Myra’s Story: A Life Narrative as It Unfolds in the Treatment and Journey of an Adopted Woman

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This case study is the story of the secrets of a woman who was adopted at birth. It is about how this woman’s experiences, her perceptions, her fantasies, and her realities were all colored by the fact of her being adopted. It is the story about a woman who was victimized from childhood and how her perceptions of herself as a victim, unloved, uncared for, and alone, caused her to draw people to her to continually repeat the abandonment and victimization she suffered when she was given up for adoption by her birth parents.

Adoption has a lifelong impact on all those whose lives have been touched by it. Myra is such a person. Adopted at birth, Myra’s entire life has been influenced by her thoughts and feelings as they relate to her perceptions of herself as an adopted person. Legally adopted from a state agency in a closed adoption, which was popular at that time, all information pertaining to Myra was permanently sealed and unavailable to her. Thus, Myra has no knowledge of her history, medical or otherwise, and of her roots, cultural and religious. Myra has never known anyone biologically connected to her. Most of what Myra surmises about herself and her background is fantasy-driven. Her fantasy concerning her beginnings has influenced her thinking about herself and the world and the people around her. Myra’s fantasies about her adoption color her thoughts and perceptions of herself and her thoughts and perceptions of others. A part of the world she lives in is her own construction. In her world, she is the victim of abandonment. Myra works hard to draw others into her world in order to get them to mistreat her, to ignore her, and to repeat the abandonment she experienced by both her birth parents and her adoptive parents.

HISTORY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF MYRA’S NARRATIVE

Myra grew up in a well-to-do family, in a small suburb. Her adoptive parents were unable to have their own biological children. They adopted two children, who were unrelated to each other, from a state-run foundling home. No information was given to the adoptive parents about either child’s background, other than each infant’s current physical health. Both children had health problems that needed immediate attention. The adoptive parents worked hard to bring both babies back to good health. They were able to achieve these goals. Both children had healthy, active childhoods.
Myra’s sister, Lyla, was seven years older than Myra. The children were close growing up. Myra fondly remembers Lyla and thinks of her often. She missed Lyla when Lyla went off to college. Myra misses Lyla now. Lyla died of cancer ten years ago.

The children’s adoptive mother was an avid volunteer for a variety of social causes and institutions, especially for those less fortunate members of society who were homeless. Myra’s father would not permit Myra’s mother to work. Myra’s father was a professional businessman, highly respected in his field. Both parents spent a great deal of each day away from the home. The nannies and kitchen help hired by Myra’s parents provided the necessary child care and companionship for Lyla and Myra growing up. In addition, Myra’s family lived in a neighborhood surrounded by many other relatives. There were uncles, aunts, and cousins, who were related to the children’s father, interacting daily with Myra and her family. Both of Myra’s parents died of natural causes over 20 years ago.

Myra graduated high school and then completed a two-year technical school program, receiving a certificate in home health care. Although Myra never worked in this field, she worked all her life. She held a number of jobs, such as a dental office receptionist, a factory worker, a checker in a supermarket, a clerk in a bookstore, and as a companion to an elderly woman.

Myra gave birth to one infant relinquished at birth, has had two abortions, has been married, and had another infant who she gave up to her husband upon their divorce and has never seen again. Myra has been retired for the past ten years. She and her lesbian partner live with their cat in a small apartment.

When Myra began her psychotherapy with me, she was very depressed and full of rage. She felt helpless and hopeless. She had been in psychotherapy several times before. As Myra described it, the precipitant of her engaging in psychotherapy in the past was the difficulty she experienced in relationships with both men and women. Myra was always involved in short-term relationships that never lasted for more than a year. Her psychotherapies were also short-term and lasted for one or two years. When Myra entered psychotherapy with me, she had been feeling lost and alone for quite a while, and had virtually shut herself up in her apartment. Her partner, her cat, and her television had been her only contacts with the world, other than Myra’s excursions outside consisting of doctors’ visits, supermarket trips, and her psychotherapy sessions.

