

# MANY HANDS: an adopted daughter's healing journey

Marcy Axness

**M**y real healing, I once thought, began on the breezy morning when I watched my adoptive mother's ashes sink into the endless blue of Maui's friendly waves. Even as I sobbed the deepest of soul-shaking tears—had I ever cried so hard before?—I was puzzled, for these waves of grief were out of proportion to my rather detached, superficial relationship with my dead mother. We were cohabitants, friendly compatriots, occasional buddies, but never bonded mother and daughter, intimate, invested. Even as I wept convulsively, the part of me that always watched from afar wondered why. I wasn't to find out for many years to come, for my body/mind/soul wasn't about to let go of its driving secrets without a struggle, without a threat.

That threat came in the form of an 8 lb., 14 1/2 oz. bundle of unbridled needs and wants born to my husband John and me when I was thirty, whom we named Ian. The experience of mothering relentlessly chipped away at the artificial self I had presented to the world—and myself—for 30 years. Mothering broke me open. My stolid fortresses of defense and control, my “Things are perfect, I'm handling everything fine” persona that had thwarted a few earnest attempts at therapy over the years finally began to shred under the pumice of my son's raw, baby neediness, his control-shattering toddler defiance, and the terrifying demands of intimacy that children innocently exact.

So I thought my real healing had come when I began to embrace the needy child inside me and allow her to grieve. My few years of past therapy hadn't been completely wasted for it had given me an intellectual understanding of some of the realities of my childhood and rolled back some of the denial one often embraces regarding family. My first therapist (whom I saw when I was twenty, because of intimacy and sexual problems with my boyfriend) explained to me, after a battery of standard psychological tests, that as a baby I felt completely on my own, “as if you sat up in your crib, looked around, and said ‘I better take care of myself, because there's no one else here for me.’”

I had always thought I'd had a truly ideal and wonderfully interesting, if somewhat unconventional, childhood. I was adopted at five days old in one of the pioneering open adoptions in which my adoptive parents met and were chosen by my birth mother. Mom was a charismatic, energetic, powerfully attractive woman with exquisite taste in everything and a keen business sense. Around the time of my adoption, she was overseeing the construction of our custom home in Tiburon, across the Golden Gate from San Francisco. On the heels of that project she opened a crafts gallery called Many Hands. She wasn't home much, but there was always some caring housekeeper around to attend to me and do the cooking. Many hands attended to me but never the ones that felt like home.

So what I was finally grieving at age 31 was what I'd never received in my adoptive home—the unconditional nurturing, the security, the predictability that children crave and thrive on. And these, in turn, were the things Ian was demanding that I provide him every hour of every day. Trying to meet his demands I was drawing from an empty well, which awakened long-dormant feelings of hurt and loss and rage. One day when Ian was a few months old I said to John, “I feel like he's sucking all the me out of me.” Actually, he was sucking the real me, terrified and raging, out of hiding.



## ACT

Participant  
Resource  
Notebook

*The Core  
Issues*

**Resources**



# ACT

## Participant Resource Notebook

### The Core Issues

### Resources

While inside I struggled, outside I strained to present a status-quo face. I wore J. Crew, I pureed organic baby food, I went to Mommy & Me. I clenched my teeth, and I tried to keep it together. I was living what Clarissa Pinkola Estes calls “the grinning depression.” So for awhile I thought that my real healing began on Ian’s first 4th of July, when, after nursing him and tucking him in for his morning nap, I drove up to a scenic overlook and screamed from my Saab at the panorama of Los Angeles, Beverly Hills and the carefree beach communities, “I HATE BEING A MOTHER!!!!” I had been psychically pummeled into letting go of the desperate façade that all was okay.

I had also slipped back into the anesthetic numbness of my infancy and childhood. I had a wonderful husband, a beautiful son, a lovely home, great friends...but I somehow couldn’t connect with the experience of all that. I felt like Meryl Streep’s character in “Postcards From the Edge,” when she tells Gene Hackman, “I know I have the perfect life, I just can’t feel my life.” I couldn’t inhabit it, feel it against my soul. I was skimming over the surface of life, for fear of the menacing undertow beneath. I wasn’t *un*happy, but I wasn’t happy. My history was repeating itself, and I had enough consciousness to realize that this wasn’t how I wanted to live out my life.

