

Narrative Burden **By Robert L. Ballard, Ph.D.**

Alasdair MacIntyre, a well-known ethicist, wrote: “We all live out narratives in our lives.”¹ If this is true, then each life is a story, with a beginning, an end, and a wide range of characters, plot changes, and climaxes that enrich and enliven the story in between. These elements combine to create unique stories that are never repeated or duplicated.

For international and transracial adoptees, one of the few things we can truly call our own is our story. We have lost our birth families, lost our birth culture, been placed in a family not of our own choosing, and placed in a culture that is different than our original one. Whether or not we see our narrative as a sad or joyful one, it is one of the few aspects of our lives that is solely ours, and it is from this story that we begin to figure out who we are and how we fit in the world.

Yet as transracial adoptees who live in families, neighborhoods, and communities from whom we are visibly different, we encounter many questions about who we are. “Why were you adopted?” “Are those your real parents?” “How did you get here?” When we are asked these questions by others, our narratives are placed under scrutiny. If we follow MacIntyre’s assertion, it is not just our personal stories but our very identities-- who we are--that is placed under scrutiny.

I call this phenomenon narrative burden: how our personal narratives are placed under scrutiny and at risk by the questions of others. It means that for adoptees our personal narratives are a burden we carry. Our stories, which are one of the only things we can claim as purely our own, are simultaneously the source of who we are and a constant reminder of what we’ve lost and how we are different.

When I was conducting research on the experiences of Vietnamese adoptees in interactions with others, a Vietnamese adoptee in Australia told me: “Saying you’re adopted almost demands a conversation about this unusual topic. I am expected to supply a migration narrative.”² This quote reveals how adoption is “unusual” and because it is unusual, there is a “demand” to explain and justify this difference, usually through a “migration” narrative, or a story of how the person came to be adopted. This is an example of a narrative burden.

This kind of demand is a burden, one constantly faced by adoptees who look different than their families or their peers. At

a basic level, this demand, this narrative burden, is an issue of privacy. As I have written elsewhere, this can be a question of “to tell or not to tell.”³ It is a question of whether or not an adoptee wants to disclose his or her migration narrative and if so, how he or she goes about telling that story.

At a deeper level though, the very heart of who we are is put at risk when these questions and demands are directed toward us. The burden of having to respond exposes our identity. We are questioned not merely about the facts of our adoption, but about the fact that we are adopted. Who we are is put at risk and placed in the open. “To tell or not to tell” is not just a question of disclosure and strategy, but also a question of how we define ourselves to others. In communication research we call this “enacting” or “avowing” an identity, and with narrative burden, when we tell (or do not tell) our story, we tell the story of who we are and further write our personal story.

But there is even more to these kinds of interactions than the question of privacy or the exposure of our identity; there is also the constant reminder that we are different. The very demand or question that is posed is an indicator that we are different and not “normal” in categories society deems important. The questions are messages, intentional or unintentional, well-meaning or with malicious intent, that remind us that we are different in the world we inhabit and we are different because of choices others made for us. Adoption is still an inferior way to form a family, being different racially in a family or a community is a marker that draws attention, and not knowing or being connected with one’s birth families is odd and unique. A lifetime of these questions—Why were you adopted? Is that your real mom/dad? How did you get here? What’s it like to be adopted?—places us in a position of being outsiders, of being anxious about most interactions we participate in, of being constantly vigilant that at any time the conversation will demand a “migration narrative” from us.

This anxiety is a narrative burden, a pressure to respond by disclosing and putting our identities at risk and forcing us to speak from a position of difference.

At a culture camp a few years ago, I was speaking on a panel to adoptive parents. As I talked about narrative burden and the struggle we adoptees experience in answering these questions and figuring out who we are, an adoptive father in the rear of the room burst out, “I never realized what my son would have to go

1- MacIntyre, A. (1984). *After virtue: A study in moral theory* (2nd ed.). Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, p. 212.

2- Ballard, R. L. (2006). *Identity formation in Vietnamese adoptees of Operation Babylift: An exploratory study in intercultural communication*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Western States Communication Association, Palm Springs, CA.