Myra recounted her history to me in a voice void of emotion. She said that she has been through this monologue many times before and it bored her. She worried that I would be bored. Myra’s earliest memories revolved around things she learned from her parents. Most of these memories had to do with her ill health and her recovery. As a passing remark, Myra mentioned that she was adopted as an infant. Then she proceeded to outline the important issues she felt that she wanted to address in psychotherapy: her problematic relationships with others, her fears, and her insecurities. When I stopped her to inquire about her adoption, she was clearly disappointed and perplexed. Myra had brought up adoption once when she was seeing a psychiatrist. He paid no attention to it. Myra assumed adoption was unimportant and never brought it up with any other psychotherapist again. Besides, Myra had deep feelings of shame concerning her adoption and never discussed it with anyone. Only her partner knew that Myra was adopted. Myra seemed unaware how her life had been influenced by her adoption. She was willing to discuss her beginnings as a sick infant. She was willing to discuss her anger and dislike concerning her “bossy” adoptive father. She was willing to discuss her conflicted relationship with her partner. But Myra was not interested in discussing adoption.

Myra had been born with an immune deficiency, which affected her physically as a child. The doctors who treated Myra told her parents that she would most probably never be able to walk.
Myra’s parents told Myra that they spent a lot of time, effort, and money to correct this deficiency. Myra remembers spending many summers with her family at the ocean just to improve her health. Myra’s parents were quite proud of their success in turning around Myra’s health. Myra was able to walk and run and spent her childhood as a very physically active little girl. Her favorite memories were running outdoors, playing tag and baseball with her childhood friends.

Myra’s parents were happy that they were able to help both of their children lead relatively healthy lives, despite the doctors’ negative prognoses. But Myra always felt uncomfortable to hear her parents talk about these early years. She wondered whether she was supposed to show her parents the gratitude she felt they were looking for from her.

One day, when Myra was 9 years old, she overheard her mother talking on the telephone about adoption. Myra did not know what the word adoption meant, but instinctively felt it had something very important to do with her. Myra remembered thinking she was finally learning about the big secret, the secret that she felt had been kept from her by her parents all of her life. It was a long time before Myra was ready to ask someone about adoption. She carried the word around with her for quite a while until she allowed herself to talk to someone whom she could trust would tell her the truth. She needed to feel secure that this person would not go back and tell her parents what she felt they did not want her to know. When Myra was finally able to ask a trusted teacher, she thought, “Now I am sure adoption has always been the big secret my parents had been keeping from me.” Myra describes a pervasive feeling that she says haunted her all her life. “All my life I felt cockeyed. I was the wrong kid in the wrong place. I felt like I was just dropped out of the sky onto the ground and I had to fend for myself. I was put into the wrong family, pushed into the wrong place, and I just didn’t fit.”

Myra was shocked to realize that she was probably adopted. She says it was this knowledge that changed her relationship with her family permanently. “Now I knew why I always felt like a sheep that got lost from the herd.” Believing that she was adopted made Myra feel very angry and betrayed by her parents. Myra could not trust them. She wondered if everyone else knew about her secret. Myra wondered if her sister Lyla was adopted, but decided that Lyla could not have been adopted. Lyla never mentioned adoption to Myra; besides, Lyla got along so well with their parents. Myra felt that Lyla was the favorite child, and she alone was the outcast. Myra said nothing.

She felt separate and isolated, a stranger from everyone around her. Now she had a secret to keep from her parents. Myra began to keep all her thoughts and feelings inside. She shared herself with no one.

Since Myra’s parents were wealthy, the children were provided with all they needed in terms of clothing, food, a good home, education, and religion. The family spent time together on trips abroad; on trips to museums, theater, and opera; and by attending church. But Myra began to hate the comforts her parents provided her and her sister. Myra felt that these comforts belonged to her adopted family, not to her. Myra started to refer to herself as “a poor little rich girl,” which she still calls herself today. In Myra’s words, “I had the family, the money, but not the sense of belonging or the love that I needed. My parents wanted me to be something or someone that I wasn’t.”

