quartet. For over 25 years, Viv has worked as an integrative psychotherapist and supervisor. She gives seminars, writes articles and teaches therapists energy psychology techniques such as EFT, a form of meridian therapy. Her Daughter has taught her how to mother.

My birth mother, Jenni, whom I traced and met in the late 90s, had moved to the United States when she realised that she had "lost me". She died a few years ago. She had a son, my half-brother, ten years younger than me, who has his own family and children. For him I was the missing piece of the puzzle. My birth mother kept her secret for 50 years and when I finally made contact with her, she did not want to know. Her heart had been closed off and protected for so long. Gradually I chipped away at it, a light holiday postcard here, a birthday card there, photos of my daughter, her grandchild, with her child's handwriting to 'Dear grandma' and slowly, slowly, her heart began to soften and open. Eventually, we began to speak on the phone.

Transatlantic conversations - her US drawl made me smile. 'Waal - I gotta go to the john now - so long...'

And then, just as I was about to go over and meet her, her heart gave out. I could not help but blame myself - yet again - as the cause of her misery. She remained in a coma for months and when she finally emerged, her brain was damaged by the cardiac arrest. I

My birth father was her married boss, long since dead. He contributed some payments for my clothes and food in the nursing home; I still have the receipts.

(I have written about my meeting with her, in an article called 'Motherlove', Re-Vision.ing, 2002)

Shortly before he died, my adoptive father, whom I adored, handed me a wadge of correspondence between the unofficial adoption "agency" and himself and his wife, the prospective adopters.

Apparently I was a non-thriving baby (depressed?) whom they, as prospective parents, feared might be brain damaged, so I was moved to another nursing home where the quality of care and attention I received was much improved.

I grew plump and rosy, passed the "intelligence" tests and was cute enough to be adopted! By then I was ten months old. Some of those early trauma memories (embodied almost at cellular level) surfaced with a vengeance when I gave birth to my own baby daughter. For many adoptees, the birth of their own child will be both re-traumatising -- and transformatively healing.

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My adoptive mother was a Jewish immigrant from Vienna. She had left school at the age of 14, although she was very bright, to work as a seamstress and help support her family. She escaped to England just as Hitler was coming into power, on the advice of a young SS officer who befriended her. She managed to bring her brother, his wife and her youngest sister over, but her favourite brother, a jazz pianist, shot himself and her parents persuaded her to leave them behind. They perished in Auschwitz.

She worked in service as a maid (her younger sister was young enough to go to school) and later as a machinist in a small clothes factory. She never forgave herself for those she left behind. She became mentally unstable and depressed, even undergoing ECT (electric shock treatment) whereas today she might have received counselling. She told me the Nazi doctors had butchered her and so she couldn't have babies. I believed her. Now I see this as a metaphorical truth, not fact.

She hurled some cruel and unforgiveable statements at me as I turned into a teenager, which I duly internalised, and no matter how much therapy you do on these things, you never quite forget them. I imagine today she would probably not have been allowed to adopt. I don't think she meant to hurt me, but in her "bad" moments, her bitterness and self-loathing seemed to be projected onto me, the "stranger" in her midst, and I became, then, the object of her hatred, fear and abuse. It was almost as if I became the "Nazi tormentor". 'You must have been born from the Devil,' she would scream. That affected me throughout my early life. I was convinced I was somehow different - and "bad" -- and that somehow I had to make it up to everyone around (including God).

Adoptees are skilful adaptees. "No child of mine would act as you do!" I was trying to be this new phenomenon: the teenager. In the early 60s this meant hanging out with friends in the local coffee bar, talking about existentialism and French films. I wore black polo-neck sweaters, panstick lipstick and thick eyeliner, hidden behind a fringe. I was into Miles Davies and the Beat Poets. I didn't do sex or drugs until my early 20s but she was still suspicious. When she "came back down" she would smother me effusively with apologies. I never trusted her - and on reflection, I can see that she was probably bi-polar.

In contrast, my adoptive father was a rock, an anchor, my lifeline. He stood by her but I knew he was on my side too. I still miss him. He had a wicked sense of humour and was a good listener. Stubborn too, and fiercely proud of me. I was his daughter and I felt his protective love for me. He had been in a concentration camp (Buchenwald) until a wealthy relative paid money to get him out. He still had the number tattooed on his inner forearm, still had the memories and horror stories. He was one of the lucky ones.

So, both my adoptive parents were immigrants with 'survivor guilt' and I lived and internalised that feeling. For many years I successfully made it my own, this belief that I was not entitled to live. As well as my particular Holocaust backdrop, this sense of guilt and disentanglement is a familiar one for people who have been adopted. Many adoptees feel unentitled, that they should not be here. For some, this may be experienced pre-birth, in utero, from a womb that is hostile or fearful of carrying them.

On the positive side, being adopted has formed me. I am not just a survivor but I thrive.

I am resourceful and resilient, and transform and heal through being creative. *Many adoptees have an urge to be creative, to "make their mark" in the world - and this is a strong*

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motivational drive. It's as if we need to get hold of the world, and say, "Look at me. I'm here and I have a right to be, so see me, acknowledge me, love me." We want to shape and form a world for ourselves that we were once powerless to shape. Being creative means literally to make our own 'worlds'.

I believe that the years of transpersonal psychotherapy I received from my late 20s and into my 30s, and then training to become a psychotherapist myself, helped me repair the damage of a broken attachment, and to function in the world with trust and a strong sense of self.

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