

THE SEVEN CORE ISSUES AND ME

Penny Callan Partridge, M.S.W.

My first exposure to “the seven core issues” was in the mid-eighties when I went to a presentation by Deborah Silverstein and Sharon Roszia at a meeting of the American Adoption Congress. What I heard there was an entertaining and non-threatening way to invite adoption triad members across the triangle into each other’s experiences.

I am leaving out “professionals” here, because they’re not who I was thinking about at the time. Even though I happen to have a Master of Social Work degree, my perspective on adoption is first and foremost as an adopted person - my truly lifelong experience - and secondarily as an adoptive parent. I take great pride in having helped to start an adoption triad support group back in the early seventies. Adoption Forum (in Pennsylvania) is now celebrating its thirtieth year! My primary role in the adoption community these days is as a poet and writer. So I do not relate to adoption as a “professional.” However, I love to support the work of adoption professionals who want to learn and teach what really helps adoption triad members.

It was for the summer 1996 issue of Pact Press, a special adoptee issue, that I was asked to write a poem about one of the Seven Core Issues in Adoption. This led to my poem, which begins, “I choose grief.” (Those three words used to be its title. Now the title is the poem’s last two words, “new legs.”) This poem took off from the memory of a colleague, a psychiatrist, saying it must be hard not to know the person you were born to. I was furious with him for saying that, and also very grateful. It was certainly one of the things that set me off on a journey I can now see as critical to my development, to my growing new legs. The poem turned out to be one of my best.

Of course, it was then obvious that I should try to write a poem about each of the seven core issues. I did this over the course of two years and learned a lot. I like to think of poems as putting us, through their rhythm and imagery, into a trance. This trance could be either in the writer or the listener. In that trance, we can take things in, or put things together, that we wouldn’t be able to outside the trance.

Ironically, this “word music” can reach people in places of their own wordlessness. If it also gives people words for something they didn’t have words for before, they not only have new insight but also feel more powerful, more in control of the lives, simply by having those new words. I love that my poems have been used in “seven core issues” trainings and in other kinds of adoption presentations as well. I love to hear stories about how they have been used or about how they work.

Recently, I have started a second series of seven core issues poems, again starting with “grief.” When I was perhaps halfway through the first series, Sharon Roszia told me that she and Deborah Silverstein consider “grief” the gateway to all the other issues! This time I was grieving the drug-related death of a young woman who I think remained much too isolated in her experience of having been relinquished and then adopted. For myself, I see the seven core issues as a way of facing my own feelings about my own and others’ adoptions. For



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professionals, I see them as teaching tools that help keep adoption triad members from being alone in their adoption experience. Hear, hear. Hear about the Seven Core Issues in Adoption.



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Penny Callan Partridge is an adopted person and the adoptive parent of a daughter and a son. In 1973, Penny co-founded Adoption Forum, one of the earliest triad support groups, in Philadelphia. She currently lives in Western Massachusetts, where she attends a monthly potluck supper with other adopted people. She expects to write about adoptee experience for the rest of her life. Penny can be reached at P.O. Box 3193, Amherst, MA .

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Out at the Clouds

It's Sunday morning, and I keep humming – da da da dah – “How Great Thou Art,” the hymn sung during the opening of the movie “Secrets and Lies.” I saw the film for the third time Friday night. I was especially glad to revisit a particular line, which I now feel different about than when I first heard it. I think it represents something almost unsayable about the adoptee experience.

To oversimplify, the movie is about the reunion of an adoptee and her birthmother who can barely believe they are related except for the birthmother's signature on a form. The birthmother is white. The adoptee's African ancestry appears so unmixed that more than one person has asked me if I thought someone who looked like that could really have a white parent. Cynthia, the birthmother, is a factory worker. Hortense, the adoptee, is an optometrist whose late adoptive parents had been middle class Londoners of West Indian heritage. It was on the plane trip home from a Caribbean vacation, when Hortense was seven, that her mum had told her she was adopted.

The movie's most haunting line for me comes after Cynthia has asked Hortense if she remembers how she felt when her mother told her. At first there is a bit of evasion, “Well, I guess you don't forget something like that.” And then, with a little more prompting, she says, “I just looked out at the clouds.”

