

Prepare Your Child for A Birthcountry Visit

Adoptive country visits and handling the emotions

June 01,2010 / Rebecca Nelson

Identity. Culture. Adoption. Individually, these concepts hold a different meaning for each person struggling to explore their own place in this world. I am an adult adoptee from South Korea, and I also work with children who have been adopted at different ages.

Not long ago I was working with a 9 year-old girl who had been adopted from China as an infant. Sarah (not her real name) and her parents had recently visited China , and so I asked what she thought of her trip. In a decided tone Sarah replied that China was " creepy,"and remembered most that there were "a lot of beggars." I felt sad that Sarah's birthcountry visit left a negative indelible mark on her. She was going to have a challenge ahead of her in accepting her birthcountry as being an important and meaningful part of her identity and heritage. It also was not likely that Sarah would desire to return.



As a young adolescent I also had the opportunity to visit my birthcountry, South Korea . In fact, I lived in Seoul for a year with my adoptive parents and I was wholly unprepared for this surreal experience. I felt like a foreigner in my birthcountry despite having lived there for my first 5½ years of life. The native Koreans noticed, too. My features may have been classically Asian, but I walked and talked like an American. I received many looks, stares, and what I interpreted at the time to be disapproving judgements. Despite that my circumstances were very different from Sarah's, like her, I felt very little connection with my birthcountry. Instead, I felt bewildered and conspicuous, and less Korean than I could have imagined.

Both Sarah and myself would have benefited from thoughtful emotional preparation for a birthcountry visit to facilitate a positive and meaningful context for our experiences. Any life event such as, getting reading for school, starting a job, a birthday party, or adoption, involves preparation. When we don't prepare for an event or important experience, we often find our attention divided with juggling multiple tasks or becoming overwhelmed with details, which can take away from the positive or deeper aspects of the experience. In terms of a birthcountry visit, emotional preparation relates to the exploration of thoughts and feelings about the child's first-country, followed by organized and purposeful behaviors related to ensure a meaningful visit.

Emotionally preparing children can be daunting for adoptive parents, as it includes talking with children about serious matters that can involve complex or ambiguous feelings. That is, while adoption is a wonderful way to create families, it also means that, at some point, a child must come to terms with the land of their birth as part of her adoptive identity. For the purpose of article, we will use China Birth-Country visitation as the central example. The Following are some suggestions in emotionally preparing your child (and yourselves) for a

birthcountry visit to facilitate a meaningful visit.

1. Cultural Perspective Taking : The political and socioeconomic forces that have made China the primary source country for international adoptions is unique. What it means for Chinese adoptees is that, for the most part, there is less ambiguity about why their birthfamilies could not care for them. There are many academic and authoritative resources that speak to this, but two which most eloquently and supportively address these complex issues and are specifically written for Chinese adoptees are "[When You Were Born in China](#)" by Sara Dorow, and "[Kids Like Me in China](#)" by adoptee Ying Ying Fry, who was a 3rd grader at the time of publication. Both of these books utilize photographs of children and adults in China in naturalistic settings relevant to orphanage and adoptive histories. Also important, both books emphasize that families in China love their children. Sometimes, no matter how many times children hear this from their parents, this point can really hit home when communicated through other avenues.

Additionally, it is helpful if both similarities and differences are highlighted in a relatively even manner. Some children may be comforted to know that some aspects of their life are relatively universal (e.g., hotels, McDonalds and restaurants). Taking this concept one step further on a more meaningful level, it is helpful for children to know that the larger social context is also generally universal such as, family constellations and social class. For example, Sarah would likely have benefited from exposure to the idea that impoverished and homeless people (beggars) exist in every country as well as working class and "white collar" professionals. I would have benefited from a few casual but specific lessons in social etiquette when I spent time in my birthcountry (I'm sure this would have reduced the number of "looks" and "stares" that I may have overpersonalized at the time). By imparting a range of social conditions, children are provided with greater perspective from which to view their birthcountry and themselves.

