

**“Love Makes a Family”**  
 Reverend Sharon K. Dittmar  
 First Unitarian Church  
 536 Linton Street  
 Cincinnati, Ohio 45219  
 513.281.1564  
 May 13, 2007

*Following Rev. Dittmar's remarks on adoption are remarks by church members  
 Eric Elfner and Meredith C. Keith Church*

Most of what I know about adoption has been taught to me by the members of this congregation. When I came here almost ten years ago, there was a large group of families with adopted children in junior and senior high school (UU World article from 1994). Later I learned that First Church also has a large group of families who adopted children in the 1960's. And now we also have many adopted families with children in our infant/toddler and pre-school, elementary classes.

Regardless of your decade of adoption, you have all said the same thing to me, “Our family came here because there were other adopted families here.” Any individual or couple making the decisions to adopt has crossed a lot of personal territory. People feel relieved to come here and have their family accepted and loved as is. You have taught us that love and relationship make a family, any family.

Through you I have learned about the private and silent adoptions of the 1950's and 1960's. You taught me about trans-racial adoptions which became more common in the 1970's and 1980's, and then the international adoptions of the 1990's and beyond. You taught me that adopted families undergo a lot of psycho-social scrutiny. Reading all the studies is enough to give anyone an insecurity complex, and as parents of adopted children, I know you worry. As one of you said to me, “Sometimes I am wracked with self doubt. Am I doing this right?”

Parents of adopted children arm themselves with the knowledge that at early ages adopted children feel the shelter of love and then there comes a point when they ask, “Why was I given up?” This moment has been described as a primal loss, complete with corollary questions “Am I lovable? “Am I worthy?” One adopted parent struggling with this issue, feeling love for and the pain of her children explained, “My children were not given away. They are not, were not puppies. We wanted them.”

So adopted children enter into families and that want and adore them. As another parent said to me “Adoption is good for everyone involved. Children need homes and people need to create families.” And then this parent added “But everyone I know who was adopted had problems at some point in their lives.” This parent suggested to me that adopted parent support groups are vital from the beginning, so that adopted children know they are not the only ones who don't look like their parents and so that adopted parents realize they are not alone with their struggles. She added, “The lack of a biological connection creates more areas of mystery and misunderstanding.”

As one adoptive parent who was herself adopted as a child said to me “Please don't romanticize this. Whatever name you give it, ‘placing a child for adoption,’ ‘making an adoption plan,’ adoption is born from a loss and grieving process. My adopted son began to grieve during his adolescence.”

There are many, complex reasons that children are given up for adoption. Maybe somewhere out there is a birth parent who doesn't care, but I have also had very moving conversations with at least two female UU ministers, who gave children up for adoption over thirty years ago. Not a day goes by that these women do not think about and pray for their birth children raised by other mothers and fathers.

In preparation for this service I received an anonymous letter from a member that reads in part

I cannot stop wondering about your upcoming sermon on adoption. As a birth mother who surrendered my daughter for adoption in 1969, the subject is never far from my thoughts. I have nearly completed reading a book on the subject, *The Girls Who Went Away, the Hidden History of Women Who Surrendered Children for adoption in the decades before Roe vs. Wade*. I am so relieved and comforted to read the first hand stories of the women interviewed in the book, as well as an historical explanation of the norms and values of those times that created such an era of secrecy and shame related to these unplanned pregnancies . . . There is a quote from the book I would like to share with you “That baby lives with them every breath they take, every second of their lives. Every prayer, that baby is with them forever.”

So here is a birth mother thinking about her adopted daughter every day. On the other hand, I was approached by an adopted daughter whose birth mother refused to see her (as an adult), and then also refused to let the birth father meet his grown daughter although he was eager to meet his daughter. Every state and country has different rules on adoption, and in this state (not Ohio) any or either birth parent has the right to refuse to meet with their child, and to refuse permission for the other birth parent to meet as well.

I asked this woman how she managed such a devastating second loss that seems so mean-spirited. She replied, “Therapy. A decade of therapy.” She went on “I was over forty by the time this happened. But as my husband said to me [referring to the decision of her birth mother] ‘Can you imagine how thick the scar tissue was on that decision?’ ” Two years later her birth mother contacted her, still refusing to meet her or let her meet her birth father, but she explained in a letter that to this day her husband of over forty years and children from that marriage did not know she had ever placed a child for adoption.

It makes it no easier, but the scar tissue must be very thick on that decision. It makes it no easier, but it reminds me that a man and a woman create a child, yet it is usually left to the woman, often a young woman with less power and lots of pressure from family, money, society to make a haunting decision. Many of us manage haunting decision by refusing to admit they were ever made.

