

## Identity Shift and Recovery, revised for publication

By Ron Morgan

### Introduction

“... when we are asked—and ask ourselves—*who* we are, we are being asked *what* we are as well.” Kwame Anthony Appiah, “The Ethics of Identity”

This is a revision of the presentation I gave at the National Conference of the American Adoption Congress on March 29, 2008. I had originally intended to co-present with Helen Riley, a Ph.D. candidate and LDA who is writing her thesis on Late Discovery. Unfortunately, Ms. Riley couldn't attend the conference, so I presented solo. However, Helen gave me permission to use some of her preliminary research and findings, and I have folded these in with my own observations to create a seamless presentation. I included the article Ms. Riley published in the Australian journal *The Family Relationships Quarterly* as a handout, so attendees could read the article in its entirety and parse out which parts of the presentation were hers and which were mine.

In this version of my presentation, intended for publication, I have separated Ms. Riley's research from my own observations. Ms. Riley's work is of critical importance to understanding Late Discovery and should be read on its own. Since it's available online, I feel no need to Bowdlerize it for this version of the presentation. Instead, I'd like to use it as a platform from which to further explore notions of Late Discovery and identity.

### Qualifying Late Discovery Adoptees

Late Discovery Adoptees are persons who are raised in families that do not disclose their adoptive status, and who discover the truth about their adoption when they are adults. To some this may appear a clear definition, *sui generis*. To some this definition may seem frayed around the edges...

The disclosure of adoption information in families may be said to occur on a continuum. On one end of this continuum are families that disclose adoption information openly, providing age appropriate information not only about the adoptee's specific adoption but also including perspectives on cultural attitudes toward adoption and providing support as the adoptee interacts with the larger community outside the family. On the other end are adoptive families that never disclose the adoption to the adoptees. Most adoptees have learned about their adoptions somewhere in the middle of this continuum.

So, why LDA's? What differentiates LDAs from other adoptees, who may also have found out that they're adopted by accident or have had limited opportunities to openly discuss adoption in their families, is that for LDAs the disclosure occurs after they have are developmental adults. Late Discovery Adoptees are psychologically and socially

mature and have fully realized identities at the moment of their discoveries. And I believe identity is what is most traumatized and dislocated by Late Discovery.

### Expanding the Narrative Concept of Personal Identity

Helen Riley provides a model of identity based on the theories of Jerome Bruner and M.U. Walker that postulates narrative as a tool for rendering the personal and communal experiences of individuals coherent and resonant. This model also provides a moral discourse by which individuals and their communities can build expectations of mutual responsibility and trust. Riley locates the foundation of this discourse in early childhood development, specifically in the bonds of trust created between parents and child. And she theorizes that the trauma of Late Discovery is directly related to the loss of trust in the parents.

This narrative model of identity has personal, social and moral dimensions. But identity also has historical and political dimensions as well. Identity is polyvalent, and can lay multiple claims to ascendant, or, some argue, essential, qualifications, gender and ethnicity, for instance. And since identity flows with the dictates of narrative structure, identity can be said at the same time to be dynamic. Just as we are not born parents, but become parents (presuming we choose to become parents), we were not born adoptees, we became adoptees.

The narrative identity as described by Bruner uses birth as the starting point of personal identity, with the “diachronous string of events” beginning with our births. But since personal narrative identities are created through interactions with what H. Riley describes as “community”, identities must also be defined by history, by what happened before we were born, as well as by what happens afterwards, not to mention the impact on individual identity by events that occur in our community that may not directly effect the individual but effect the community. Aspects of the historical nature of identity can be genealogical, sociological, cultural, a function of nationality and/or ethnicity. Most likely the historical nature of personal identity is some combination of these aspects and more.

Identity also has political dimensions. To have the identity of a woman is to have a significantly different political identity narrative than a man, to have the identity of a person of color is to have a significantly different political identity than a white person, to have a gay/bisexual/lesbian/transgender identity is to have a different political identity than a straight person, etc. In my opinion to have an adoptee identity is to have a significantly different political identity than a non-adopted person.