2. Support Identity Continuity : Related to the suggestion above, a core issue that challenges adoptees, especially international adoptees, has to do with the phenomena that they were born in one country to a particular family, but are now living in an entirely different country with a family completely unrelated to them. This can stir insecurities at the most basic yet complex level identity. For the most part, Chinese adoptees do not have the benefit of knowing their ancestry, let alone their immediate birthfamily, or being told what they were like as an infant or young child. For many adoptees looking backwards in their history, it is as if their existence began at the time of adoption. For children who were adopted beyond infancy, this can be quite unsettling as school-aged children naturally think about where they came from, and how their life began and dramatically changed. Adoptive parents can facilitate continuity in the identity of their children by sensitively and openly talking with them about their lives before adoption. By doing this from a very early age, children become comfortable with the concepts of adoption and birthcountry. This comfort will help children feel secure when going to their birthcountry. The two books mentioned above are good vehicles for opening this type of discussion, as are open-ended questions when a child is in a calm and receptive state. Granted, little is known about a child's preadoptive history; however, creative and affirming questions or statements, (" I bet your birthmother had beautiful eyes like yours .") show positive support of adoptees core struggle

with an ambiguous beginning.

3. Developmental Age : Developmental age or how a child behaves can be vastly different than a child's chronological age. When addressing emotionally laden issues, use your child's developmental age to direct their interests and experiences. For example, younger children need to eat more frequently, have a shorter attention span, and are less able to regulate their behavior and emotions making them more dependent upon their parents when coping with stress. Depending on your child's developmental age, families will want to plan for strategic "quiet" or "down time" to allow children to process the experience in way that does not overwhelm them. For some children they may include structuring their sensory experiences (e.g., carefully planning the number of outings, avoiding particularly crowded or noisy situations or alternating active and sedentary activities).

4. Learn About China and Chinese culture : You or your child may have expectations that she will "blend in" once in China . Often times the opposite is true. The reality is that Chinese adoptees are mostly raised by Caucasian families. As a result they will probably impart a Western (or other) culture in their demeanor, which often contrasts with the subtle and indirect general communication style of Asian culture. By exploring Chinese culture as a family before the birthcountry visit, your child (and you) will become more comfortable with cultural similarities and differences, which are important in facilitating realistic expectations. Causal educating statements, such as, " Did you know China has the world's largest population ?" or " Did you know spaghetti was invented in China ?" are usually intriguing segues for conversation, which can lead to more meaningful discussion about their birthcountry. Most children readily learn about new places when provided tactile experiences. A globe or large world paper map can be used to show where China is located, along with your child's province of origin, where the family will be stayingetc. Children usually enjoy using markers to designate these special places, and it also provides them with a readily understandable visual reference that can make the experience more relevant for them.

5. Special Needs Children : Whether by inborn temperament or life experience, some adoptees have special needs with respect to their ability to process strong or ambivalent feelings in an adaptive manner. These children will need particular sensitivity in how they are prepared for a birthcountry visit, and it is recommended that parents consult with an adoption mental health professional to facilitate this process. Undoubtedly, these children will need a more structured itinerary and opportunities for supported quiet time. Some potentially challenging experiences such as, an orphanage visit, may need to be reserved for another birthcountry visit when the child has acquired more mature coping skills.

6. Practical Dos:

- **Family Emphasis :** Do emphasize the birthcountry visit is a family trip, not a sacrifice the parents have made for a child, as this can place undue pressure on a child who may not want to upset her parents or may feel guilty about the allocation of time and expenses. Additionally, emphasis on the family imparts a positive message to the child that the family considers her birthcountry to be an important aspect of her

identity and the family's as well.

- Active Participation : Most school-age children love to participate in family plans. It makes them feel important and valued. Providing thoughtfully pre-chosen options is one way to structure their participation in a productive manner. In a previous article specific ways to engage your child in the birthcountry visit such as, having her create her own album using a camera, keeping a travel diary or journal. For some children the opportunity to videotape matters of interest to them can also be valuable.
- Transitional Object : Allow your child to bring a beloved object from home to help them feel more comfortable in a country that may feel completely foreign to them. (e.g., favored stuffed animal, blanket, or pillowcase)

In summary, with emotional preparation, a birthcountry visit can provide an invaluable familial experience that imparts cultural knowledge and perspective. However, most importantly, it is an opportunity or a stepping stone for your child to learn about herself, and be able to meaningfully come to terms with her adoptive identity.

