

Building Bridges To Your Child's Ethnic Community

And .. Why it is important

by Chris Winston

Adoptive parents are forced to examine many things about themselves and about adoption itself. It is not a one-time event, but rather, an ongoing process as we struggle to raise our children in the best way possible. Those of us who have adopted interracially find that our cute little babies do, indeed grow up and eventually face the racial teasing that we were warned to expect. My own experience has been as an adoptive mother of an internationally born child. While we specifically worked to integrate our family with the Korean-American Community in Sacramento, California, I believe that our experience speaks to virtually anyone wanting connections to another ethnic community.

Innocence ended for me one day when I was standing with my son waiting for him to board the bus to kindergarten. The little boy in line in front of my son turned to him and said, "Chinese people have flat faces!" Having overheard the remark, I stepped over to them and said, as calmly as possible, "We don't tease each other about how we are different."

The little boy who made the remark was with a woman who had brought the children up from a nearby daycare. She had not heard the original comment, but when she heard my remark she was concerned and asked what had happened. I did not want to have a long discussion about it with her as I felt it might escalate things. I had said what I had said in order to show my son that I would not let such remarks just go by. However, I did not want to embarrass him by keeping a focus on the incident. I was not very successful, apparently, because the daycare lady turned and really scolded the little boy who had made it.

The following Monday as we again waited for the bus, this little boy and his mother arrived. She leapt from her car and began a verbal tirade about how I had so traumatized her son that he was now unable to ride the bus. Trying hard to stay composed and get a word in, I asked "but you don't approve of what he said do you?" She ended by explaining that she was new to California and her son wasn't used to being around "Oriental people."

What I learned from this was that I was not going to be able to protect my son from racism, and that his teachers and other significant adults might well be unable to make intervene positively on his behalf. From my perspective, he needed to know that racism was not an individual experience - that he as an individual had done nothing wrong. It was only his racial identity that had caused him difficulty. Clearly, he needed to know others who looked like him and could share his experiences.

I could, of course, have read him any of the excellent books that address racial teasing. I could also have shared with him the times when I was teased as a child. But I believed that the most meaningful intervention would be to make solid connections to same race role models and

mentors. With the support of a group he would not feel alone. Ideally, the group experience would not have to focus on the negatives faced by Korean-Americans, but could instead, show him an array of positives. In this way, he would view his heritage as a source of support rather than as something to be overcome. I knew that as he grew, he would be seen first by strangers *not* as a member of *our* family but as a member of the ethnic group his physical appearance reveals him to be.

All parents who have adopted transracially and transculturally are faced with the task of helping their children build a positive image of themselves as members of an ethnic group to which they themselves do not belong. An Associated Press article on Korean language schools quoted adoptive parent Barbara Randolph as saying about her children, "They wear Korea in their faces every day of their lives, and I think they should wear it in their hearts."

Most parents are aware at some level of the difficulties that their children face in coming to terms with their ethnicity. They buy their children multicultural books and gifts and plan to take them on trips back to their birth country when they are older. Most families, however, *do not* give their children access to same race role models and mentors. Sometimes this is because such an ethnic community is not available. Sometimes it is difficult to make meaningful connections, even when the potential exists to do so. More often than not, I believe, our own fears get in the way. Still, there is no real substitute for personal relationships. While books, festivals, and cultural artifacts are enriching and much, much better than no exposure at all to a child's "roots," these "enter and leave" events still keep children isolated from a real sense of community. These reasons alone may be enough to make the venture into your child's ethnic community worthwhile. My experience has led me to consider two other reasons as well.

Proponents of open adoption argue that children who know their birthparents are better able to resolve the inevitable issues of loss in adoption. For families who have chosen intercountry adoption, access to our children's birthparents - or even to reliable information about our children's birthparents - is often not even possible. The closest we may ever come to any sort of open exchange of information for our children is by helping them build a comfortable relationship with others of their race or ethnicity.

Already I have seen my son use his contact with other Korean-Americans to work out some personal puzzles. To quote my son, "I like Korean food and Korean people, but I don't like some Korean rules." He feels that there are differences between things Korean and things not Korean, and he is exploring what those differences are and how they affect him. The value of this is that I am not making ethnocentric or cultural judgments for him.