Was this another evasion? I was disappointed when I first heard this line. Was I wishing Hortense had said something I myself had felt but would only recognize when she said it? But what better answer? How could that seven year old have felt anything more direct? Wasn't she mostly in shock – a state of not feeling? Not knowing how to respond? Perhaps confused by a mixture of possible feelings that might contradict each other? Perhaps worried that if she let herself feel anything, she might be overwhelmed? Or that she might hurt the feelings of the person next to her, this person to whom she was closest in the world?

“I just looked out at the clouds.” Exactly. It must have seemed like everything fell away except just herself and the clouds up there. Blankness. Quiet. Space. What else was possible?

One of the spaciest adoptees I ever knew had painted herself a triptych in oils that hung in her living room. It was of sky and clouds. It made her chalk white living room even spacier, as if we were up in a puff of air. Up in the air with little to ground us. But that was exactly how it felt to me – not the being adopted, per se, but the not knowing what my birthparents were like and how I might be like them. It's how I felt before I grounded myself by finding them. “I just looked out at the clouds.” Metaphorically, I did that a lot.

This movie is wonderful in many ways. But where I still feel most deeply touched by it is in the spacey, detached part of me. Which now feels more familiar, more understandable, more acceptable. After this movie, I would even say more embraceable.

- Penny Callan Partridge

(ACT suggests using this poem in relation to the core issue of loss.)



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Abandon / Abandonment

This story starts with my going with my parents and my boy friend to “The Unsinkable Molly Brown” (a local production) and coming home afterwards so full of music and happiness that I sang and sang and sang in my parents’ living room. And the next day the boy friend whom I was going to marry said he couldn’t marry me.

The story gets sadder. I went from that breakup back up to the Bay Area where a friend drove me over the Bay Bridge to my adoption agency where I said I wanted to meet that woman out there who gave birth to me to get help with what to do with my life and the social worker said that bridge has been burned.

The story gets sadder. One Christmas, my father said that what he wanted most from me for Christmas was to hear me belt out those songs from “Molly Brown” again the way I had that night. How I loved my flawed father for wanting that from flawed me. And I tried but I couldn’t do it.

Are you ready for the saddest part? (Yes even sadder before a bit of hope at the end.) I have never let myself go like that again, even though I know it was right for Hans Peterson not to marry me (especially if he couldn’t take me at my happiest!) and even though he said it had nothing to do with my singing.

But here is what I think I may even now be learning from this story. That if someone rejects you, you must try very hard not to do the same to yourself to even a tiny piece of yourself that you’ll be tempted to hold responsible.
can I please remember that my father liked me not holding back?

- Penny Callan Partridge

(ACT suggests using this poem in relation to the core issue of rejection.)



Icons of Their Times

What if we
had known as children
that Lucy and Einstein
had given up children?

She who was
on every week,
he whose name
meant genius.

Would we have
laughed less at Lucy
or sat up more
in math class?

Or just seen
that sometimes
real people
smart funny okay

but real with
real circumstances
don't find a way
to stay with their children?

- Penny Callan Partridge

(ACT suggests using this poem in relation to the core issue of shame and guilt.)



New Legs

I choose grief
that river
that takes
you somewhere.

Like when Charlie said
it must be hard not to
know the person
you were born to.

And off I swept
both hating him
and loving him
for saying it.

Thrashing upstream in
anger to come
swirling down
in sadness.

And bumped
against the bank
to climb out
on new legs.

Where would I
still be
but for that river
and those new legs?

- Penny Callan Partridge

(ACT suggests using this poem in relation to the core issue of grief.)

The Woman Who Was Adopted Has Five Mirrors in Her Bedroom

She can't recall
seeing her face
in a mirror
as a child.

She can't recall
finding her face
in her mind
as a child.

She can't recall
her parents
mentioning
her appearance.

She can't recall
feeling
she had
an appearance.

A roommate
in college
saw how she
stared into mirrors.

A man she married
would scare her
with how
he saw her.

Another man she
married barely
saw her would
walk into her.