Myra felt that her family did not allow her to have her own identity. She was named after her father’s favorite aunt. To avoid any confusion, Myra was called by her middle name. This confused and upset Myra. It made her feel as though she was a nobody because she did not even have her own name.

As Myra grew into adolescence, there was more friction at home. Myra’s parents always insisted that Myra dress and act lady-like. They picked out her clothes and expected her to wear what
they chose. Her parents expected certain behaviors from Myra and Lyla at home and in public. Myra felt picked on and singled out at home. She felt she was treated differently from Lyla. Myra felt she was not treated as well as her sister was. Myra felt that she tried very hard to please her parents but never could. Myra could not be what her parents wanted her to be.

Myra kept her true feelings to herself and became increasingly angry and resentful.

I wasn’t like most girls who were interested in dolls and dressing up in their mother’s clothes. I didn’t care what I wore and I hated to dress up. My father made this big deal all the time. My mother dressed me up in the clothes my father picked out for me. My father insisted I wear dresses. All I wanted to tell him was that I liked skirts. But he never asked me what I wanted to wear and he never let me choose my own clothes. I had to listen to him and do as I was told. I never felt that I could be my true self at home.

Myra began to think of herself as two different people. There was the Myra who lived in the house with her family, and the other Myra who played outside with her friends. The “Inside Myra” was quiet and well-behaved, just the way her parents wanted her to be. The “Outside Myra” was her real self, playing in the neighborhood with her friends, feeling happy and worry-free. When Myra was outside with her friends, she did not have to try to please anyone or to feel she was walking on eggshells like she felt as the Inside Myra. Myra dreaded when it was time to go inside and be that other Myra, the Myra her parents wanted her to be.

My parents did what they thought was the best. They fed me and took care of me. They dressed me, sent me to school, and took me places. But they never talked to me. They never really knew the real me. They didn’t know how I felt about things, or what I thought. And my parents did not care about me. They never paid any attention to my feelings. They wanted me to be quiet and well-behaved, you know, children are to be seen and not heard. My father was the real boss. He made all the rules. We all had to listen and obey him, including my mother. Only what he thought and felt was important. He was a real big shot, liked and respected by many people. He loved to control people. He was always bossing my mother around. I hated to see that. My mother tried her best for me, but she always ended up doing just what my father told her to do. I felt as if I didn’t exist. Throughout my whole life, I have felt as if I didn’t exist. It is like it was stamped into me from the day that I was born, that I just don’t exist.

My father’s reputation was the most important thing. He was always telling us not to do anything that would harm our name. He meant we were not to harm his name. Well, I never brought embarrassment to our family name. Of course, my parents never knew about the things I did, because I never got caught. I tried so hard to please my parents, especially my father. But I ended up pleasing no one.

In public, we had to look like the perfect family. I was always told to act like a lady. I was so embarrassed when people would make a fuss over me because of my family name. I hated the standards that went with my name and my family’s reputation. Those weren’t my standards. That wasn’t my name. Oh yes, we had money and that bought me schooling, clothes, food, and a home. But money could never buy me a real family. What I needed was love, caring, and understanding. I never had the love and affection of a real family. I never felt comfortable in the family I grew up with. I never felt that I really belonged.

School was another source of conflict for Myra. Myra remembers trying so hard, but having little success in school. She did poorly on tests. She was very embarrassed when her parents were called to school to discuss her lack of progress. Myra discovered that she was so much better at making her classmates laugh than she was at getting good grades.