I asked two of our members to share their experiences of adoption with you, Meredith Keith Chirch and Eric Elfner. They both have similar and different stories. Both were adopted as children, and chose to adopt as adults. I want to thank both of them for sharing their stories with us today.



**“My Story”  
Meredith C. Keith Chirch  
May 13, 2007**

To me, adoption has always been THE way to grow a family. Not just an option, but the only way, or the preferred way, as far as I am concerned. This has always surprised people. But let me tell you a little bit about my story and I think you’ll understand why I feel this way.

My parents decided to adopt from Guatemala in the 1970s. This was a very new thing at the time. They knew no one else who had internationally adopted from any country, let alone Guatemala. They actually lived here in Cincinnati at the time. During the process they moved across the river from Ohio to live in Kentucky. This move was prompted by some adoption professionals in Kentucky telling my parents that they would expedite the home study process

and help in any way possible since I'd be the state's first Central American adoption. This came in especially handy when, at the 11th hour, my parents were told that they would be required to post a 1 million dollar bond in order to bring me home. Needless to say, my parents were panicked - - they certainly didn't have that kind of money! But, the State of Kentucky stepped in and posted it for them, so a crisis was averted. Flash forward to 30 years later, and that requirement is no longer a part of the process. Thank goodness things improve with time!

The process that they went through had other elements that were somewhat different than the process is now. They waited on a list, which hasn't changed; however, they waited 2 and a half years to get to the top of that list, which certainly has changed, thankfully. When they finally did get "the call" about me, it was accompanied by a mailed 1"x1" black and white photo of me that they could barely make out. This didn't matter to them. It was all they needed to know that I was the daughter for them. They then waited about 4 months for me to arrive home. Back then you didn't travel to Guatemala because of the Civil War going on.

I was 8 months old when I arrived home. My parents say I was the perfect baby. So much so, in fact, that they decided not to have another since they just knew they wouldn't get that lucky again. Mom quit her job to stay at home with me, and she spent a lot of time with me, particularly worried that I might have been developmentally delayed since I had spent the first 8 months of my life in an orphanage with little to no one-on-one interaction with others. She may have gone a little overboard, because I started talking before I was one and I began reading at age two! I point this out not to brag about myself, but because often times there is an assumption by the general public that all children who have been adopted will have some sort of issue because they were adopted, whether it be developmental, physical, or in some other category. I'm living proof that this is just not the case. Adoption is just like anything else - - you cannot stereotype based on one profile that you hear about in the news or from your neighbor. People who were adopted are just people like everyone else, and should be treated as such.

I should probably mention at this point that my mom was also adopted, as was her brother. So she had a unique perspective while raising me that focused on openness and constant communication. She never wanted me to feel like adoption was something weird, or that we couldn't talk about anything at any time. My grandmother had never felt comfortable talking about it with her, and she didn't want me to experience this same situation.

Having said that, however, I never felt weird at all. The truth of the matter is that my experience is that families are families, period. It doesn't matter if the people in the family share DNA. It doesn't matter if kids have come from their mother's bodies or not. Kids are kids, and parents are parents. That is the bottom line as far as I am concerned. In fact, in all my years of interacting with various friends, co-workers, and acquaintances, I've had a hard time finding many people who had a relationship with their moms even half as close as the one I've had with mine. We finish each other's sentences, know exactly what the other one is thinking, and spent life as close to best friends as we could have possibly been. Don't get me wrong - - we had our ups and downs just like any other parent/child relationship. We had our share of yelling matches, and I'm pretty sure she wanted to bean me my whole 13<sup>th</sup> year of life, believe me! But it's just so funny...we share so many traits, I am basically a younger version of her. And because of that, I am a very strong proponent of nurture over nature when it comes to familial relationships. Now that's not to say that both aren't involved, because I am well aware that they are. But I also have the unique perspective of being a stepparent, so I get a front-row seat of the biological parent/child relationship every day of my life without actually being in it, and I can tell you that based on my observations, one does \*not\* outweigh the other when it comes to nature versus nurture, in my opinion.