New insights led to more therapy. My therapist found my grinning depression to be resistant, “slippery.” There was a pervasive, free-floating anger around my childhood. I would sit there on her couch, and talk about how I was one of my mother’s accessories...and I would smile. I would recount how my mother neglected me in favor of her work and her hobbies... and I would smile. Johanna urged me to let it up and out, to hit a cushion, to yell the smile off my face. I couldn’t. The wall of shame, of propriety, of what good, *acceptable* girls do, was too tremendous to scale.

None of the issues that had been unveiled from my life to this point had been adoption-related, per se. The kind of neglect and abuse that I experienced go on in all kinds of families, usually in the name of love or guidance or God or money or, as in my mother’s case, an unfortunate case of narcissism. But there was an aspect of my experience as an adoptee yet to be unveiled, an experience shared by countless people, not only adoptees. It is an invisible legacy of early loss which builds their walls of defenses and control stronger, higher, deeper than most—almost impenetrable. And I was to learn about it from my second child, my daughter, Eve. Giver of life.

I’ve thought for a long time now that my real, true healing began on the day before Eve was born. I had to leave a concert at intermission because I was feeling so strange, something akin to nausea, but different. When we returned home, I walked straight through the house, not stopping to hug my son or chat with the babysitter. I closed our bedroom door behind me, stripped off my clothes and crawled into bed. I began to cry, then to sob, wrapped in my sheet in a fetal position. After some moments of this sobbing, the words began to come out of my mouth, “Mommy doesn’t want me, Mommy doesn’t want me...”

I knew exactly what it meant. While I’d barely ever considered my adoption in terms of my emotional life, I was familiar with the concept of developmental psychologist Erik Erikson that when one spends a lot of time with a child of any particular age, unresolved issues from one’s own childhood at that age tend to be awakened. After having nudged and prodded and stirred up the soup of my psyche with the trials of motherhood and my recent year of therapy, this fetus I’d invited to grow under my heart—another budding girl-child—had secretly



# ACT

## Participant Resource Notebook

### The Core Issues

### Resources

continued the unearthing process, which culminated in this spontaneous regression to my own pre-birth feelings.

Toward the end of Eve's first year of life, I delved into the research on the psychological effects of mother/newborn separation, by such people as D.W. Winnicott back in the 50's, and Nancy Verrier, who was then researching her concept of the "primal wound," an indelible existential imprint of loss occurring in babies separated from mothers at birth. This inaugurated my next journey of discovery.

I began to devour adoption literature by people versed in the ambivalent nature of that profound experience. Their soothing words of explanation, validation, and context corroborated my longshunned reality and flowed over me, through me, and deep down inside. I sighed the deep, relieved sigh that comes with being known, being acknowledged. I was not crazy, just appropriately grief-stricken by losses that had never been spoken of. I had endured a sort of "Gaslight" existence in a family that couldn't speak the truth about much at all and certainly not the painful truths about dead babies and broken wombs and mommies who couldn't keep their daughters; a family who instead put smiles where weeping faces had a right to be.

Nancy Verrier's work led me deep into pre- and peri-natal research, which continues as the field charts new territory. For the past 15 years, the work of people like Thomas Verny (*The Secret Life of the Unborn Child*) and David Chamberlain (*Babies Remember Birth*) has promoted a broadening understanding of how profoundly affected a person can be by the circumstances surrounding the pregnancy of his or her mother, and by a mother's attitudes and feelings toward her unborn child.

Profound revelations about the prenatal trauma in adopted (and many other) people continued to accumulate in my files. I soon came to understand the primal wound as a *continuum* of separation beginning months earlier in the womb of a mother who has emotionally detached from her baby. Then I met and interviewed Dr. William Emerson, a pioneering psychologist who has been treating infants, children and adults for pre- and peri-natal trauma for twenty years and has worked with hundreds of adoptees and their families. Dr. Emerson maintains that the greatest trauma to adoptees happens in the first trimester!

As incredulous as I was when he first said this, it soon made profound sense to me, as he explained the foundational traumas of being a mistaken conception, of having a mother who is disappointed at the news of her pregnancy, who may psychologically reject the baby inside her, or perhaps even fantasize about, actively consider, or seek abortion. (These circumstances aren't true of all adoptive pregnancies, but certainly a majority.) The message transmitted to that incipient being is that she shouldn't exist, she doesn't deserve to exist, her creator doesn't want her to exist. Dr. Emerson believes that it is in those early weeks of intermingled genesis and rejection that the artificial self begins to form, out of sheer survival instinct.

Everything he said resonated deeply within me, and helped make sense of the fact that my core issue goes beneath abandonment and rejection, to my basic feelings of *unworthiness of existence*, of the basic existential sense of simply *being wrong*.

