

## Personal Location and Context

*Jeannine Carrière*

Words cannot do justice to how honoured I am to be editing this collection that describes the sacred journey of adoption. My personal journey led me to the Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency and their work with First Nation children and families in the 1980s; I am very grateful to have had a long and enriching continued relationship with them that has offered me a number of teachings. As a point of departure, I wish to begin with my own story of connection to adoption and my personal location as follows (see Carrière 2005).

On Sunday, July 18, 2004, my sister and I took a short trip to visit both the communities we grew up in. This sister is one of my birth siblings. She is the one who came to find me when I was twelve — she shocked my adoptive parents by showing up at their door quite unexpectedly. To protect her privacy and that of her children and grandchildren I will not use her real name but will refer to her as Angel.

On that brilliant Sunday morning we shared more stories about our youth on our drive to our first stop in St. Adolphe, Manitoba, the community where I was raised. My intent was to visit the graveyard where my adoptive parents are buried. I wanted to thank them for the life they gave me through adopting me as their daughter. I was telling Angel that I would have liked to have gone to the house where I was raised, but I had not been there in almost thirty years and did not think I could just walk up to the door and knock. You see, my adopted sister, whom I shall name as Marie, still lives in that house.

Our trip to the graveyard had been strategically planned around the time that the town's people would not be around, or so I thought. As we walked to my parents' graves, my apprehension grew. When we reached the site and I saw their names, I could not say the words I wanted and

asked Angel to pray while I wept. She said a beautiful prayer and thanked them for taking good care of me. Finally, I was able to speak too, and thanked them as well. They really were wonderful parents.

After we visited my parents, we walked back slowly through the graveyard toward my truck. I read the headstones with interest as I knew most of the people and, of course, it was another affirmation of my own mortality in a sense. As we were leaving, I looked up and saw someone heading toward my parents' headstones. It was my adopted sister Marie. Angel said, "Well I think that's a sign, and you should go talk to her." When I said that I was afraid, Angel responded, "She looks like she can handle it." I walked toward Marie and called her name. When she looked up, the sun was in her eyes — as she shaded them with her hand, she looked exactly like my adopted mother. She was as stunned to see me as I was to see her. I walked toward her and embraced her.

After we had a short visit on the spot, she said the words I had hoped to hear. She invited us back to my childhood home. I had told Angel about my room, my favourite tree and other pieces of my growing-up years while we were driving. Once we got to the house, I was happy to see that it looked the same as I remembered, with the exception of a new garage. Marie kept it very much like my parents would have. For me, that was so comforting.

We sat outside. We shared stories of my childhood and fond memories of me as a baby and young girl. Marie had such affection in her voice; that also was comforting. I could not help but think, "What was I hiding from and why did I think I was not welcome here anymore?" Finally, we went into the house where I discovered, to my complete joy, that my old room had not changed either. Marie pulled out a piece of fabric from my old dresser that I immediately recognized as belonging to an old pair of my pyjamas that I might have had when I was four or five years old. She also showed me my mother's old button pail that used to amuse me to no end on rainy days as a child. I was in heaven with these old treasures. When Marie told me I could have my two favourite buttons, you would have thought they were diamonds.

Before we left, Angel and I sat on the swings that I loved as a child. They are bench swings long enough for two or three people to sit on. As a child, I used to sit on them with my parents on many wonderful summer nights. Marie took a picture of Angel and I sitting on those swings. This image was precious since we never had a chance to swing together



Jeannine Carrière, 2004, at her adoptive parents' grave in Manitoba.

as children. Before I left, I promised to come back with my daughter and grandson, which I did. I also was blessed to know that my mother had kept a number of my childhood treasures; Marie gave these to me before I left Manitoba to come back to Alberta.

On that summer day as Angel and I drove away, I said to her, “Well that was a miracle!” She replied, “And that was no coincidence — your parents wanted the two of you to reconnect.” I also remembered that July 18 was my father’s birthday, which is why Marie went to the graveyard — to pray and wish him happy birthday. I felt like I was the one who received the biggest gift that day. It was the gift of reconciling with my past and establishing a positive connection to my adoption in a way I had not experienced since my childhood.

I spent the rest of the summer also connecting with my birth family. I have fond memories of the summer of 2004 when I thought I was going to Manitoba to write my dissertation. Creator knew I needed to do so much more than that. In order to write about connectedness, I had to experience it myself and come to truly understand what it means to me as an adoptee. These days, I feel pretty lucky, which is what my birth siblings, who were not adopted, have always told me. I know now that my rebellion, my addictions and other painful experiences were not really about me being unlovable, nor did they occur because my adoptive

parents did not love me. My search for myself led me to some dangerous places, but now I have come full circle. I know who I am and where I come from. And that, my friends, is the strength of connectedness. (Carrière 2005: 12)

As an Indigenous writer it is important to locate myself in my writing. I place myself in my work: as a Métis woman who was adopted by a non-Aboriginal family, and as a social worker in the field of child welfare for many years. I also am a mother and a grandmother. My own life as an adoptee was not always easy: I believe this was mostly the result of the mystery of living in the family of another people, borrowing other people's name and culture while being alienated from my birth family and community. But this all changed for me one day when one of my sisters from my birth family showed up at my parents' door, asking, "Are you Jeannine?" When I replied that I was and she announced that she was my sister, my whole world changed. I lost everything, and I gained everything. It was as if something inside me shifted and I felt connected. I belonged again. No, let me rephrase that: I felt like I belonged for the first time in my life (Carrière 1999: 128).

