

# **Tree of Life exercise with international adoption**

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I was initially introduced to the Narrative Therapy Tree of Life method last year by a former colleague. She had used it with children in Africa who have survived and often still live in experiences of trauma. While she presented to our staff on the impact that this practice had on eliciting experience and meaning for these children, I began reflecting on the ways that the Tree of Life exercise could also be an impactful experience for people who have been adopted.

I am frequently struck by the power of narratives and storytelling in the adoption community. I believe that adopted people often share their own life stories as a way of coping, making meaning, and deriving strength. I think that they share their stories with each other to connect to common experiences and to develop community. Adopted people share their stories with adoptive parents, birth parents and adoption professionals to educate, grow and gain empowerment. I was drawn to the use of Narrative Therapy practice as a forum for adopted people to develop meaning and strength from their evolving narratives about their lives.

This fall, I was invited to run several child and adolescent therapeutic groups at a weekend long culture camp for children who have been adopted from Asia and who live with their families in Cape Cod, Massachusetts and the surrounding area. For people who have been adopted internationally, there are many layers and complexities to personal identity. I hoped to provide an opportunity in these groups to explore elements of identity relating to adoption, culture, race and community. I was especially excited to use the Tree of Life method because it artfully incorporates themes of past and present. It also addresses issues of loss but also strength and finding support through community. And the very nature of the multiple aspects of self within the Tree assumes in the reality of a multifaceted identity. I believe that these are all essential themes in international adoption. I will discuss my own use of the Tree of Life exercise in one of the groups that I ran at the culture camp. I will also detail the ways that I interpreted each element of the Tree of Life to address issues relating to international and inter-racial adoption.

As an internationally adopted person myself, I began preparing for the group by creating my own Tree of Life. I reflected on personal themes of adoption and multiculturalism in my own life story and how the different elements of the tree integrated these themes. I decided to utilize this exercise with the older group of children at the culture camp. They ranged in age from 11-14. The children all were touched by adoption in some way. Most had been adopted from Korea or China but some of the group members were the birth children of the adoptive parents. As I showed them my Tree of Life, I began telling them my own story, beginning from my roots, along the trunk and up through the leaves and fruits. I wasn't sure how the group would receive my story but for a relatively rowdy group, they listened intently to my descriptions and seemed interested in the elements of the Tree. The next day I knew that they had been listening carefully

as they retold verbatim what I had shared about myself in my Tree of Life while we reviewed their drawings.

After I shared my tree and story, they all engaged in drawing their own trees. In addition, to the basic elements of each tree, they added creative details to make their trees truly representative of their individual experiences. As they worked on their trees, I asked them to begin with the roots and we all drew each part of the tree at the same time. They enjoyed the drawing and some of the children drew incredibly detailed elements of their trees while others drew thin and sparse lines. I didn't ask them to share their thoughts as we were drawing but with each element, I reviewed what each part of the tree represented.

I wanted to reinforce that each of their stories were important and special, so on the following day I handed out frames and offered the option to frame their trees. Some children were eager to frame theirs while others declined. We sat in a circle and looked at all of our Trees of Life. We spoke about the forest that we had created and the community of trees that we had developed in the group. This seemed especially important because many of these children did not have a regular community of other internationally adopted children. For some, this camp was the only place where they spent time with other children who were adopted, Asian American or the combination of both. This process of being together and witnessing all of our collective trees enabled us to discuss what they can do to sustain this feeling of community and connection throughout the year. Throughout years of conversations and gatherings with other internationally adopted people, I have heard many stories that include feeling isolated, different, and ashamed. I believe that this is a common theme because many international adoptees were and are not connected to a community of people with similar adoption and multicultural experiences.