It was during her public school years, when Myra was about 10 years old, that her father began “helping” her with her reading. He would sit with her in his private study to help her improve her comprehension. As she entered puberty, Myra’s father combined teaching her “social skills” with
her reading comprehension lessons. He wanted her to act properly so that she would be successful when she began to date boys. Myra did not like her father’s “social skills” teaching. The lessons felt very wrong, and her father hurt her physically. At first, Myra fought him and refused him. But he overpowered her and promised to hurt her even more if she resisted. Myra felt helpless and alone. She felt dirty, embarrassed, and guilty. She was too afraid of her father, and knew her mother was afraid of him too. There was no one Myra could tell, no one to help her; no one would believe her. Her father threatened her and physically hurt her. He told her he was behaving like a father, but she was not behaving like a daughter. Myra was angry, hurt, and confused as she submitted to his weekly “lessons.” The molestations finally stopped when Myra was 17 and sent away to a “boarding school” in Maine. Myra was pregnant by her father, but only her father knew. She went to school in Maine, and had her baby in secret. After Myra gave birth, her father whisked the baby away and told her he arranged for its adoption. When Myra finished high school and returned home, she was never molested by her father again. Their relationship was cold and distant, and remained that way until her father’s death 20 years ago.

Myra had difficulty throughout her school years. In elementary school, Myra barely passed each grade. In high school, she often failed at the end of each school year.

I always had so much trouble in school. I just could not understand things like the other kids did. I tried, but I always seemed to fail. I really needed help, but no one listened to me. My father wanted to avoid being embarrassed in front of his friends and relatives, so he transferred me from one school to another, rather than repeat the grade in the school I was attending. If only someone had taught me to read or learn like the other children. Today I still have trouble reading and comprehending what I read. I still can’t read a chapter book. I am more comfortable watching the news on TV than reading the news in the newspaper.

When Myra was 12 years old, she sneaked up to her parents’ bedroom to search for more information about her true self. There, in her parents’ drawer, Myra found a birth certificate with her name on it, and the city and state where her adoption took place. The name on the birth certificate was the name her adoptive parents had given to her. There was no information about Myra’s true identity. Myra was looking for information about her biological heritage. “Who am I? Where did I come from? Who are my real parents?” Myra has none of these answers. Instead, she created her own stories in her head about her birth parents, and about herself.

It’s always been a mystery to me, why did my biological parents give me up? I just don’t know. Sometimes I think that they were street people without money or a home. They must have disgraced their families when my mother became pregnant with me, and their families put them out to live on the streets. My birth parents probably looked raggedy like bums, just like me. They did not have any money for food or a place to live, and that’s probably why they couldn’t keep me. What I really believe is that they gave me away because I was a bad baby. I know that’s the real reason my birth parents got rid of me. People don’t give good babies away. That’s me, born on the wrong foot. I was born a weirdo, a bad baby. My birth parents gave me away because there was something wrong with me. They would have kept me with them if there hadn’t been something wrong with me. My birth parents didn’t want a bad baby. Nobody wants a bad baby.

Another of Myra’s fantasies was her insisting that she suffered from a mental illness. Myra felt that this mental illness made her a bad baby, causing her birth parents to give her away. Myra constantly watched the talk shows on television to find out what her particular mental illness was that
made her abnormal. “Being an adopted person has taken away my chance of ever being a ‘regular, normal’ person. I’m abnormal and I want to know what’s wrong with me.”

When Myra was 15 years old, her parents sat her down and told her that now she was old enough to understand that they had adopted her when she was three days old. She also learned that her sister Lyla was adopted as well. She and Lyla were not related to each other before they were adopted. Her parents explained that they were unable to have children but wanted children very badly. So they looked for children who needed special care and found Lyla and Myra. Myra listened quietly. She felt very angry, yet she said nothing. She had questions that needed answering, but she was too angry and hurt to ask. She thought to herself, “Why did they wait to tell me now? Why did they keep this from me all my life? What else are they keeping from me?” Instead of asking questions, Myra assured herself that her parents would never answer any of her questions, so she decided she would not waste her time asking.