### Identity Trauma of Late Discovery

LDAs describe their discovery as traumatic, wrenching, abruptly transformative. LDAs describe their discovery in absolute terms, as annihilation, as if they had become non-existent. Late Discovery causes a sudden erasure of key narrative threads of identity, beginning with the fundamental trust built between parent and infant. LDAs become ‘not who they thought they were’, their parents become “not who the LDA thought they

were”, and this dislocation reverberates outwards until the LDA reaches the realization that the world is not what they thought it was. We may be accustomed to theorizing that persons uprooted from their places of origins, refugees of war and economics, and thrust into unfamiliar countries or cultures develop dislocated identities, but with LDAs the dislocation is not geographical but contextual. The maps of their identities are no longer trustworthy. LDAs become lost in their own lives, the string of diachronous events no longer coherently interrelated. So we may say that LDAs have a dislocated identity.

Identity is the dance of personal self, family and community that Late Discovery brings to an abrupt halt. In general LDA’s experience confusion and deep feelings of betrayal, primarily towards their parents, but also siblings, aunts, uncles and other members of their extended family who colluded in the secret. LDAs can feel voiceless and isolated. And if their adoptive parents are still alive and continue to deny the reality of the LDA’s adoption, LDAs may feel frozen in the lie even after discovery. Some LDAs in this impossible dynamic sever contact with their adoptive families. Others compartmentalize their discovery, hiding their knowledge of their adopted status from their families, even from their own children, while integrating their new identity narratives into their other discrete relationships.

The breach of trust that created this sense of betrayal can also reverberate in the LDA’s relationship with his or her community of origin. If the fundamental relationship with their parents is discovered to have been based on deceit and secrecy, the LDA may extend that loss of trust to the wider world, making every memory of interrelationship suspect as well as problematizing their contemporary relationships.

Helen Riley writes, “The intense feelings arising from the perceived violation of trust are expressed through a range of reactive attitudes. Reactive attitudes reveal an assumption within an expectation or linked to an expectation. When expressed in late discovery – disbelief, confusion, anger, sorrow and loss - they are responses to violations of normative expectations and assumptions. The moral values that may be perceived as being violated or affected can include attitudes towards duty of care, the degree of integrity and honesty expected within family and other relationships, responsibility to and for others, a sense of justice, the right to be treated equally and with dignity, and the right to demand accountability.”

LDAs have been rendered voiceless, deprived of the knowledge necessary to realize their authentic identities, as adoptees, even though their status was one of the driving forces in their family dynamics. They were, to quote J. Brison, “reduced to silence, to the status of objects, or worse, they have been made into someone else’s speech, an instrument of someone else’s agency”.

As Late Discovery Adoptees look out into their communities for answers and for moral feedback, they will find little to guide them. Resources for LDAs are scarce. With the notable exception of the landmark study by the Post Adoption Resource Centre of Australia, there has been no published research on Late Discovery. Occasional media stories of LDAs focusing on individual narratives, reported with a mix of horror and

compassion, may be comforting to the LDA who happens upon it, because these stories affirm that Late Discovery has at least happened to one other person, but the emphasis on individual particularity, on how this horrible thing happened to this one person, can actually reinforce isolation and work to obscure the role the community may have played in shaping the family dynamics of secrecy and deceit. And, of course, this individualization of Late Discovery also allows for the continuing marginalization of LDAs. “This is something that happens rarely, to a few unfortunate individuals, who can be assigned the identity of victims, like survivors of a tornado or car wreck. Therefore it has nothing to tell us about ourselves, our attitudes or our culture or society.” This atomization, combined with the LDAs lack of voice and agency, positions the Late Discovery Adoptee as a marginal group identity.

Unfortunately this attitude extends to the community of adoption professionals and practitioners. The general thrust of adoption practice for the last five decades has been toward openness. I have read a lot of academic research, tons of guides intended for prospective adoptive parents, attended pre-parenting classes as guest speaker. I would be hard-pressed to name a reputable adoption practitioner in the English speaking world that would overtly counsel an adoptive family to hide the fact of the adoption from their child. This is commendable, a giant leap from previous eras when both professional and popular literature was filled with advice to lie, equivocate, stall and stonewall adoptees about their adoption. Unfortunately, though, some parents didn't get the message...

