

A Mother by Any Other Name: Adoptive and Biological Mothers

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My title is a partial quote from Shakespeare's play "Romeo and Juliet," 1600. Juliet said,

"What's in a name? that which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,
And for that name which is no part of thee
Take all myself.

So to extrapolate, what makes a woman a mom/mother? Is it automatically given or earned? Is it only for that one special person who mothered? Is it conceiving, carrying and delivering a baby? Is it raising a baby into adulthood? It is being a strong female presence in a child's life? Are some mothers more real than others or more deserving of the title mother or mom?

I was adopted when I was 8-days old. My parents have always been very positive about my adoption, always willing to answer questions and provide information as age appropriate. They have also expressed gratefulness towards my biological mother for making the extremely difficult decision of placing me for adoption. (Knowing this, when both my daughters were 8-days old, I held them and looked at them and could barely start to imagine the unbearable pain my biological mother must have felt at handing me to my mom.) I have always felt and viewed my adoption as a positive thing and have never felt animosity or anger towards my biological mother. I have also not felt an aching or empty place inside of me for not knowing my biological mother.

Yet, I have been fascinated by the topic, especially since so much of the research and opinions are geared towards pathologizing anyone who was adopted, insisting that all adoptees have a gaping hole and feelings of intense loss that can only be filled by a relationship with their biological mother. One of my pet peeves was when peers would ask me, "Don't you want to find your REAL mom?" I would always come back with, "I know who my real parents are. They are the ones who have raised me all these years."

My doctoral dissertation was about adoption. It was entitled, "Growing Up Adopted: An Examination of Adoptees' Socialization Experiences." My thesis, much like feminist theory, explored the social environment and thus the way adoptees might be treated by others because of having been adopted. I also used a non-clinical sample which is sorely lacking in the adoption literature. Those with parents who were open and honest about their child's adoptive experience and those who had less negative reactions by others in their wider social circle, were more able to eschew any negative comments made about their adoptive status and held more positive attitudes about adoption in general, when compared to

those whose parents were not open and honest or heard negative comments about their adoptive status.

I always knew that in addition to having biological parents (and some non-identifying information) I had a biological half-sister who was two years older than me. It turns out she has always known about me. She found me in March of this year after placing a few phone calls. Amazing, really! It turns out that Gwen is a marriage and family therapist and we have hit it off in such an incredible way. She has become a close friend and sister in the last 5-months. My biological mother Lacy and I met in May, a surreal but positive experience.

So, why am I sharing all of this? I have been adamant for the last 5-months that my mom is the only one to carry the title of “mom.” I call Lacy by her first name. When I correspond with Gwen, I refer to Lacy as “your mom.” My parents have been extremely supportive and are not jealous people. In fact, after I met Lacy, my parents also had the chance to meet her. Both my mom and Lacy thanked one another for me. I felt very loved!

I am still processing this experience and part of this is exploring what the word “mom” means. Lacy carried me and gave birth to me. She wanted to keep me, but had a two-year old and did not know how as a single woman she would be able to give both of us what we needed in the late 1960's. So, she did the most amazing, beautiful and unselfish thing. She put me first! She put me ahead of her feelings, her attachment and love for me and with help placed me for adoption with my parents at 8-days of age.

My mom fed me, woke up at night, changed diapers, played with me, dealt with my stressful teen years, my good-byes as I moved out and then moved away. She saw me become a mother for the first time and our relationship changed to that of friends, as well as mother-daughter. Yet, Lacy deserves recognition for all she did for me, for giving me life, and for the feelings of loss and sadness she has lived with for 43 years.

Juliet's speech would suggest that Lacy is also my mother and that calling her Lacy does not change that fact. So, my mom and Lacy are different kinds of mothers, but are both mothers. Lacy is deserving of respect and appreciation for the lifelong sacrifice she made for me. Wouldn't most moms sacrifice their life for their child? Isn't that what both my mom and Lacy have done?

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