Sometimes people argue that parents shouldn't adopt a child from another country, that this is doing the child a disservice by taking them away from their country of origin. I disagree with this. How could it possibly be better for a child to grow up without a loving family just so

that they can stay in the country of their birth? I have had a great life that never would have been possible without adoption. Even though I grew up in various parts of the Midwest, where there was pretty much zero diversity, at the time, I didn't feel very different from everyone else at all. I was just a regular kid living a regular life. True, all of my friends were white, and no one around me looked like me, but to be honest, I really thought nothing of it. I was always getting compliments on my "tan", which was funny considering that I was just always dark, and I'd be even darker if I'd stayed in my country of origin, but of course that didn't occur to others. As with many things in life, I didn't even notice that I looked different than my parents until strangers started commenting on it or asking me about it. Luckily, the negative comments were very few and far between. I won't lie, I faced prejudice. But most kids were not so much mean as they were curious. I got a lot of the question, "are you mixed?", which at the time, meant a combination of black and white races, since back then in the Midwest there were not many people of other races/ethnicities around. I got a whole lot of "what are you?" To which I'd reply, "I'm human, what are you?" Kids did ask me why I looked different from my parents sometimes. But I felt very comfortable talking about the fact that I was from Guatemala and that that was why. I think that the reason for this was that my parents just managed to make me feel as though I was special in a good way rather than in a way that was embarrassing or something to be ashamed of. My mom always taught me that people would ask me questions throughout life, and that it was up to me to decide what I wanted to share with them. She emphasized that our family's business was no one's business but our own, and that I had full decision-making authority over what other people learned about me and what they didn't. She also taught me that when people asked questions or said things that might be hurtful; it was because they were ignorant of the subject, and not because there was something wrong with me. She did a great job at all of this, because while I sometimes got irritated (depending on my mood that day!) when kids asked me things, most of the time I was confident and comfortable informing them of the way things really were.

My least favorite question from kids, and even to this day from adults, frankly? "Who are your REAL parents?" Ug. Just saying those words still makes me shudder! This one was hard to stay calm for, and still can be, to be honest, but I would always just explain to them that there is no such thing as REAL parents. Just like there is no such thing as FAKE parents. There are just parents. My parents are my parents, end of story. I tried to put myself in their shoes and think about the possibility that they think there really is a difference. I then tried to teach them what most of them had simply never heard, which was that not all kids come from their mom's bodies, that some don't. That adoption is just another way to build a family, one that is just as "real" as having a baby through pregnancy. And that was that. Now that I'm an adult, I realize that these kids just didn't know what else to think or say. And that they truly just needed to be taught. So I am glad that I had the patience as a child to teach them that families come together in different ways, but no matter what the ways, all are still families. Hopefully today, they are better people

Sure, you say, that's all well and good. But what about your Guatemalan culture? Mom and Dad started from the beginning with introducing Guatemala as a culture/country to me. I had worry dolls, large and small, and brightly colored woven items from Guatemala that they could find. There weren't a whole lot of choices back then (remember, this was back before E-bay, can you imagine?), but they did the best they could. There weren't festivals, or parades, or even a whole lot of books. But they made a big deal out of it anytime they did find something Guatemala-related. In the 7th grade it came time for the old "pick a country and write a report on it" project. My parents of course got so excited, since this was a great opportunity for me to study Guatemala! Honestly, I saw it as yet another boring Geography lesson. I wasn't interested in the culture at that time. Some children will not be interested at all, some will. I know that this varies because of my interactions with others who were adopted. I finally did become interested, but not until college. So there is no perfect formula for introducing a child's birth country. The best way to handle it is to make it available to them and they will find it at their own pace.

Just like you can't generalize that all adoptees will have issues, you certainly can't generalize that everyone will have had as great of an experience as I have had. However, I find that often times parents of adopted children should step back and take a deep breath before jumping to conclusions about their kids. Kids who come from their parents' bodies have issues too, you know. So just because a kid is having an issue does not mean that it stems from the fact that they were adopted! Again, I reference my stepchildren. My stepson, who just turned 13, is experiencing the same things that I was at that age in terms of trying to figure out who you are and what kinds of people you want to spend time with, and what that means about you. My stepdaughter, who is now 9, had early learning issues that were not able to be explained to us, and is teased just as much about her freckles as I was about being brown. You just never know how your kids will turn out, no matter how they came to join your family. So don't try to figure it out. Just live life and enjoy it. Be a good parent. That's more important than focusing on issues and where they came from or why they are there.

My life is totally complete. No, I do not feel a sense of loss, or emptiness, or longing for something. I'm not saying that's true of every adoptee, but it's certainly true of this one. Frankly, I rather like not knowing any medical history, because what could I do about it anyway? That's just one less thing for me to have to worry about! I am very grateful that I had the opportunity to have a second chance at life. That's something that not everyone gets. But there is no other "family" out there who belongs to me, or to whom I belong. I just have one family. Here are the first three lines listed under the definition of "family" in the Random House Webster's College Dictionary that I found: "1. parents and their children, considered as a group, whether dwelling together or not. 2. the children of one person or one couple collectively. 3. the spouse and children of one person". Nothing in these mentions anything about these people having to be biologically related. So there you go.