Of course, our adoption agency gave us the most common reasons that Korean children are available for adoption. They explained aspects of the culture that would contribute to our children's lack of acceptance in Korea. But if I myself am the one explaining these things to my children, I may be doing them the disservice of promulgating cultural stereotypes and inducing fear in them. I do not, even with a few years exposure, have sufficient cultural competence and little personally acquired information to help them understand just how their adoptions came about. But I think that some of the answers may well be there in the interactions that they have

with those in the Korean community itself. Some answers may exist even in the negative interactions as well as the positive ones.

The other thing that will happen is that our children will develop enough cultural competence to make better judgments about what constitutes rejection and what doesn't. By being in environments where a different language is spoken, where accented English is the norm, and where different manners prevail, I believe that our children will be more able to find such differences non-threatening when they are older, and to accept these things as just what they are - differences. There will be no reason to read rejection into what is really just a different life experience. They can face the issues that really matter rather than being stopped by the fear that lack of familiarity breeds.

The final justification for venturing into your child's racial or ethnic community has to do with our ethical responsibility as adoptive families. There is a wonderful book by Cheri Register called *Are those Kids Yours? - American families with children adopted from other countries*. Ms. Register writes as a parent of children adopted internationally. In the last chapter, she explores the ethics of intercountry adoption and talks about how our actions as adoptive parents affect events and policy in our children's countries of origin. According to Ms. Register, while adoption may be a wonderful solution for individual parentless children, it is not always the appropriate action at time of upheaval abroad. She goes on, "When I hear the news of a mudslide in Brazil that buried a community of women and children living in fifty shacks on a hillside, or the orphaned or starving children in some war-torn land there is always a haunting refrain at the end: These could be *my kids*. I have made the joyous discovery that I can feel complete and natural pa. Rental love for a child who is related to me by neither blood, race, nor cultural origins. Perfect as the match seems, and as willing as I am to attribute it to fate, I know that I would feel the same attachment to virtually *any* child who might have been placed with me. How can I not mourn the mudslide victims? And how can I not mourn the lost gifts of children whose spirits are suffocated by poverty, hunger, disease, violence and exploitation?"

Many families do continue to contribute financially to the care of the world's children - especially to those in their own children's countries of origin through their adoption agencies. However, it appears less common place to make the leap into our children's American ethnic communities that might help *our own children* right here at home. How can we not care about our children's fellow immigrants? Just

as our children who come to us at an older age struggle with language, so do those in their ethnic community. Language changes and the struggle for assimilation impact ethnic communities heavily. Do we not have some responsibility to care about these issues? Especially in these current political times, we must care about the negative portrayals of immigrants in this country by the media, for the image they present will reflect back on our children as well.

Few Americans will forget the events of three years ago when, on April 29, mass rioting took place in Los Angeles following the Rodney King verdict. In the Korean Community, this event is known as **Sa Ee Gu** which means "4-29". On this day, African-Americans and Korean-Americans came into serious conflict, with the result that Korea town was burnt nearly to the

ground. At that time I had only begun my explorations into the Sacramento Korean Community and the differing Perspectives on *what* happened on that infamous day and *why* it happened were largely unknown to me.

Since then, I have learned that Korean-Americans do not view that conflict as having been essentially against the African-American community- They feel it occurred because their own community does not have familiar access to the American mainstream media. Positive interactions among members of both groups living together in the community are rarely, if ever) acknowledged. By focusing on the negative events that occurred, the emotions of both groups were overly aroused. The result was Sa Ee Gu.

Of seemingly little connection to the events that tore apart communities in Los Angeles was the annual celebration of the Korean Children's Day Picnic held in Stockton California, for adopted Korean-born children. However, that year for the first time, many adoptive parents were fearful that it might not even be safe to have a large public gathering that centered around a Korean flag. The shock was that we were very much connected to an event of which we had little understanding. Our children were, after all, Korean-American.. Our connection to our children's ethnicity is there whether we choose to acknowledge it or not.

As adoptive parents who have adopted transracially and transculturally, I think that we have a moral responsibility to acknowledge that connection, however. We are inevitably linked and if we do not care about and for each other, both the adoptive families and the ethnic community suffer. Our children are and always will be seen as Korean *first*- The ways in which Korean-Americans are perceived and the ways in which they are treated here in the US. will affect our children both now and later when they are grown and no longer under our protection.

Part II:

Making the Connection

One of the first things that adoptive parents often say to me when I suggest that they participate in our support group's language school or a Korean Community event is that their children are not yet "asking about Korea." They seem to feel that the child will ask when he is ready, and then they will provide some information. My own experience has shown that often young children are not able to frame the questions they have about the differences they see and sense, though the need for answers and connection is still there.

