AFTER A WORKSHOP session on adoption a middle-aged white man and his young black daughter came up to me. He asked if I would listen to his predicament and give him advice about how to handle it. He and his wife had been invited to a family reunion, quite a gala affair. There was just one problem: the man’s brother, who was organizing the reunion, was a racist and had made it quite clear that his niece was not welcome.

The troubled man who stood before me, and his wife, both wanted to attend the reunion. Would it be okay, he wondered, if they got a babysitter for their daughter?

I looked at him for a moment in disbelief, pulled myself together, and pointed out that he now has a daughter who is African American and that, as her father, he must stand up for her and tell his brother that if she is not invited, he and his wife would not be attending.

On another occasion a parent shared with me the disillusionment he felt thirty years after Martin Luther King Jr. outlined his dream of an integrated and peaceful society. Such a society, the man said sadly, may not come to fruition. For this parent, like many other white parents I’ve met, King’s dream was a major inspiration and no small factor in his decision to adopt transracially. Now the lack of societal progress was causing him, quite literally, to lose interest.

So when my editor asked me, after reading the interviews, “Why do you keep asking all these questions about the parents’ continuing their relationships with their adoptive children? I don’t understand that,” I told her about both incidents in an effort to explain.

Transracial adoptees who were in the vanguard of this phenomenon—and I am one of them—were adopted domestically in the early to mid-1970s. Unfortunately, data on transracial adoption placements remain incomplete for this time period for a variety of reasons. What we do know is that from
1968 to 1975 approximately twelve thousand black and biracial children were placed with white families. And, as the parents interviewed for this book attest, they were given little guidance or information by the agencies that handled the adoptions. The parents were on their own.

Much of the traditional empirical research done on transracial adoption was conducted by social scientists from the 1970s to early 1990s. It focused on the self-esteem and racial identity of children of color, like me, but mostly from the perspective of their white adoptive parents. Two things jumped out at me when I read those studies. One was that a large percentage of these first families lived in rural middle America. They were inspired by their church or Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech—or they simply wanted to adopt, and black and biracial children were available. But because of where their adoptive parents lived, the children often had no contact with the African American community because there was no African American community to speak of.

The other factor that jumped out at me was statements made by white adoptive parents, explaining that, in effect, they chose to be “color-blind” in how they viewed their black and biracial children. And, indeed, these studies concluded that love is crucial in raising transracial adoptees and predicted that these children would grow into productive people in society. But as I have traveled around the country speaking with adoptive parents—many of whom are quite amazing, I might add—I have met enough of their children to know that while love is certainly essential, these children need more.

Those statements about “color-blindness” are at the root of the problem: while it’s wonderful, on the one hand, that their child’s color did not matter to their loving parents, on the other hand, their child’s color is not irrelevant and of course is a major component of identity. How could these children form healthy identities if their parents regarded one of their major characteristics as irrelevant?

One result was that some of these children grew up feeling like an experiment in racial harmony, disconnected from their ethnic community and not “a full voting member” (for lack of a better way to put it) of the white community in which they were raised. (Just who do you date in high school?)

Too often, then, as young adults, many of these children moved away and were shocked by the world they found outside their close-knit, nurturing hometowns. A certain element of disconnectedness entered their relationship with their parents. Probably, it was always there, shrouded by the demands of daily living and the challenges of raising any child in twentieth-century America.

Plenty of people in their twenties have a tough time renegotiating their relationship with their parents, but transracial adoptees, and their parents, are
picking their way through a psychological, cultural, and emotional minefield. And if the parents are unable to understand the multiple quests on which their transracial adoptees find themselves embarked, their relationship may be ruptured. Sadly, some parents simply give up once their adoptive children are launched into adulthood. These parents are tired. Or, like the man I described earlier, completely disillusioned.

That’s why we asked the parents represented in this book whether they have been able to maintain a relationship with their adult adoptive children. That’s why we wanted to know how they have managed to do it (and most of them have). That’s why we asked about their children’s choice of marriage partner and how that has affected the parent-child relationship.

I think that the reasons behind most of the other questions we asked are fairly self-evident. But because my editor was so puzzled by the questions about the parent–adult child relationships, I wanted to offer a brief explanation for those readers who would have no way of knowing the answers, simply because this is a realm far beyond the experience of most people.

Rhonda M. Roorda

NOTES