3- Ballard, R. L. (Ed.). (2009). *Pieces of me: Who do I want to be?* Warren, NJ: EMK Press. Visit www.emkpress.com/teenbook.html to order this book for adopted teens and their parents.

through.” We all turned and watched as he cried. In that moment, he was realizing there were some things he as an adoptive parent would never fully understand about his adopted child. He understood, as best he could, narrative burden and the impact it was going to have on his child.

Kelly Reineke referred to narrative burden in the article she wrote on non-adoptee privilege in the Summer 2009 issue of *Pact's Point of View*⁴. The parent crying in the audience was realizing his non-adoptee privilege, recognizing that the non-adopted, white, and those who live with their birth families never have to worry about their migration narrative, never have their identity and person questioned, and never experience the discomfort of constantly weighing and wondering whether or not to disclose intimate details about their lives. Their personal life story, the one true thing in their life, is not and never will be a burden to carry or something to be defended and constantly explained to others.

The notion and experience of narrative burden is not just about adoptees, however. For adoptive parents who are reading this, I am sure you have had your fair share of interactions with others about your family, many of them enjoyable and many of them not so enjoyable. For you, there is a narrative burden centered on being a mixed-race, non-biological family, and when others ask those kinds of questions it places you in the same situation as many of us adoptees. You have to decide whether or not and how to respond to intrusive questions or demands; you have had your family's identity and how it was formed through adoption challenged; you have been reminded that you and your family are different. If you have never before experienced these kinds of interactions, it can be a jarring, challenging experience, one that makes you uncomfortable, angry, defensive, anxious, and forces you to look at who you are and to justify your choices and your narrative. Responding to these questions is another topic altogether, but regardless of how one responds, narrative burden is at play.

Narrative burden extends beyond our community of adoption. Those who speak a language other than English or who have names that are not traditionally Western often experience narrative burden. Non-white individuals who live in predominantly white neighborhoods or non-white individuals who work in white workplaces experience narrative burden. Second generation immigrants who live, work, and go to school in English-speaking, Western cultures but were raised by or being raised by parents who cling to traditional Asian, African or other cultural ways of relating and being often experience narrative burden. DWB (“driving while black”), an insidious form of racism perpetuated by law enforcement, is a more overt, discriminatory form of narrative burden.

In these situations, an individual must determine how and in what way to respond; the individual's identity and personhood are vulnerable, exposed, and under scrutiny; and the individual is reminded of their difference, a difference having nothing or very little to do with the choices the person has made about his or her personal and unique narrative.

As a communication researcher, I view identity as a dynamic phenomenon, something constantly in flux, always shifting. Each interaction we are involved in with others, each communicative exchange, is a moment when our personal story as it is written to that point in time meets the opportunity to continue writing our personal story. As we struggle with our narrative burden, one thing we as adoptees (and adoptive families) can do is take the opportunity to write our personal stories in the direction we want them to go in each interaction. We can be proud of being adopted, use questions as teaching opportunities, or politely deny to disclose our narratives. We can tactfully shift the question, both as a way to deflect attention from our difference and as a genuine way to level the playing field in an interaction so that difference is moved from the foreground to the background.

After all, do not all individuals and families have a narrative? We can hope that by telling our stories we educate others so that in the future, we are not perceived as so different—so that someday the well-meaning questions do not have racial or cultural undertones, but are merely queries about who we are from people who genuinely want to know us. While we may not have been given the chance to write our beginnings, each interaction, each moment we experience narrative burden, is a moment where we can claim our story as our own—a chance to write the rest of the story the way we choose to.

Robert "Bert" Ballard (bballard@uwaterloo.ca) is a Vietnamese adoptee, international adoption researcher and consultant, and an assistant professor at the University of Waterloo (Ontario, Canada). He and his wife have two non-adopted daughters and are awaiting a referral for a son from Vietnam. He will be a keynote speaker at Pact's annual Spring Training, Adoption Stories: Helping Adopted Youth Understand and Explain Their Adoption Journey, on March 6, 2010 in Oakland, CA.

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4- Reineke, K. (2009). Non-adoptee privilege. *Pact: Point of view*. Oakland, CA: Pact, an adoption alliance, pp. 3-4, 9.