My son came to us from Korea as a five year old, bringing with him some intensely negative feelings about anything Korean. He had many love/hate feelings --- craving the food, missing the ease of communication in his original language. From the beginning, it was pretty clear that we were going to need to help him establish some positive connections here, in the present, if he was going to successfully deal with his past. And the fact was that the connection to his Korean heritage was not his alone. Just as we, as a family, share the heritages that are mine and my husband's by birth, we also share our children's Korean heritage. We can learn about the culture. We can have Korean-American friends. We can find strength from inclusion in the local Korean community, for while we are not Korean, we are a Korean-American family.

For us, the first step in venturing into our children's ethnic community was to feel a sense of entitlement to do so. This did not mean taking over our children's experiences or dressing up in traditional costume or dining out in a Korean restaurant from time to time. It did mean that we had to decide, as their parents, that this connection was important for them --- and for us. The importance for them of knowing *who they as Korean adoptees and who we are as a family* is something of real concern.

The next step was to honestly address some of the fears that we shared with other adoptive families. I made my first Korean-American friend when I walked into her dry cleaning establishment and introduced myself to her. I knew that I was going to need help when my five year old son arrived, not speaking any English. I remember what a scary thing that was for me to do. She wasn't very receptive to my overtures at first. She had once helped another such adoptive family, and the experience had not been a positive one for her. The family had only wanted her help with their child's transition, and had then cut everything Korean from their lives. It had hurt this sensitive, caring woman to see this child truly lose all connection with his Korean identity. So my promise to her in seeking her friendship and help was that we would work to build a lasting relationship, and that my interest in doing so was genuine.

As I worked to keep my promise to my new friend, I was surprised by some of my own actions and reactions. I remember fearing that she and her Korean friends might think that I was not a good enough parent for my children. I fussed over their appearance and worried about their behavior out of my own need to appear worthy to those whose judgement I feared. I worried especially about my son who acted out a lot of anger in those first days. Eventually, I spoke to my new friend of my concerns. Gently she chided, "He is your son, is he not? Why do you care what anyone thinks, Korean or not?" Thus began my feelings of acceptance and entitlement to membership in this new partnership.

I was eager to move beyond the security of an individual relationship and test my convictions in a larger group. I was able to do this when my friend invited me to go to church with her. A whole range of fears came into play then. Would my daughter, in the company of a Caucasian mother, be stigmatized when she went to the Sunday school class? Would she be teased because she had been orphaned, because she was adopted, because her mother was Caucasian?"

My fears were not realized there at the church. Aifter several months, however, my friend began taking her children to Korean school. I decided to let my daughter attend with her daughter, and I was invited to join an adult class. For six months it was a wonderful experience, until internal politics led to a decline in the school's enrollment. My friend decided to leave and take her daughter to language classes back at church. We were comfortable at the school and decided to stay. After my friend left, however, the experience for my daughter changed and the day finally came when she was teased because her mother was Caucasian.

I held my daughter as she cried for a long time. I felt scared and very vulnerable. My daughter, however, viewed the incident through different eyes, deciding that the girl who had hurt her was simply "a mean girl!" By this time, she knew so many Korean-Americans who loved her that she was able to *individualize rather than stereotype* her unfortunate experience. While

some Koreans harbor some prejudices against orphans and adoptees, she knew that others do not. I had not resolved this issue to the same degree as my daughter, however. It took a lot of soul searching to decide whether prejudice is worse when it comes from someone of your child's heritage, or whether it should be treated as you would any other act of prejudice. My compromise was to stop sending my daughter to Korean school for a while, but to continue attending myself.

By this time, I had made another friend, my Korean school teacher. She was Americanized enough to have some understanding of my situation, and she was very interested in learning about adoptive families. When she offered to tutor me privately while school was closed during the summer, I told her that what *I really* wanted was to learn Korean with my children. Was she willing to conduct a class for all of us? She discussed this with the principal and offered to hold a summer class just for adoptive families.

The summer class was fantastic. Even though there was much potential for misunderstanding, there was so much love coming from both the adoptive families and representatives of the school that everyone could feel the challenge and excitement of what we were doing. At the end of the summer, we asked to continue our own program within the broader Korean school program, and that fall we continued our classes.