Dr. Rebecca Nelson is principal investigator of a study investigating the developmental status of newly adopted Chinese infant girls. Mental, motor, and speech and language skills are being assessed upon arrival with a follow-up six months later to determine the rate of catch-up. A third follow-up study is also in process at DePaul. Ms. Nelson's study was recently cited in the Chicago Sun Times and as an intercountry adoptee herself has given talks to local adoption agencies and participates as a panel member for open discussions with prospective adoptive and adoptive parents. Contact Information:

Rebecca I. Nelson, Ph.D., P.C.

3633 West Lake Avenue - Suite 202

Glenview, IL 60025

Tel: (847) 729-4293

Email: rinelson@comcast.net

Heritage and Transnationally Adopted Children

From Roots to Routes

July 26, 2007/ [Sheena Macrae](#)

Heritage cannot be sealed and bottled, to be spooned. To survive, with all its powerful headiness and ability to sustain a sense of self and well-being, it must be distilled and allowed to mingle with the air in which it finds itself. Heritage needs to be used to live.

For my children adopted from China, what their Chinese heritage means for them is bittersweet. And so it is most probably for children adopted from other cultures and societies. My children's heritage isn't about ribbon dancing, or water buffalos, or dimsum and language class, although these are part. My children's heritage, a snapshot in China's history, tells of a country in transit from country rags to global riches, a country of vast and complicated difference. It tells of a country where wages for most are low, where conditions for living and working are hard and where family planning is decided by the state and not within a family. It tells of a country where some children are adopted overseas because the state system cannot properly accommodate all the children in need of social welfare or new families. It tells of tough parental decisions to let go a child: on the steps of an orphanage, the gates of a factory, the side of a road. It tells of parents who may have abandoned their child and never looked back or intended for the child to survive.

It tells of Chinese people, kind as people are the world over, who've lifted a foundling child and given that child a chance at life. It tells too of mothers in China, in the countryside and in the cities, still with their children. In poverty, in poor domestic situations... but still with their children.

How hard this heritage is to explain to our children! How can they use it to make sense of themselves? How can it help build self-esteem? It's for us, their parents of the present, to explain the contradictions and conundrums which lead our children to live with and be loved by us. We are here to help our children make their mark in our communities, to help them 'bend the air', just as - for a little while - they bent the air in China. We are here to help them develop pride in their heritage despite the prejudice that their heritage may engender in the societies in to which we bring them.

How best to explain? Heritage needs to be lived to come alive. A birthcountry visit is worth a million words. My family, my children adopted from China and I, have made several visits back to China; the children make sense of China with their own eyes. What can a child's eyes make of China? Well, what my children see changes as they mature, and their understanding of the conundrum of their heritage expands, is exponential,

each visit. They see with the simplicity of a child's vision; perhaps that vision sees clearer than any adult exposition of heritage.

Is this too tough? To permit a child to see conditions and situations which may have applied to them? To look at begging, poverty, substance abuse and poor housing conditions? Yes, it's tough but it's placed in context. And the context is more than simply seeing difficult scenes. It's seeing Chinese children going to school, playing in nurseries, in play-parks. It's jostling in a queue for tickets for rides in the parks, blowing bubbles with Chinese bubble-makers, sharing an offered balloon with yet more kids in the parks. It's shopping, looking at how things are different and some are the same. It's thinking the whys of cooking and sanitation!

It is facing the suspicion with which our family is regarded in parks, in restaurants. It's having ordinary people take time to explain how our family shocks because we are part of the politics of family planning made real - and how that is shaming.

It is receiving the knowledge that there is welcome in the welfare institution, their first community of care. For my children, it is knowledge that staff there call the children by their given Chinese names. It's wonderful to see a child realise she is both her Chinese and English name; and her names only name who she knows she is now! The sum of two contexts..... One child, two names, one identity

Heritage is part of but not the sum of identity. Identity is what a person chooses to make of history, the personal narrative that is the web and waft of the whole person, enabling their personal narrative to develop. A child who is held by "loving hands" (parents from the present, carers from places in the past) will be able to paste the snapshot of their heritage and history in to their Book of Life whether or not it's in their lifebook. With a grasp of living heritage, adopted children can move on from the roots of the past to future routes - which knowledge of love's journey make easier to take.