The field of pre- and peri-natal psychology presumes a primal level of consciousness at conception, a notion that I finally came to believe because it wasn't my intellect that was guiding me, but my gut experience. I began working with a pre- and peri-natal therapist, and connected with the primal, disowned feelings that threatened to overwhelm me as a tiny, ego-less being—intense, smothering feelings about annihilation, which laid the foundation for my very psyche. There was the rage which threatened to consume me (rage at my birthmother for "throwing me away," at my adoptive parents for not seeing, and easing, my deep pain, and

at the world for letting this happen to me) the hopelessness and helplessness, and the nearly unbearable sadness and longing.

It was *this* deep sorrow, unearthed for just a moment, that flowed in those tears so long ago when I buried my mother-my ache for the lost mother, the original one.

All of my previous years of trying to “reframe” my attitudes or amend my responses through insight or diligently incanting affirmations never seemed to have a significant or lasting effect, which added to my frustration and feeling of incompetence. It was like trying to push a car with a flat tire uphill in gravel—it always slipped back the minute I relaxed. When I finally approached my issues within the various frameworks that incorporate acknowledgment of shaping prenatal trauma—including some body/mind approaches in conjunction with the pre- and peri-natal therapy—it was as if I inflated the tire, swept away the gravel, and drove into my life with the top down and the sun on my face.

I’m emotionally available, I’m able to focus outward rather than compelled to turn inward, I get to experience in a connected way the moments of my life, rather than feeling the need to control those moments and thus remain apart from them. Most blessed of all, I experience my children as joyous gifts rather than burdens. Those cosmic flashes we all occasionally get—of oneness with everything, of complete peace, of the feeling that all is right in this very moment—have begun to fill up my life as rule rather than exception.

There were times when I walked into (my therapist) Wendy’s office feeling dismantled, manic, anxious, totally un-grounded; and emerged centered, peaceful, at ease, connected back to my life. I truly believe this kind of deep work is nature’s Prozac; everything I have experienced has been about lifting the lid off of a lifelong depression, which some believe is caused by intense, deeply-held feelings seeking—and *resisting*—expression. And as bottomless as I despaired that my pit of dark feelings felt, slowly, almost imperceptibly, that bottom materialized...and then continued to rise and become weight-bearing: I don’t fall through anymore. Things happen, old primal buttons get pushed, I may cry or yell or become decidedly unpleasant for a brief time. But that bottom, no longer so terrifyingly deep, holds, I can trust it. I don’t fall very far, and then I step out. Healing has taken place, undeniably; and just as undeniably, it is ever unfinished: always healing, never “healed.”

**S**o, as in the space/time continuum of the new physics, my real, true healing was, and is, *always* beginning. The layers of denial slough off and the work deepens, as wounds open further to the balm of new insights and—most critically—skillful empathy. My journey back to the pain of the womb needed the prelude of some basic understandings about what had come later. It was a tracing backwards and inwards, beginning where the hurt was less, and going to where the agony lay, the agony woven into my marrow and my psyche.

Wendy once explained to me that you don’t get to get what you never got. You only get to feel how bad it feels, and that’s when you heal. “It’s already gone, it’s already lost, and the only thing that you can do in therapy to heal is *feel the loss*. There’s *nothing* to fill that hole—there’s no man, there’s no sex, there’s no drugs, there’s no house, there’s no money, because it’s already a loss. People hate that, because they want a therapist to fix it. But all you can do is bring them to that empty hole, and let them look in again, and scream at the emptiness.”



# ACT

Participant  
Resource  
Notebook

The Core  
Issues  
Resources

It took many years, and many hands to guide me to that empty hole, to help me find the strength to look in without turning away again, and to hold me while I quaked. It took many hands, along with my own, to deliver me my real, true life. Bless them all.

*Marcy Axness, Ph.D., writes and speaks internationally on pre- and perinatal development, including primal attachment issues in adoption—as illuminated in her doctoral dissertation, “Malattachment and the Self Struggle: Separation, Survival and Healing.” Using as a narrative foundation her own experiences as an adoptee and a mother, she guides parents in supporting their children’s optimal early development through the practical application of leading-edge research.*

*She welcomes correspondence at [dr\\_marcy@quantumparenting.com](mailto:dr_marcy@quantumparenting.com). Additional articles by this author on a variety of related subjects can be accessed at [www.quantumparenting.com](http://www.quantumparenting.com).*

© 2000. Reprinted with permission from the author.



# ACT

**Participant  
Resource  
Notebook**

*The Core  
Issues*  
**Resources**