In sharing our trees, the group was generally contemplative and quiet. Some shared that they liked thinking about their birth family and culture through the process. Others shared that they embrace the person that they are now. Most were quiet. I think this quiet was partially reflective of adolescent self-consciousness but I think some of the group members felt that their trees and their personal stories were private and that this was not a journey that was open for conversation with others. And this is often true for members of the adoption community (birth families, adoptive families and adopted people) who pick and choose times when they feel comfortable and open to share their stories and times when they choose to keep them private. And I think that's just fine. I believe that this practice will help the group to connect with the various parts of their identity and to begin developing narratives to integrate into their whole sense of self.

### **Breakdown of the international adoption Tree of Life**

I utilized Ncazelo Ncube's description of his Tree of Life Project as described in the 2006 International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work as a framework for presenting the Tree of Life in the group.

**Roots** – The roots of the tree represent birth family, birth culture and birth country. I prompted the group to think about what they knew (or didn't know but perhaps imagined) about their birth country. I asked the children to think about what they have experienced, learned about or

embraced in their birth culture. The roots also represented their birth family and what they knew of or imagined about their birth parents, possible siblings, and ancestors. The roots also represented the place where they had resided in their birth country (perhaps in an orphanage, in a foster home or even with birth family members). And finally, these roots represented other important people from their birth country including foster parents, social workers, or other caregivers.

**Ground** – The ground of the tree represents the life that the children have in their adoptive family, adoptive culture and current country where they live (which for all of these children is the United States and mostly the New England region). It represents their relationships with their adoptive parents, siblings and relatives. I prompted the children to think about the culture, foods, day to day activities (including school, pastimes, sports, music and arts, family gatherings, friendships) that the children experience now and have experienced in their lives growing up in their adoptive families.

**Trunk** – The trunk of the tree represents the strengths or skills that the children have. I prompted the children to think of strengths that they had demonstrated during the weekend long camp as well as strengths that they have in terms of personality characteristics, coping mechanisms or talents. Since we had discussed in the group, coping with discrimination or intrusive questions, I prompted the group to think of strengths they had demonstrated in dealing with these issues.

**Branches** – The branches of the tree represent the hopes and dreams that each child has for their life. I initially asked the children what kind of person they would like to be and what goals they would like to achieve. I asked how they would like their relationships with the members of their adoptive family to be in their lives. I also asked whether they have desires to seek out more knowledge or connection to their birth country, culture and possibly even birth family. This element of the tree was broad so that it could connect to their hopes in relation to adoption or just general hopes in their life.

**Leaves** – The leaves represent important people in the children's lives. I specifically noted to the group how important people could be people they don't even remember but still had an impact on their lives in some way. In presenting my own tree to the group, I had spoken about how my birth family had been important, even before I had met them as an adult because they had given me life and had made a choice to place me for adoption and that felt significant. I prompted the children that anyone that felt important in their lives, whether members of their adoptive family, members of their birth family, people that had cared for them in their birth country, current friends, teachers, mentors, camp counselors, famous people that they looked up to or were influenced by, are all important people that they could represent through their leaves.

**Fruits** – The fruit represents gifts that the children have been given. In presenting my tree to the group, I spoke about actual gifts that people have given to me, but also spoke about the gift of love, caring, family and home that I have been given by my adoptive family. In addition, I spoke about specific physical characteristics that I like about myself which have been passed on to me by my birth parents. I also mentioned certain personality characteristics that may have been inherited from my birth parents. I asked the group to think about important or special gifts that they have been given by family members, friends or other important people in their lives. I asked

them to think about why these gifts felt special and in following the language that Ncube used in his Tree of Life exercise, asked what each gift giver had appreciated about the child that had prompted them to give that gift.

I believe that this Tree of Life practice is a powerful way for adopted people to reflect on the various elements of their identity. It connects their past and present, strengths and hopes into a visual representation of her one being, her one tree. And in adoption, although birth parents and adoptive parents, birth culture and adoptive culture are separate, they are truly connected through the adopted person. I believe that the Tree of Life allows the adopted person to acknowledge all of these elements of her identity and connect them in this picture of herself. And in viewing these trees together, or in doing this project in a group, adopted people can acknowledge and admire their unique and also shared experiences in community.

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