Heritage is a part of composite identity. We owe it, must show it in its reality, in birthcountry visits, to our kids. As responsible parents, how we choose to show and tell about their heritage, when in birthcountry and once home, is critical. We must also offer our children a sight of their heritage without gloss but without gloom. Why? Because our children rely on us to start them on that journey....roots and routes. We help the seam their past - through our present family - to the future which beckons them.

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Emotions and Birthcountry Visits

What can we parents expect? How can we support our children?

July 26, 2007/ [Sheena Macrae](#)

CYCLING THROUGH EMOTIONS

Over the course of a visit to a transnationally adopted child's birthcountry, especially if it's planned to visit their institution or foster family, it's likely that the child will run the gamut of every emotion. Even simply planning a birthcountry visit can produce emotion...our adopted children often fear the unknown, fear transitions. With a birthcountry trip the fear is of the unknown, yes, but also of the known, however unconscious the knowledge of their birthcountry has become. Children also may become hugely energized about making the trip... We parents need tools to deal with the emotions we and our children almost inevitably will experience.

A birthcountry trip with every emotion possible sewn into its fabric needs careful preparation. Experienced families have found that preparation with books, drawing pictures, and using maps to deciding the route is worthwhile preparation for the trip. The child is entitled to be party to the planning. More, it makes planning for the trip a family task; that is a huge safety net for a child unsure he or she wants to make the trip. It helps an anxious child feel secure that the whole family are going – and the whole family are coming back!

Then, we parents need to understand that in making return visits to their birthcountry our adopted children may cycle through all of the four basic emotions of fear, anger, sadness and happiness. For those families who make just one visit, it is likely that the tour through the emotional wheel won't be sequential, that emotions will present and re-present in a patchwork response as the child struggles to come to terms with feelings. Often, too, the child will freeze these feelings, pack away the emotions, and families will find that it is months after coming home that the child dares to release how they felt. On a first trip it is very likely that work to grasp the feelings were will continue well into returning home. For families who have made more than one trip, feelings about being in birthcountry often arise and can be dealt with straightaway; the child feels secure enough about being there to let emotions out and let parents deal with them... For these families, rather than emotions packed away to deal with later, we come home unpacking how we've dealt with it.

Let's take a quick tour of the emotions that may arise in a birthcountry visit, and how we parents might think to deal with them.

FEAR

Fear may begin before the trip. Fear of “going away”, fear of “going somewhere”, it’s shorthand for the journeys our adopted children made to us, even if they are going back with us.

And arriving in birthcountry? The fear is intensified by the immediate sounds smells and colors. It’s not easy to prepare for this. A Chinatown in the west, for example, isn’t the same as a town in China. And then, on landing, the fear is made instantly worse because - as children do - our children look immediately to us, their parents, for help. And what might they find? They find parents who are flummoxed and tired, unable to figure how to call a cab or find a train, unable to speak with their normal confidence to others and ask for help. The parental edifice of strength crumbles in the eyes of the child. Where is the child going to hide? Will we (parents) regain our normal strength and confidence? If not, what? And if the child becomes afraid, s/he may turn away from us. Both parents and children, not coping.

Helping

How can we help these initial fears? It’s important for returning families to take time after touch-down. Try to get sleep as soon as possible and try to grab some easy food. Then hang out together very quietly to regain family composure. Go for an easy walk or two, and get the hotel to write directions back to the hotel and the names of places you want to visit for cab drivers. Stay close to your child. Hug and carry your child as much as s/he will let you. Get a room with one big bed (and ignore strange looks). Eat foods you can share. Don’t criticize if your child if your child doesn’t like local food. Do take time to mooch round supermarkets and wonder at ‘same and different’ from home. We parents have to lead on opening up the dialogue with birthcountry...

An orphanage trip

Fear comes as baggage in trips to the child’s first place of care. It’s not just being there, it may even be going there. The journey may upset the child emotionally. The decision to visit should be worked out beforehand. Not all kids can cope. The orphanage trip need not be part of a birthcountry trip if parents feel it might overwhelm. Nonetheless, we parents have to remove our own anxieties from making this connection. Children often cope far better in reality than imagination. On the other hand, our parent agenda for visiting the orphanage (delivering gifts, seeking information) should not drive the visit. If needs must we can deliver our agenda without taking along the child. But many families find children grow in understanding of their first months and years by reconnecting. For some children, for whom birthparent searching is well-nigh impossible, connection to the orphanage is the deepest connection to birthcountry they can achieve.