And the true testament to how great I think adoption is when it comes to ways to build families? The fact that I've always planned to adopt my child. I think it's so great, in fact, that it's the ONLY method of family-making I ever planned to pursue. Yep, that's right; I never wanted to be pregnant. That always seems to shock people. But to me it's always been a question not of "why adopt? But rather, "why not adopt?" I've noticed that our society has this way of trying to make people believe that it is a necessity to procreate. And why is that? Because it's really not a requirement of every human being who lives here on this planet, right? There are kids already in this crowded world who need families, and there are families who want kids. It sounds like a perfect match to me! I've had this plan since elementary school and told each and every guy I dated as a young adult and beyond, needing them to know up front what they'd be getting into should our relationship develop further. So this Winter I finally got to realize my dream. Today is my first Mother's Day as a mom. I am so excited. When I was taking my leave of absence from my job, I was calling it just that, a "leave of absence". For some reason, I had in my head that the phrase, "maternity leave", referred only to those taking a leave for pregnancy. Then one day I thought, "Wait a minute, who says that maternity only refers to pregnancy? Doesn't the word just refer to something relating to being a mother?" So I picked up that handy dictionary again the week before I left, as I was typing up my Out of Office e-mail automated message. Here is what I found listed as the very first definition under "maternity": "1. the state of being a mother; motherhood." A-ha, I thought! Actually, I think I said it out loud too. So I hit that backspace key and replaced the words to read that I was out on maternity leave. Ah. That's better.



**"Adoption"**  
**Eric Elfner**  
**May 13, 2007**

Good Morning! It is truly an honor for me to get to speak with you today about adoption

and more specifically international adoption. My wife and I had considered adoption from the very beginning. Two years after having our biological son Ben, we made it a reality. Of course considering adoption is a very complex process. The overriding driver for me was really quite simple. We wanted another child and there were children that needed homes. Let's do that.

There are 2 important facets of our life as an adoptive family I'd like to talk about this morning. First is "don't forget about the adoption." Yes adoption is a big thing. And a close second -- that it is okay to sometimes forget about the adoption. **"Adoption is not the defining characteristic of our family."**

The first facet is a question of acknowledgement, "What... oh yes we **do** have an adopted daughter!" You see mostly there are clothes to buy, homework to be done, dinner to be cooked, clothes to be picked up, grass to be mowed, ... clothes to be washed, ...clothes to be folded, ...clothes to be put away (laundry is my duty). Most family time is consumed in activities of normal daily life.

Lily our youngest, now 5, was adopted from South Korea. She was only 4 1/2 months old when she came home with us on a 15 hour plane ride from South Korea. In preparation for getting Lily, my wife and I went to many days of adoption training, talked to many people, and read many books. Due to my relatively weak memory, I could not tell you much about what I specifically learned, but I hope I remembered the key points. The most important being, Do not forget that Lily was adopted.

That may seem strange to someone just meeting our family, because well... she looks different! She looks Asian. I'm sure every parent of an adopted child will tell you: you very quickly do not see an Asian child, you don't see an adopted child, you don't see anything out of the ordinary. You see your child. And as I mentioned earlier, the first thing I think about is that yes we have an adopted daughter, AND I better not forget about it.

We are all individuals and we need to know our place on earth. An adoptee has the risk of having somewhat of a hole in their person, if they are not brought up to understand and appreciate everything about themselves, just like any other child. For an adoptee, being adopted is a big part of who they are. As we all know, everyone is different and we do not know how being adopted will effect a child. Just as I do not know how being skinny will effect my son. Or being beautiful will affect my wife. But, being adopted is potentially a big thing and I feel we need to give our children the tools that they can rely on as they grow. Adopted or not.

A few months ago, Lily said "I'm the only one that makes our family Korean." Well actually she said it more like *"I'm the only one that makes our family Korean."* This is great, don't you think? In a few short words she was able to express the pride we hoped she would develop and carry into her adult life. How much did Amy and I have to do with this? That is hard to say. But, I was certainly happy to hear her say this.

To me, one of the greatest gifts that could be given to an internationally adopted child is the gift of knowing the language of your birth place. Culture is so very intertwined with language. You can have a lot of appreciation for a culture, but to truly and deeply understand, I think you need to know the language. And to really feel like part of that culture, there is nothing better than knowing the language.

This is one gift that I did not think we would be able to give Lily. But let me tell you a short story. We are members of a group of people in Cincinnati who have adopted children from South Korea. It is called Korean Focus Cincinnati. There are play dates for the younger kids, an occasional camping trip, and celebrations of Korean holidays. We attend these events to keep Korea in the forefront of our lives, and build a community of similar people.