She knows now
her birthmother
couldn't bare to see
what she looked like.

-Penny Callan Partridge

She knows now
her parents
couldn't bare to see
who she looked like.

She knows now
any sibling
would have told her
what she looked like.

She knows now
that photographs
on the wall
would have helped.

She doesn't mind
looking older now
so much like
her birthfather.

She doesn't mind
looking older now
so much like
one grandmother.

She doesn't mind
sounding
so much now
like her parents.

The woman
who was adopted
has five mirrors
in her bedroom

and sometimes
whispers
into one of them
I see you.



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(ACT suggests using this poem in relation to the core issue of identity.)

Portrait in Five Parts of a Daughter of Four Parents

I. My Face

It turns out my face
is from by birthfather.

My fifty year *old*
face a mirror image
of the portrait
of our father
on the wall in my
brother's study.

My brother says
the older I get,
the more I bring
him our father,
Billy Duckett,
whom I never knew.

And I tell you
what is either
a sad commentary
on my *life*
of else inevitable
in *my* life:

This bringing
someone to
someone else
without lifting a finger
is one of the
thrills of my life.

It is also what has
made me really
like my face.

II. My Sense of Humor

It turns out my body
is my birthmother's.
My sense of humor,
too, if you are
willing to grant that
either of us had one.
I've rarely told a joke
(or told one right)
and I cried at Abbott
and Costello movies
they were so mean
to the fat one.

Catharine and I
liked coming out
with things bluntly
and being amused
by this privately.
Oh I know this
doesn't leave you
rolling in the aisles
(ho ho) but our first
phone call told me
that I do so have a
sense of humor.



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III. My Art

It turns out my art
is from the mother
who adopted me.
She liked poetry.

She liked T.S. Eliot
("Do I dare...?") and
to read aloud while
she brushed my hair

She liked Gerald Manley
Hopkins' dappled things
and Basho's haiku.
So wouldn't you?

My mother was
an actress turned
fifties housewife.
And I see my life

in so many ways
as improvement,
overcoming,
but also praise

of hers.

IV. My Heart

Does my heart
belong to Daddy?
Who'd thought it fine
not to have any children?
Who let my mother
do all the parenting?
Who had such
stereotypes?
Who was Republican?
Whom I dismissed,
I detached from?
I rejected him.

But he had this
humble heart this
appreciative heart.
He said a certain
symphony was as
close as we get
to heaven on earth.
I was glad he'd
come close to
heaven on earth.
He would sigh
in the shower
it felt so good.
Now I sigh
in the shower
can feel that good

If my heart is his
it's that he
let me see
his heart.

If my heart
is like his
I'm glad I have
his heart.



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V. My Conclusion

I am a junk man's daughter.
I have some pipe from his junk yard.
I can see my face in it.
I have his face.

I am an accountant's daughter.
I have a ledger he kept.
I can account with words.
I have his name.

I am a teacher's daughter.
She encouraged her husband to paint.
I have his prize winning painting.
I have her hands.

I am an actress slash housewife's daughter.
I replay her scenes.
I have her mother's pearls.
I have her dreams.

I am from Arkansas
And Philadelphia,
South Dakota
and Pasadena,
Palo Alto and
Shehawken,
San Gabriel and
Massachussetts.

I will leave on Earth
two adopted children.
and I will be part
of them.

- Penny Callan Partridge

(ACT suggests using this poem in relation to the core issue of intimacy.)



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Pandora in Later Life

And what if I had not?
I would be dead by now.
Dead of my anger.
Dead of my goodness.
Dead of my anger
at my stinking goodness.

Imagine yourself
in a room with a box.
And you don't know
what's in it.
And you don't know
why you shouldn't.

When you closed your eyes,
you would see that box.
When you opened your eyes,
you would see that box.

That box was my life.
My life was in the box.
When I opened the box,
I was letting out my life.

Oh you get blamed
because of other people's
closed boxes. But even
with all of the openings
and closings my life
has been since then,

I have
not
ever
once
even
a single
second
regretted it.

- Penny Callan Partridge

(ACT suggests using this poem in relation to the core issue of mastery and control.)