In the discourse of adoption, of adoption practitioners and theorist, the family dynamics of Late Discovery is presented as an anomaly, a rare thing that happens to some rare individuals. I believe in part this may be because the absence of serious professional theoretical opposition to the dominant discourse of adoption openness appears to close the question, and obscure the actual practices of families that adopt. But once adoptions are finalized, families disappear behind their privacy, and unless they volunteer to continue to participate in the discourse of the adoption community, their realities become opaque and inscrutable. This opacity in fact renders LDA families invisible, and if you can't see something, it can be tempting to believe it doesn't exist. But a look outside of adoption discourse may be illuminating. According to a study cited in an article in the Boston Globe earlier this year, as many as 44% of parents of donor conceived children intend to keep the manner of conception a secret. The same article describes that assisted reproduction counselors and therapists are surprised by this high number. Although it's much easier to conceal a donor conception than it is an adoption, the percentages described in these studies indicate a strong widespread desire for secrecy and lies among parents who may feel their modality of family growth to be personally and socially marginal, both for themselves or their children. The language of rationalization used by these parents is the same as used in the families of LDAs.

There is no way of accurately quantifying how many adoptive families do not disclose the adoption to their children. By its very nature this type of family dynamic is occult. The PARC study hypothesizes that as many as 20% of adoptive families keep the adoption a secret. Helen Riley is more conservative and hypothesizes 5%. My opinion is

that these numbers are speculative at best, and I'm obliged to answer the question, "How many families like yours are out there", with the statement, "More than you think..."

At any rate, LDAs know they exist, and as they unwrap the package of discovery they find, among the dislocation, the trauma, the rage and depression, the seeds of a new identity, their identities as adoptees, and begin to integrate this new group identity into their narratives. It's important to note, though, that this new identity as an adoptee is also a marginal group identity. Part of the discovery of Late Discovery is that not only were they not *who* they thought they were, but *what* they actually are is tinged with historical stigmas of difference, distrust and discrimination.

Restoring, "Re-storying", and Recovering the Late Discovery identity narrative

Many LDAs move swiftly after discovery to assimilate an adoptee group identity, by joining and interacting with the adoption community, by initiating searches and reunions, by doing what other adoptees do and becoming conscious participants in the adoptee discourse. But the LDA narrative has significant differences from other adoptee narratives, and LDAs may feel alienated as other adoptees relate narratives of integrating their knowledge of their adoption into their identities as children, as adolescents, as young adults. This can manifest as a feeling of being "a part of/being separate from" the adoptee community, an extension of LDA dislocation. The adoption community at large and the adoptee community in particular are extremely sympathetic to LDAs, but the hard work of creating an LDA identity within this community, and the larger community, the world, must of necessity be left to LDAs.

An LDA identity that can provide a coherent and resonant narrative and that can accommodate moral equilibrium by establishing accountability and responsibility, must come from LDAs themselves, but this cannot happen in isolation or solely by individual introspection. It is my opinion that LDAs need to create their own, alternative, discourse in which their voices are heard, centralized, and in which they can delineate their experiences, not as exceptions or marginalized individuals, but as persons in the process of integration and autonomy.

The Late Discovery List is one node of this discourse. The Late Discovery List is designed as a peer support group, although I act as moderator I do not lead the group. The list consists of email postings by members on any subjects germane to their discoveries and the aftermath. There are no off-limits topics, there is no proscribed language. At times list traffic is a trickle, at others the list generates fifty posts a day. The tone of the list is non-argumentative, supportive and informal. Ten years ago I set up the space and LDAs have come and done the work, finding their stories mirrored, discovering that they are not atomized, discovering that their narratives can be centralized and indeed normative to their circumstances.

Many LDAs on the list have described the desire to "re-story" their lives by the act of writing their memoirs. I can personally relate to this, shortly after I discovered I was seized by the urge to write, beginning with discrete autobiographical episodes, and then

moving on to speculations and theories about what happened to me. This urge continues... The LDA's on the list who are writing memoirs are doing so with the intent to publish, to make their narratives public. This can be seen as an assertion for moral equilibrium, because by introducing the Late Discovery narrative into the larger public discourse, LDAs will lay claim to a moral response from the world at large.

Because it is the rare space dedicated to Late Discovery, the list has attracted LDA\*slash\*academics, like doctoral candidate Helen Riley, but also others, who can use the list to outreach for interviewees and to test theories on Late Discovery. I am hoping that, beyond the crucial work that LDAs do on the list creating a new LDA discourse, these researchers may create a legacy body of work about Late Discovery useful for the greater adoption community. I hope that this research can become a legacy for adoption practitioners, who can integrate this research in their practices and, perhaps more importantly, adjust their assumptions.