

I'll be Home for Christmas

Monthly Newsletter | by Cam Lee Small, MS, LPCC

Published December 2022

Hello!!

Thanks so much for taking time to subscribe to my monthly newsletter. How are y'all doing as we enter into the heart of December and the holiday season?

The past week has been a wild one for me and my family. Here are three reflections that came up for me as we begin our four-month stay in China:

Reflection #1

On our recent flight out of Korea, there was a child in the row in front of us who looked about 1.5 yr old, screaming uncontrollably, "Omma!!!"

I thought of how many babies have flown out of Korea screaming with that same desperation. Out loud or silently. With words or pre-verbally.

In this case her mother happened to be sitting a few rows behind us. The flight attendant ran back as the flight was taking off, still in its ascension. Seconds later the mother came running with her arms outstretched to the seat where her child would calm after a couple of minutes.

It was a classic serve-and-return attachment scene, where a child puts out a cue for connection and soothing and their preferred caregiver is able to answer with proximity and warmth. The phrase, "There is no baby, only a baby and its mother" felt so real in that moment.

When adoptees "adjust well," does it mean they've made peace with their mother's absence? And/or do they learn to endure or tolerate their "new" adoptive family's presence? What does that process look like and how do we receive and extend help through it?

My mother-in-law lives here in Nanjing (where I'm currently writing this letter). While we're in quarantine, she sent a text that said, "Welcome home!"

The idea of *home* is a fluid one for me. Maybe a lot of adoptees can relate to that? Who is home. What and where is it. Does it go with us. Does it stay in one place. Is it a place. Do we scream when we leave it. Does our heart swell as we approach it. How do we respond to it, and how does it respond to us?

For me, I'm grateful for the chance to feel at home, here, in China, with my spouse and kids and in-laws, and closer in proximity to Korea. I'm home. And I have room in my heart for more. For those I'll miss as we travel throughout the next few months. I think, for today, *home* is at the intersection of *being here* and *missing there*.

Reflection #2

For the past few days I've been posting updates as our family begins an extended stay in Asia. We're currently navigating an eight-day quarantine. Being in this spot is a culmination of months of intense research, planning, and complex variables (mostly) working out [e.g., our son had RSV so we had to reschedule our flights out a week later].

Someone sent me a message asking, "Are you in China to adopt? I think I'm confused by the hashtags."

The question came just days after I submitted the manuscript for a book I'm writing aimed at exploring the adoptee journey; mine and ours (if you're an adoptee reading this).

Given there were already many adoptee-related topics on my mind still - from researching and writing about them so intensely for the past six months - the question brought up several layers for me (ps nothing against the person who asked the question!!).

1. *Why the hashtags?* For the particular post referenced, I uploaded a video of highlights from the past few days of our travel and used the hashtags #adoptionjourney #adopteejourney #adopteestories #travelblog and #familytime - in general you can browse through my account to see why and how I use certain social media hashtags in relation to my adoption advocacy work - for this post it was simply a nod to the experience of being born in Asia, relinquished, adopted into a white family the U.S. (who I appreciate and love beyond words), and navigating the life-long journey of identity, kinship, geography, birth search, culture, travel, and family as an adoptee.

2. *Our default assumptions.* This is something we're all working on, right? Reflecting on how we interpret events and the assumptions we hold (that are designed to help us bio-physiologically but can sometimes end up missing the mark). What assumptions might be coming up for us that could stir a sense of confusion about an Asian adoptee traveling to Asia with their family? Would there be other reasons that would bring a person to China besides adopting a child?

3. *Language.* How has language been used (even without intention) to restrict our view of the adoption journey? Where have terms or phrases been situated in favor of some while isolating others? Ex., seeing adoptees and their content through the eyes of adoptive parents (as the primary/first perspective), to the general exclusion of other perspectives/possibilities. Could part of the adoption journey include our return to the places from which we were adopted? How would the adoptee experience be changed if that process was grafted into the norms of our

lifespan? Again, nothing against the person who asked this question. And, an opportunity for all of us to continue learning and growing together as members of the adoption community. I imagine an “Oh, of course they’re traveling to [insert any geographic experience related to family/culture of origin here], because that’s a natural dimension of what it’s like to be relinquished and adopted, the two are intrinsically related.” How many adoptees would be relieved of the tensions of having to explain to their adoptive parents why they’d like to search for birth family, why they’re interested in their birth culture and elements associated with their communities of origin, the split guilt of feeling like we’re betraying someone by looking for someone, etc? Language, when restricted to the lens of adopters, becomes life-limiting for those who’ve been adopted. When “adoption journey” can’t include journeying outside the adopter’s world, then the term (and practice) becomes more of a source of captivity - rather than the emotional-relational support it originally promised to offer. How can we continue to reclaim adoption-related language to make it a supportive place - for adoptees - from which dynamic possibilities for personhood and purpose could flourish inward and outward? We’re transforming that which is *functional language* for adopters into a movement toward *confessional liberation* for adoptees - where adoptees are the reference point for information, education, and advocacy for public and institutional discourse, policy, and practice related to adoption.

For adoptees:

How does that dialogue sit with you? Are there any pieces of the question/response that bring up additional thoughts/feelings about the topic(s) represented?

Reflection #3

“Space as a construct therefore becomes important as a site where configurations and reconfigurations of identities become possible or denied. On one hand, space is an arena where contesting definitions, articulations, and representations of identities are enacted. On the other, space, or in this case, reterritorialized space, becomes part of identity formation itself, as it brings about experiences of diversity, displacement, homelessness, and chaos, while opening up possibilities of community and nationhood in unconventional modes. This is where space, in relation to identity, becomes politicized, as both contestation and reterritorialization become intimately connected to the power to define selves and gain access to resources.”

-Rick Bonus | Locating Filipino Americans

For adoptees:

In his book *Locating Filipino Americans*, Rick Bonus conducts site research in San Diego, CA, and shows how Filipino Americans were making places out of grocery stores, community centers, beauty pageants, and newspapers. It’s not accurate to compare the adoptee community to the subjects of Bonus’ research. But can we map some of those space-making concepts onto ours? Over the past year, how have you participated in sites where *configurations and reconfigurations of identities become possible or denied*? Especially as it relates to the continual

defining and re-defining of the adoptee identity and all those dimensions therein? How does the notion of *reterritorialized space* become relevant as you embark on that quest of identity formation? This season - and - as you consider what's possible in and through your reflection-action in 2023?

Bonus, R. (2000). *Locating Filipino Americans*. Philadelphia Temple Press

Closing

What I like about A Christmas Carol is the sense of hope it provides. That our past can in fact be recognized as a primary factor in shaping our current circumstances. But not without also recognizing how the future is inescapably linked to the here-and-now, as we get to decide (generally) what meanings need to stay and which ones need to be re-examined. Meanings of life, suffering, community, healing and actions intent toward a better future in which a new part of us gets to come alive, and to life. What do you think about that? Reflections 1, 2, and 3, were loosely given as touchpoints to bring your past, present, and future into the here-and-now, that you'd be open to unearthing those potentials within you that are currently on standby.

Maybe we'll be home; maybe not; maybe we'll build one together; maybe we'll honor the home that once was or could have been. Whatever the case is for you, may you find rest and renewal this season - along with the joy of being connected to those you love and cherish.

Thank you again for taking time to stay connected with me through these monthly newsletters. Please have a warm and meaningful holiday season and I'll see you in January!

-Cam