Dealing with fear

How do we parents deal with fear? By hugs, by closeness, and by acknowledging that fear is a proper thing to feel when you feel out of control. An orphanage visit is hugely heady, and indeed may trigger memories even our children didn't know were held deep inside them. What tools do we adoptive parents have to hand? Parents can help regulate children with a quiet compassionate hand on shoulder, an acknowledgement that we too feel strange, but that fear dissipates when you face it... It's the pre-worked signal (a squeeze maybe) that means a child wants to leave now. It is empathy and true parenting – knowing exactly when a child has faced quite enough, and needs to retreat to recharge strength and ability to cope. Re-charging? My image is that of a child with a smaller sib seated on their lap, sitting on my lap, with all of us rocking for stability...

ANGER

After fear comes anger. Adopted kids on birthcountry visits can be very angry. Anger at being taken out of routine, anger at parents' not coping, and anger at all the wrong foods. Children need supported in their anger. We as responsible parents need to remember that anger very quickly surfaces over deep feelings of loss. We parents may be at a loss ourselves to deal with the feelings of raw anger which may be freed in our kids when they arrive in birthcountry. We have to be in a place to support our children. We have to be abler to contain our own emotions.

Loss of "fit"

Children feel anger at loss of fit. They ask why they had to be lost to their birthparents. What was that caused this (are they to blame)? We parents then feel guilty: are we right to ask our children to look at these losses, to have brought them back to birthcountry to confront them?? My elder girl has enunciated her anger by saying sharply that being in China can make her feel extremely angry and very sad. She sees families in what she feels must be equivalent situations to hers (mainly women begging with kids) still WITH their children. She is angry at her birthmother for not trying harder to keep her. She asks why if these mothers can do it, why not hers?

Tools

When we very often can't do other than offer other reasons for our child's loss, how do we deal with this sort of anguished anger? What are the tools?

~Allow the anger. It is the children's right to have it. But remember in birthcountry and afterward, we parents may have to defend or explain the societal reasons that underpin our children's need for adoption. We have to do this even when there is a part of us that screams at birthmothers, birthmother, you were wrong to leave my child.

~ Give all possible answers truthfully and appropriate to age, and don't offer an untruthful safe way out. Over time as our children grow and re-question events, they may be better off allowing anger early so that in teens this anger is put where it belongs. It is our job to make safe our children's connection to their birthparents, because if we don't, who will?

SADNESS

Resolution

After anger comes maybe a resolution. Families often find that as anger resolves, there is a catharsis. Many families fear catharsis, thinking that if they avoid birthcountry visits any crises our children may have in belonging to our family will be averted. But, these are crises waiting to happen, and the fact that they happen IN birthcountry may in fact be healing... Why? Because facing anger and fear in birthcountry is supported and made possible because our adopted children come to birthcountry within OUR family. Finding out about the losses that began a child's journey an adoptive family is hard for that child to bear. Finding out about losses is beyond even thinking about first family and first community of care. It brings with it great sadness for what might have been and what was. But dealing with this sadness and loss in birthcountry allows the first glimmering of understanding of how to bind all this into the future.

Comparisons

When we parents take our children back to their orphanage, their first community of care that cared for them after birth family, we ask them to meet who 'they were'. It is likely they will meet current children from that community, and will draw comparisons. They may also find themselves drawn by the staff back to the status of "a child from there". For adopted children, this other previous identity, another view of "Who I Am, at base" is very hard. It may diminish esteem; it may make the child feel labeled an orphanage kid...

Tools

What tools are there for sadness?

~Allowing sadness is so important. Allowing the child to pick up the emotional pieces of their past life and examine them within the circle of current family is so important.

~Realize that it is important to allow that the examination of past life may not be peaceful! The child may feel anger at looking at all the aspects of sadness just described. We parents have to be very strong, and not let our emotions round wanting to protect our children get in the way of letting them simply FEEL. Hug and touch are very important, but the lightest of touches may seem to burn our children when they are

emotional, so keep to the lightest of touches...

