

“Lessons from Proteus”

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When I think of the words adoption and adolescence, I think about the Greek myth of Proteus. As you may remember, Proteus was a shape shifter, and could not be recognized for who he was, unless one could hold on to him through all his changes. One was rewarded if one could manage this task which took courage, persistence, and determination. As we know, adolescence is a time of trying on identities, creating and discarding them, often in rapid succession. Parents, still dealing with the horror of one shape, are often surprised to find it dropped as quickly as it was acquired, replaced by another one often as unexpected as the first.

For the adopted child, this emerging into one's identity is complicated by the fact that to be true to who he or she is, the adolescent must forge a complex identity. She must hold together aspects from adoptive and birth families and places, as well as the particularity of her own increasingly defined individuality. For instance, imagine an internationally adopted teen, Peruvian and American; middle-class, yet from a birth family that struggled with dire poverty; she is of African and Indian descent, living in a Caucasian home. She may be rejected by immigrant teens from her birth country, and have difficulty fitting into a primarily white neighborhood or school. She may be raised Jewish, but born Catholic; a serious student in a family of athletes. Add to this the standard improvised identities of that age group, including the paraphernalia, belly button rings, drugs, and all.

One gift of holding onto these multiple pieces is the connection they allow with so many others as the adopted adult emerges. If they are nurtured, these many facets of identity strengthen one's empathic imagination. They allow understanding and compassion to grow directly from accepting one's own multiplicity of identity.

Some adopted teens put their parents through difficult trials to test if their roots will continue to be held into the soil of the adoptive family. Having lost day-to-day contact with his/her birthfamily, a teen may wonder if the adoptive family will also be shed or taken away when the going becomes very rough. This arouses intense feelings for many adoptive parents, themselves uncertain of how the bonds of adoption will weather the transit to adulthood. Scary prognostications in the adoption and psychiatric literature about adopted teens frighten some parents into fearing and acting as though all is lost at an early stage of this long process.

Here's are reminders from Proteus:

- Hold fast to your child, following him or her through the permutations and improvisations of identity
 - * Tolerate rejection without retaliating, having faith that it is about testing your love, not throwing you and your love away
 - * Honor the construction of a complex identity, valuing what its gifts and strengths are...even while witnessing the difficulty of constructing and navigating it during adolescence

What we can easily lose sight of is that the very struggles we fear will pull our child away from us, are the struggles that can deepen our bond, if we can survive them.

Few parents of teens can say they actually enjoy the bleaker, more frightening and trying aspects of this process. Talk to those who have weathered it, and indeed they can speak to the gifts coming out of the process: for their own development, their children's, and for their relationship. Ask them to describe their child at a low moment of adolescence and compare it to the adult this child has become. This is usually very reassuring.

Use a mantra in times of need: Great difficulty is not a sign of failure!

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