

# Two Indispensable Questions for Adoptee Health & Wellbeing

By Korean Adoptee & Therapist Cam Lee Small, MS, LPCC  
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“You have a masterpiece inside you, too, you know. One unlike any that has ever been created, or ever will be. And remember: If you go to your grave without painting your masterpiece, it will not get painted. No one else can paint it. Only you.”

-Gordon MacKenzie

## Family separation is a lifelong event.

And it leaves us with two burning questions:

1. Does such early adversity restrain me from certain qualities of life thereafter?
2. What prohibits me from honoring what - and who - from which I've been separated?

In other words, how do I live a meaningful, satisfying life in the wake of trauma and loss, is that even possible?

And, do I need to sacrifice anything in my life today (e.g., gratitude for people and circumstances, friendship with folks who struggle to understand me, job, etc.) to preserve or re-establish significant connections with my origins?

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\*CONTENT NOTE: adoption, trauma, loss, grief, abuse of power

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You're an adult now. And on top of those piles of laundry and dishes, parking tickets and unopened emails, you're living face to face with the realities of identity, aging, relationships, intimacy, work, parenting, and human suffering that seems only to increase, locally and across the earth.

## Brief Context

For individuals who've experienced relinquishment and separation from one family system and culture - and placement into another, "Just look at everything you've gained!" as a social intervention may not be cutting it like it used to.

Dr. Susan Branco is a Licensed Professional Counselor and Assistant Professor at St. Bonaventure University and specializes in adoptee-centered research. In her article "Relational- Cultural Theory: A Supportive Framework for Transracial Adoptive Families," she speaks to the process of transracial adoption and its impact on those who have been adopted, including barriers we might face:

"Several scholars suggested transracial adoption is an extension of colonization, where White adopters from colonizing nations adopt children of color from colonized nations. Through forced assimilation, the adopted children subsequently lose their connections to the cultural, racial, and ethnic communities." (Branco, 2022)

Other scholars contend that adoptees represent a colonized group of people, "removed from our original families, communities, cultures, and oftentimes stripped of our original language without agency. Unlike settler colonialism, the territory seized and controlled with adoption is not land, but instead our bodies." (Eng, 2010 cited in Newton, 2022).

However you choose to relate with those perspectives, we're simply recognizing that it's common for an adoptee to outgrow the fabric of ideas and resources that once entertained her as a child. You need something different. Your family needs something different.

## Variables for Adoptee Health

As you hold those two burning questions from earlier, **reflect on these two variables** in your life, and see if there are any areas that you'd like to be different:

1. Healing environments
2. Empathic relationships

The truth is, negotiating those two variables today won't resolve your household chores and existential concerns (or parking tickets). Not fully. Not immediately. Maybe not at all.

However, they'll help you engage those two questions of healing and empowerment in the following ways:

## 1. Healing Environments

Around [five million folks](#) wake up each morning to spend large portions of their day in spaces and places that were not designed with them in mind.

And that's just in their personal lives.

They also have to learn how to cope with stressors in vocational and professional settings, which oftentimes aren't much better. Maybe that's you?

In the midst of the various roles you juggle, you know what it feels like to leave an interaction feeling more depleted than fulfilled.

The Office of the Surgeon General released a [Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well Being](#). It was dedicated to workers who lost their lives during the pandemic and to their families.

Research suggested that five workplace attributes were/are most predictive of whether workers experience their organization's culture as "toxic" – which was defined: disrespectful, non-inclusive, cutthroat, unethical, and abusive. It was noted that the pandemic alone did not create those attributes per se, but it made them worse.

Therefore, in response to that and other research, the Five Essentials for Workplace Mental Health & Well-Being were developed and can give practical guidance for incorporating dimensions of healing into your daily environments; not only throughout your family and in adoptee communities, but in general as a local and global

citizen working to be a living, life-giving presence in our world of conflicting realities.

Each of the five essentials is connected to two human needs:

1. Protection from Harm
  - a. Safety
  - b. Security
2. Connection & Community
  - a. Social Support
  - b. Belonging
3. Work-Life Harmony
  - a. Autonomy
  - b. Flexibility
4. Mattering at Work
  - a. Meaning
  - b. Dignity
5. Opportunity for Growth
  - a. Learning
  - b. Accomplishment

Those conceptualizations could be applied to just about any kind of context in which people organize together around common goals. Take time to reflect on what those ideas mean to you. Are there gaps or opportunities in your day-to-day experience? Or essentials that are present in your life that you feel especially encouraged by, interpersonally or otherwise? In addition to your individual reflection, discuss your relationship to them or ask for feedback either in your personal counseling context or with trusted folks in the community.

## **2. Empathic Relationships**

How do you feel when people in your life just get it?

As you've grown into adulthood, you may have become more aware of the various individual and social implications of being adopted. It's also possible that people around you have struggled to keep up. The authors of *The Adoptee Consciousness Model* (Branco et al., 2020)

explain more about the continual, fluid, diverse nature of that experience.

Adoptees too often face barriers to the emotional and practical support we need, which not only shapes our adoption-related coping, but also compromises our sense of meaning and satisfaction in relationships that are significant to us.