Myra says she always wanted to know things about herself. She wanted to know about her birth family. She wanted to know where she came from. She wanted to know her biological background. Yet, Myra has never made any effort to find out about her background. She says,

I’ll never know the things I need to know about myself. And that makes me sad. I don’t know anything about my genes, or about my biological parents, or about myself. I don’t know what kind of problems or illnesses I could have. I don’t know what my family looked like. I don’t know what I look like, or who I look like. My birth parents didn’t want me to know anything either. That’s why they had the records sealed. So I am left not knowing a thing about myself. I always feel so stupid when a doctor asks me about my family history. I have to tell the doctor that I don’t have any history. My history is one big blank.

As a child, Myra was angry and resentful. As an adult, Myra is still full of anger and rage. She continues to hide her true feelings, and she still tries to please people. Myra continues to feel depressed and alone, just like she felt as a child growing up.

All through her life, Myra says she has felt like “a nothing, and a nobody.” She says she has never felt important to anyone. Myra says that she believes she will never be important to anybody. Myra is sure that no one will ever care about how she feels or what she thinks. Often, Myra tests people just to prove that this is true.

Myra believes that her birth parents took away her chance of ever having her own identity when they abandoned her at birth. She says that these genes she and her birth parents have in common would have given her the complete understanding, the sense of belonging, and the identity that she feels she lacked with her adopted parents.

I always felt different. I never felt right but I didn’t know why. And then I found out that I was adopted. That was when I knew why I didn’t fit there and I never would fit anywhere. No matter what I did, I would always feel out of place. If I had been brought up by my birth parents, I would not have suffered these feelings. But I wasn’t brought up by my birth parents. My adoptive parents brought me up and I will always suffer for that.

Myra is filled with anxiety. She says she has always been a worrier. She worries about the news she hears on television. When she was younger, her sister would tease her and call her a worry-wart. The darkness that scared her as a child still scares her today. Myra does not know why. She
just knows that she feels safer inside the house than outside. She hates crowded places. Her biggest fear is that someone will break into her home and kidnap her.

As a child, Myra did not like putting her thoughts into words. As an adult, she continues to feel frustrated and angry when she is asked to tell what she is thinking and feeling. Myra wants to be understood without words. She becomes very irritated and annoyed when she is asked to explain what she means. She says that she knows her birth mother would have had that understanding and that she would not have had to do any work for her birth mother to know what Myra was thinking or what she was feeling. She would not have had to do any work to be loved and cared for by her birth parents. She is angry and frustrated that anyone would ask her to work to be understood by another person. Myra expects to be understood without having to say a word.

Myra believes there is a bond between birth parents and birth children that does not exist between adoptive parents and adoptive children. She thinks this is true for all adoptive children and their parents. Myra says that she wishes she knew other adoptive people so that she could verify this. She does not think of Lyla and Lyla’s experience as that of another adopted person, and one she could identify with. Myra prefers to view herself and her experience in her family as being unique and alone.

COMMENTS ON THE PSYCHOTHERAPY

Myra feels that she came into the world with nothing and no one to care about her. She is sad and lonely. She has felt a stranger from others, for most of her life. The pain of feeling like she does not belong is still with her today. She says that she is afraid she will leave this world with nothing and no one to care about her. Consciously, Myra’s biggest fear is that she will end up alone, homeless, and living on the street, like the fantasy she carries with her of her birth parents. Unconsciously, Myra’s wish is to be abandoned and homeless, with no one to love or care for her. Myra pushes people away who are friends, or who want to be friends. She pushes away people who care and want to be in her life. She has a need to see herself as mistreated, ignored, and unloved. Myra pushes away people who want to love and care about her. She looks to involve herself in situations where she will be rejected and left alone.