Well at one of these events about a year ago, Lily overheard a couple of Koreans talking in Korean. She asked Amy "what are they saying?" To which Amy replied they are Korean and talking in the Korean language. As all you parents know, there are times when your child asks a simple question to which we give a simple reply, and think no more about it, but in the end it is a major event. Well this was one of those times. After a short period Lily said, "Well, I'm Korean.

Why can't I talk Korean?"

Well again that was a wonderful comment; a clear indication that she is building a healthy understanding of herself. And luckily there is a Korean school here in town, up in Blue Ash not too far from our house. It is for all school age children – preschool through high school. The students, that go there are almost exclusively second generation Korean-Americans. That is children of parents who have immigrated to the US and become naturalized citizens. Although these parents come from a very different perspective than we do, we share the same goals of having our children learn and appreciate Korean culture and language. The school meets one day on the weekend for 2.5 hours. We started Lily there this past fall and she just completed the school year last week.

I do not know how long Korean school will last for us or what impact it might have. Right now it is easy. Lily likes it. It fits with her easy going sociable style. It works in our schedule. There are kids that stay in this right up through high school. I cannot even imagine that this will work through high school for us. What happens when Lily does not want to go? What happens when school conflicts with soccer or dance class? Will we "**encourage**" her to go? We will need to deal with that later. For now, I'm just enjoying how well it is working out.

I asked the kids what I should mention, in talking with you. They agreed that I must mention the greatest adoptee holiday. And although this is not a widely know holiday outside of adoption circles, everyone close to adoption knows about it. And I do not think I am compromising any confidences when I tell you about it. It is of course, "Gotcha Day". Yes I said Gotcha Day. You know like the day I got you. Gotcha Day. I'm not making this up. Lily came home to us on Nov. 22, back in 2001. So that is our Gotcha Day. Turns out that that day was also Thanksgiving. So we celebrate Gotcha day along with Thanksgiving. Also turns out that that day was Ben's birthday. So we tend to do a lot of celebrating at the end of November each year.

For Gotcha Day, Amy has always cooked up quite a Korean food feast and we pull out the picture albums and have a grand old time.

Now I said that there were 2 facets of being an adopted family I was going to talk about. First was, to remember that Lily was adopted from South Korean. That is very important. Now, what was the other thing? Right, adoption is not the defining characteristic of our family. The "traditional" family is in the minority. You know: Mom, Dad, 2 kids, 1 dog, 2 cats, an occasional fish.

We are open minded people here so I will not dwell on all the various and assorted ways that families get put together today. There are single moms, single dads, gay families, grand parents raising grand kids, communal families, "traditional" families, the list is endless. I myself was in fact adopted by my dad after my "birth father" divorced my mom. I was 1 year old. She remarried a few years later. The person I view as my dad is the man that raised me, taught me to play basketball, took me to school; The man that offered to catch me when I climbed too high in a tree and was scared to come down. So I just see adoption as another way to grow a family, its okay to sometimes forget. Adoption has its own challenges and its own rewards, just like any other family structure. Love makes a family.

So we talked a bit about remembering the adoption and very briefly about adoption not defining our family. There is one last thing I'd like to cover before I make my exit from the spot light here.

I feel bad... I feel bad in that I have given this talk with so much focus on my daughter. We also have a wonderful and exciting son, Ben. And this is part of the balancing act that all parents go through, and that is ensuring all family members get adequate time and attention. This past fall, I was downtown walking around Sawyer Point with Ben and Lily. And as occasionally happens a perfect stranger said to me, "She is s-o-o cute." Forgetting rule number one -- Lily was adopted -- this most often goes in one ear and out the other. I think nothing of it. But this day I was on my guard and although I know the woman did not mean anything remotely incorrect by her comment, I felt the need to respond. I felt stronger than my normal "Oh Thank You." This

day I felt the need to tip the scale a bit in the direction of my number one son. Now I was not trying to be impolite and I'm unsure of the tone of my voice, but I did say "And don't I have a handsome son as well?"

Ben and Lily are so unique and wonderfully different; I've never really questioned the attention I have given each. They both bring such joy to our lives. When I'm asked about having even more joy with another child, I'm quick to point out you can get too much of a good thing.

Let me end with a quote to drive home the point that a family unit is a family unit no matter how it is created. Ogden Nash a humorist said: *"A family is a unit composed not only of children but of men, women, an occasional animal, and the common cold."* I think we can all relate to that.

Kamsa hamnida