I was now more convinced than ever that any program we undertook as adoptive parents should be deeply embedded within the Korean community, rather than be run as a program for adoptees by our support group. I felt that in the end, our children needed to feel as much a part of the community as possible rather than as a separate entity. Thus, we had to balance the need to have a program tailored to our special needs with our need to be in the community. Sometimes it was a very precarious balance, difficult to achieve.

That winter we participated in the Korean School fundraiser which was also a Christmas party. Though their classes had been taught separately, all of the children, adoptees and second generation kids alike, sang together as part of the day's entertainment. Watching those children performing joyfully together made my heart soar. Then suddenly, I was struck by an overwhelming and frightening observation. *How Korean they'd become. Am I giving them back? Are they still mine? Will they someday long to return to their origins without me?* But when we adults joined our children on the stage in the singing, I knew that I would not lose my precious children. Instead, I felt the true joy of sharing in a rich heritage that belonged to *all* of us as integrated and accepted members of this Korean-American community.

We were very fortunate to have teachers that were committed to our children and to us as families. Our children were also very deeply attached to them, and many of us were surprised at the depth of their feelings, I don't think any of us could have predicted just how important these relationships would be to our children. The fact was driven home to me when one of our most finest teachers of whom my own son was especially fond suddenly left the school, with no explanation or advance notice. The abandonment issues which his leaving raised in my son were difficult to deal with. Still, the loss came in a setting where support and other strong role-models were readily available, and the issues raised by the teacher's departure did not sever

the positive community connections we had worked so hard to build for my son and for our family.

BECOMING COMMUNITY ADVOCATES

I have come a long way from my first tentative overtures for help from the woman who operated the neighborhood dry cleaning business to embracing a truly multicultural family lifestyle. Today we are deeply involved with the Sacramento Korean Community and operate from a strong philosophical base in all we do. As a family and as a group, we work to be culturally sensitive, to develop positive reciprocal relationships, and to be inclusive of all who want to work with us, while still working hard to respect the need for appropriate boundaries.

One overriding need expressed to us by the Korean Community was to have mainstream Americans understand them better. This stems directly from the lack of political power and estrangement that they feel led to the events that involved them during the Los Angeles riots. We have worked hard to help make and strengthen those connections for a Korean community that has a tendency to avoid interacting beyond their own closed group, much less with the power structure that dictates regional policy.

I have helped facilitate discussion groups to identify community needs as well as a meeting where community issues were discussed with a California senator. Members of our new non-profit group, *Friends of Korea*, provided activities for children at an all day conference on Korea in Davis, California. While this is not specifically an adoption-related group, it is an adoption-sensitive one. Our board of directors consists of first and second generation Korean-Americans as well as Americans of other ethnicities and races.

Recently, we organized a booth at the Pacific Rim Festival in downtown Sacramento and sold beautiful Korean Calligraphy. Interestingly, it was the only booth at that festival that represented Korean culture, though there were many other Asian groups exhibiting. It was exciting for our children to be part of a group where the primary focus was not only on *adoption* per se, but on *all* people connected to Korea. We organize groups to discuss Korean history, arts, and culture. We offer language classes and access to events sponsored by other Korean-American organizations. We welcome all who are interested to join us in our activities.

With all of the work and planning that has gone on to bring two diverse communities together in a positive way, it has still been important to respect and maintain some boundaries. The adoption support group membership consists of adoptive families, though others are on our mailing list. There is a group for adult adoptees where participants can freely discuss issues without fear of offending others within the Korean Community. And there are other special focus groups where our participation as adoptive families is not always be appropriate, though there are many times when we are invited to participate. As non-Koreans, we can still be an active part of the community if we are respectful and caring of others while asking to have our own needs met.

It is difficult to venture outside the security of what we know of who we are. To be the only Caucasian face among many Asian ones can be uncomfortable at times, yet in interracial

adoption, this is what we ask our children to do everyday. I think we validate our childrens' experience when we are willing to walk that road. Many of the early fears that I had in moving into the Korean Community were real. They played themselves out in both subtle and more obvious ways. I met people who asked insensitive questions and made judgements that seemed unfair. There were people who valued our children less because they had been orphaned and adopted by caucasian parents. While this created temporary unhappiness, the many positive experiences more than balanced the negative ones.

It is impossible for us, as adoptive parents, to protect our children from the reality of the prejudice that exists both in mainstream America and in the Korean-American community. Avoiding the Korean Community will not prevent them from knowing that some Koreans will reject them, but it will keep them from ever knowing that many other Koreans will love them deeply.

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