It took Myra many years to allow herself to tell her story. Each piece of information she gave, Myra held on to as long as she could. I, the psychotherapist, was her fantasized birth mother who knew without words and understood without talking, so Myra became annoyed when I asked her to explain what she meant, or tell me what she was feeling and thinking. She assumed that I automatically understood and treated my questions as if I were joking with her. Although Myra sought psychotherapy to help her with her relationship with her partner, in reality Myra sought therapy in order to feel that someone understood what a victim she was. She did not want to seek out answers and would reject most interpretations. She was not interested in finding out about her roots or in understanding herself. Myra’s psychotherapy ended after she felt she had finished telling her sad story of abandonment. She rejected any efforts towards change and growth. She rejected my interpretations and showed no interest or curiosity in improving her life.

Myra’s life was a reenactment of her own history of being born and then abandoned. Sexually, Myra was promiscuous, a reenactment of the fantasy she held about her own birth mother’s sexuality. Myra’s sexuality was compounded by her father’s continual sexual abuse. Myra gave birth to
two infants and had several abortions. She was married once but gave up all rights to her son as soon as he was born. She left her husband and her son and never saw or had contact with either again. Each infant Myra gave birth to, she abandoned as she felt she was abandoned and forgotten, forever.

Myra talked about her childhood and her adoption in the first and second year of her therapy. She did not talk about her sexual abuse at the hands of her father until the fourth year of therapy. She held on to the other secret births and abortions until she neared the end of her story. She never displayed any emotion or curiosity about the children she had given birth to and then gave up. Her fantasy about them was simple. They were in good homes, and were well taken care of. Myra was sure that they were better off without her. Myra said many times that she would have been a terrible parent.

Myra and I battled in the therapy. I believed Myra wanted to work on her issues concerning her relationship with her partner, her issues about her adoption, the sexual abuse she suffered, her abandonment issues, and her births and abortions. She and I worked to improve Myra’s relationship with her partner, to help her address her adoption, her sexual abuse at the hands of her father, her children, her feelings, and her life. But it would take a lot of work for Myra to address each issue. She would try to talk about the news, or a TV program, or try to speak to me as if she were on a visit to her friend or her neighbor. It was hard for her to address her issues, hard to uncover the secrets she held. And when Myra finally uncovered her very last secret, she was ready to leave psychotherapy. Her aim was to hold onto her feelings of being a sad, lonely, and abandoned woman. She saw herself as a victim and wanted the world, including me, to see her the same way. Each time I would address Myra’s need to be seen as a victim she would accuse me of being mean and refuse to talk. She would accuse me of trying to hurt her feelings and tell me how badly I was making her feel. This is how Myra handled what she did not want to hear.

After long periods of time when no movement occurred and Myra spent her sessions trying to be my friend or share the current news or TV programs she watched, I would introduce the suggestion that we take a break from psychotherapy and return when she wanted to continue to work. Often we would get to a standstill and I would suggest, sometimes curtly, that we were not working, and that Myra did not want to hear any interpretations because she enjoyed feeling bad and sorry for herself. Myra would leave the session hurt and insulted. She would call and return apologetic and angry. These sessions that followed seemed more productive in that Myra talked more freely and seemed to share more of her thoughts and feelings. She seemed to make more of an effort to talk and work after these particular sessions. She would insist that she did not want to terminate her therapy at these junctures and that I was misunderstanding her. But Myra’s work clearly was only about uncovering her secrets.

Often we would get into a battle of aims. Myra wanted to be my friend. She wanted to pass the time talking about things she heard on the news or saw on the television. She would resist working and tease me, trying to make me angry. I wondered aloud if she was trying to make me angry. She would admit that her partner complained about her teasing and her making funny noises, which angered her partner. She and her partner would get into battles. In the past, these battles had been physical in nature. These physical battles and threats were what initially brought Myra into therapy. Her partner would get so angry and frustrated that she would threaten to throw Myra out of their apartment. Myra seemed terribly frightened of being abandoned. As Myra’s therapist, I did not suggest ending therapy because I did not want to be a part of her repetition compulsion. But Myra was
married to her repetition compulsion and the suggestion of taking a break from therapy moved the therapy forward. For Myra, moving forward was completing the telling of her story of her victimization. When she had done this, she was comfortable leaving and continuing her life her way.

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