Currently I teach at the University of Victoria, School of Social Work, in the Indigenous Specialization program. My research includes exploring identity, adoption and wellness for Indigenous children. I have written much about these issues and I am proud to be working on this collaboration with the Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency (YTSA) (Carrière 2008, 2009).

### Terminology

In this book, when we describe "custom" or "customary" adoption, the meaning is the same. These terms describe a process in which a child is adopted into a family according to the tribe's customary adoption practices. The YTSA uses the name Open Custom Adoption to describe a program where adoption is based on customary practices and tribal ceremonies, which are open for the whole community to witness and celebrate.

### Adoption in Context

Numerous researchers and writers (Baran, Pannor and Sorosky 1976; Kirk and McDaniel 1984; Rosenberg, as cited in Krichbaum 1993) suggest that adoption, as a practice, existed since the beginning of hu-



Carolyn Peacock and Jeannine Carrière receiving the Adoption Activist Award from the North American Council on Adoptable Children in August 2008.

mankind. Adoption regulations can be found in the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi (Lifton 1988).

From the beginning, adoption has fulfilled multiple objectives, such as nurturing and providing supervision for children whose parents have died (Bolles 1984). Even mythology provides accounts of adoption in which babies are “found” and taken care of by an alternate caregiver for a lifetime. For example, Moses is a biblical figure who was the first well-known adoptee. However, the central theme in these ancient parables and myths is that these children typically are from poor backgrounds, “abandoned” by their mothers and taken in by adoptive parents who are viewed as compassionate, charitable people.

Adoption is not solely a Western concept (Alberta Ministry of Children’s Services 2000; Durst 1999; Kimmelman 1984). The goal of customary adoption is to recover traditional practices around caring for someone else’s child. First Nation people had words, ceremonies and processes for adoption long before contact. Historically, child rearing was a shared responsibility: children often resided with adults who were not their biological parents (Durst 1999). This shared child rearing may

have arisen from a death or loss of a child's parent(s), a claim by a relative for that child or an apparent benefit to the child (Kimmelman 1984). Shared child rearing also provided a means for caring for the elderly as they had a critical role through their teachings and responsibilities in the child's development. Children retained knowledge of and access to their birth parents and kin, even when they became part of the adoptive parents' kin group (Alberta Ministry of Children's Services 2000). One cannot present some historical facts on adoption and Indigenous peoples, however, without the mention of the "sixties scoop," which is perhaps the most comprehensive assault on Indigenous families following that of sending Indigenous children to residential schools. This era occurred in a period between the years of 1960 to the 1980s. The term, as applied by Patrick Johnston (1983), was used to describe adoption as a systematic removal of First Nation and Métis children from their families and home communities. The history of adoption and Indigenous communities is fraught with painful separations and longing. To date, adoption is not looked upon favourably by Indigenous groups, including First Nation and Métis child and family service agencies. Carrière and Sinclair state: "Indigenous adoption is a complex subject that presents several challenges that are, however, easily translated into opportunities for more efficacious policies and practices in the future" (2009: 269).

The YTSA Open Custom Adoption Program is the first of its kind in Canada in which First Nation parents adopt First Nation children from the five communities<sup>1</sup> of the Yellowhead Tribal Council in Alberta. It is the first agency to combine customary First Nation adoption practices with provincial adoption in order for families to receive post-adoption services from the federal government. The adoptions are celebrated with local community ceremonies officiated by Chiefs and Elders; many guests are invited to witness this event. Since this is the first agency in Canada to undertake this process of combining customary and provincial laws, there are many stakeholders in First Nation adoption who want to know about the outcomes for children who were adopted in this manner. The YTSA has some wonderful photos of their Elders, leaders and families participating in community events such as their Custom Adoption Ceremonies. Throughout this book we invite you to reflect on the content by pausing to appreciate the imagery. By doing so, we think you will gain more understanding and appreciation of the YTSA's Open Custom Adoption Program.



Preserving the identity of First Nation children is essential.

I express my appreciation for everyone at the YTSA who has supported my work over the years, in particular my good friend and colleague, Carolyn Peacock. She has been an inspiration to many, and I have been blessed by having her in my life. I also wish to thank the Elders, staff and board at the YTSA for being patient with me over the years in a variety of projects we have worked on together. I want to acknowledge Grace Atkinson, a graduate student at the University of Victoria for her assistance in developing this book. I wish to thank my brother Darin Keewatin for his important work on capturing the teachings of our beloved late Elder, Bluestone Yellowface. I hope that whoever reads this book is inspired to do the best they can to preserve the identity and culture of Indigenous children involved in child welfare.

## Note

1. At the onset the YTSA had five communities involved in their program; now there are four.

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