

Naming and Renaming Our Children

by Leceta Chisholm Guibault

In the book, "Inside Transracial Adoption" by Gail Steinberg and Beth Hall, naming and re-naming adopted children is discussed. The authors state that because children as young as 4½ months old recognize their names according to research from the State University of New York at Buffalo, the child is better served when adoptive parents keep the child's first name as the name *by* which he or she continues to be called.

"Asking a child whose world is changing to also change her name may be experienced as being asked to be someone other than herself," the book states. The authors write that most adoptive parents change their children's names for reasons that made absolute sense to them at the time. Some reasons for changing names included that a name was hard to pronounce, they didn't like the name, the name broke family traditions, the name didn't fit their cultural norms or "just because." Then Steinberg and Hall asked the adoptive parents to think of the naming issue from the child's point of view.

My thoughts:

All of my strongest *views* on adoption and its issues have come with time and experience. Almost 11 years ago when I was waiting for my first child, all I could think of was "what will we name her or him?" At that time, we didn't have the Internet, a support group, a variety of adoption-related books or an informed social worker. We did choose a first and middle name for our daughter, then I learned of her birth name. Back then, we decided to give our daughter the name we had chosen and keep her birth name as her middle name and am I ever glad we did. Trust me; there would be hell to pay from this truly insightful 13-year-old.

At age 5, Kahleah told me she was so happy to have the names that both of her mother's gave her. Our babies do grow up and may have some interesting opinions on this topic.

When I listen to adult adoptees speak, there is generally grief over the loss of a birth name and a part of their overall identity. That is it; I think it comes down to a question of "identity."

In hindsight or if we were to adopt again, would I change my child's name? I don't think so. Did Kahleah and *my* son, Tristan, become more "my own" because I named them? No. Maybe it felt like they were more mine in the beginning because of my inner fight with "entitlement?"

Naming or re-naming our children is personal. What I hope to convey is that although my ideas and feelings may have been one thing way back then, they have evolved. What once felt like my "right" as a parent to name my child whatever I wanted to - and yes, I felt strongly that it was my right - when they were first referred to me, has mellowed. Now, I am learning, listening and thinking, "what is really the best for *my* child," and it just may be to change the name.

As our kids mature, a true sense of identity is important. It is not an easy job for adoptive parents to give their children a true sense of identity, ALL of their identity, not just their identity by adoption. Maybe their name is the starting point. I have heard a lot of stories from adoptive parent friends about their child going through a phase of wanting to be called by his or her birth name, if it had been changed, which is quite normal. Kahleah does the same thing from time to time. I think the point is, if we do change their name we should try to incorporate at least a part of their birth name so that they feel the empowerment to choose if the feeling hits. I am trying to imagine what it would be like to know you were born in a far-off land, to another family, a different language, culture, and then BOOM, it all changed. Even if my children were adopted as infants, Kahleah can now intellectually discuss feeling like two different people.

Our kids are growing up and their personalities are developing. It's funny how something as "simple" as a name can become so important.

I have a friend who adopted from China. She gave her daughter a French name. A few years later, after corresponding with an adult Asian adoptee, my friend changed her daughter's name legally to include her beautiful Chinese name as her middle name. My friend told me that she felt the only thing her daughter came with from China was her name. She knew the *birth date and place of birth were false*. There was no *biological family history*, so the name *took* on extra importance, even *if she* was named *by* an orphanage worker.

Out of curiosity, I asked Kahleah her views on the topic. She has always told me that she was happy to have both her birth name and the name we gave her. Tonight I asked her how she would *feel* if we had not kept her birth name. She said, "My name is a part of me. To take it away is to take a part of ME away. It's like, I would not be totally 'me.'"

I asked her how she would feel to learn that her birthmother did not name her. I suggested that some children are named by a lawyer, foster parent or orphanage director. Kahleah said, "It would not matter - it would still be my first name - a part of who I am."

I have Kahleah's permission to share her thoughts. She took her time answering, knowing I was going to share her thoughts with other adoptive

parents. The truth is, I was a little surprised by her reaction to the second question. I thought she might hesitate at the thought of someone not as close as her birthmother naming her.

What's in a name? Who does it make us? Who am I?

"Leceta" was given to me by my mother - unique, hard to spell, hard to pronounce, not exactly a "Canadian" name, but I wouldn't change it for the world. It is who I am.

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