According to Relational Cultural Theory mentioned earlier, a key factor that buffers against disconnection in a counseling relationship is mutual empathy (Branco, 2022).

Mutual empathy helps a relationship bounce back from misunderstandings, relational ruptures without repair, and missed responses to your bids for support and connection.

“For some, the adoption journey is met with disinterest, misunderstanding, resistance, disrespect, and even scorn, which can be emotionally destabilizing and even traumatic, leading to an insecure and incomplete sense of self and increased adjustment difficulties. But for those living in family and community contexts that provide empathy, respect, affirmation, and support, the quest for personal understanding and self-integration in relation to adoption progresses reasonably well, with most adults attributing positive feelings to their adoption experience and reporting generally positive life satisfaction (ter Meulen et al., 2019).” (Brodzinski, 2022)

Empathy for adoptees here is foundational to healing interactions.

It is important to note that we're not merely trying to “attribute positive feelings” to your adoption experience. We're promoting an increased sense of awareness and support for your lived experience as a person who has survived family separation - and any transfers of custody that followed.

## How many of those kinds of relationships do you encounter in your daily routine?

Your constellation of healing environments and empathic relationships is made up of spaces and people with whom you can be honest, accountable, and human; allowed to be so, to be with, and invited to become more.

## Choice Outcomes

The following are just a few of the areas in which the payoff could transform our lives, even our world:

- Identity development
- Intimate partner relationships
- Professional opportunities unlocked
- Increased resources and funding
- Ministry design and evaluation
- Family dialogue is normalized
- Racial disparities are addressed
- Reduce abuse of power and control
- Repairs to education curriculum
- Investments in legal representation
- Local and global policy reform
- Socially sanctioned compassion
- Parenting support for adoptees
- Multi-generational peace
- Family preservation
- Joy and zest in life

Some adoptees may have felt [or still feel] helpless and powerless in a variety of contexts throughout their adulthood because they've grown to believe from experience that they're not worthy of help or power.

Adoption is tightly linked to a child's loss of autonomy. Loss of control and voice over circumstances that change their life and assault their voice; relationally, biologically, physically, emotionally, socially, and perhaps even spiritually.

Therefore, the restoration of autonomy is especially important to recognize here.

You get to decide how much you'd like to engage today's two questions. It's also your choice about where and with whom you'd like to explore personalized adjustments and new practices.

Sociologist and scholar Eleana Kim writes extensively about the impact adoptees can have when committed to engaging our stories with truth, imagination, and solidarity:

“Through both cultural production and social practice, adult adoptees have fundamentally altered transnational adoption in the West and in South Korea by insisting upon their recognition as a uniquely situated group of individuals whose personhood and citizenship entail particular needs and rights.” (Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory*, p 266)

As an adoptee, are there any particular needs and rights that you wish more folks knew about you?

Have any of your particular needs and rights ever been dismissed? Mine have. And I'd be lying if I said that [the institution known as "Child Welfare"](#) doesn't have grave work to do in reckoning with these realities in which families are at stake and [lives still need to be accounted for](#).

In discerning your relationship to these two burning questions adult adoptees must negotiate, you may be surprised at what begins to emerge in your life when you take informed risks through the lens of healing environments and empathic relationships.

## Envisioning the Future

Kim's observation highlights the hope and permission [and responsibility even?] - that we have as adoptees to regard these questions with a kind of reverence and curiosity.

Today's idea was aimed to help you navigate these two adoptee-focused questions:

1. Does early adversity related to family separation restrain me from certain qualities of life thereafter?
2. What prohibits me from honoring what - and who - from which I've been separated?

As adoptees, we're discovering and co-creating the answers together. That process is an ongoing one, just as your personhood and humanity are continually in process.

Our capacity for healing and empowerment is influenced by a) the atmospheres in which we allow ourselves to intentionally be, and b) our willingness to mindfully be with and labor for one another as fellow sojourners. No need to have all the answers. No need to hide when we don't.

And, perhaps most importantly, no need to doubt the impact of our individual contributions as we discover and advocate for stronger solutions together.

Family separation is a lifelong event. Our collaborative healing journey must be, too.

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Cam's work has been featured in [National Council for Adoption](#), [Christianity Today](#), [University Minnesota School of Social Work](#), and [Center for Adoption Support and Education](#). Paired with his clinical practice, Cam serves as a training facilitator for the accredited [Permanency and Adoption Competency Certificate](#), a leading post-Master's curriculum shaping adoption competencies for over 1800 professional graduates nationwide. His personal experience as an international adoptee from Korea informs and inspires his current professional work. He formed his own private practice, *Therapy Redeemed*, in 2018 to raise awareness and respond to the mental health needs of adoptees and their families wherever they may be in their adoption journey. Cam's worldwide vision for adoptee-centered advocacy is evident through his 1:1 counseling services, live workshops and support groups, Masterclass trainings, and his unique blend of content creation/collaboration across diverse media channels. His book [The Adoptee's Journey: From Loss and Trauma to Healing and Empowerment](#) addresses the intersection of adoption, mental health, and social justice. Cam's personal insight stands honestly next to his professional acumen, making him a transformative force within the adoptee community and throughout the fields of advocacy and mental health.