~ Claim the children! When the children are confronting the past, it may be that we parents have to act as a barrier to stop invasion of our children by people from their past. Don't be afraid to claim your child when fear and anger and sadness are showing. This may be necessary at the orphanage. We parents will need to engineer a delicate balance of social custom and claiming... such a hard tool to hone. Roughly translated? If the staff invade, hold your child tight.

HAPPINESS

And then there is the happiness of being in the birthcountry - and in coming home. Our children are entitled to both, adoption brings that privilege.

Being comfortable?

It may be good to come to birthcountry not to make a pilgrimage but just to meet friends. Families who make more than one birthcountry trip often find the children are aware that they are not who they might have been in birthcountry. They may look the same, but they do not behave the same. How they 'are' is foreign. Would this still pertain if they are with birthcountry friends - when we parents are absent? Yes, because social behavior is cultural and most adopted kids take the ethos of our families and the behaviour of our societies. Our kids fall between the stools of fitting in by face and being set aside by social 'mores'. Can being in birthcountry make up for that lack of fit?

What makes children happy when in birthcountry? It is perhaps having family with which to explore it? Our families are security for our adopted children, a way of reaching out to birthcountry. Without our families, our children would not be socially recognized. As former orphanage kids, they may have lived in a community, but it would not have been a family, nor recognized socially as one. So through us, they have a right to be treated with respect in birthcountry. At child level, though, what makes children happy in birthcountry? It's doing things. Things we never could have taught them. Things that seem to defeat standard literature on innate and learned behaviour. "Mum! Watch me!" is the cry, and there they are accomplishing feats they didn't learn from us. In China I have learned to stand and watch when my children 'perform'. In shops, on the road, walking, in play parks, under bridges watching dancers practice. Swimming, swinging, Tai Chi, Wushu. Some of the narratives my children's actions tell astonish me. Am I looking at their parents in them? Whatever, I see children enthralled in happiness being just a little bit part of the people of their birthcountry

FAMILY GLUE

My children 'own' their birthcountry. My elder girl says that is her job to

show us her birthcountry, and she says it with an expansive wave of her arms, see MY country. She feels strongly she belongs there as much as here; we as her parents must let her share her birthcountry. Just we shared when she first came into our home.

People say that transnational adoption is a bit like a broken jigsaw. Pieces that fitted when new don't fit any more, bits are missing, and perhaps some of the pieces are from different puzzles. AH but the birthcountry visit can act a little like a kaleidoscope; turn it and new patterns emerge. And what emerges is the importance of family. The ability to support a gamut of emotions.

It's doing things together as an adoptive family in birthcountry that matters. More, it is letting the children feel the gamut of their emotions while cradled by the strength of our family that is the key to an adopted child's sense of security in birthcountry. Our family underpins, tacks, and then helps sew together all the other emotions of fear, anger and sadness that arise, and allows for happiness and pride to emerge. We adoptive parents are the rock on whom our children lean as they find roots in the country of their birth. And as they experience all the heady emotions of the trip....

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IDENTITY BUILDING

From Life Books to Face Book—Traveling Into My Space

(How a Heritage Journey Helps Build a Strong Sense of Identity in Kids)

By: Bea Evans, Co-Director, The Ties Program

Cameras flashed as Dave and Jody arrived home from China with their infant daughter. Scores of pictures were taken at Sam's first birthday party, just days after he arrived from Guatemala. Video tape captured Rose's soccer game, the cameras still rolling twelve years after adopting her from Vietnam.

Pictures help parents recall memorable moments shared with their children. These images, the basis of a "lifebook," form a visual timeline of a child's life. As each picture is worth a thousand words, the tales that accompany the pictures are told over and over again. Eventually, as the stories are internalized, a child begins to weave them as their own.

Stories take on a different flavor each time a new storyteller begins. Further, kids create new anecdotes, recalling important events that they are now able to tell about themselves. The movement from "lifebooks" to "face book" is symbolic of the transition from hearing one's story to telling your own.

Telling a story about a remembered event is clearly easier than retelling one you've heard. As children retell information they've heard about themselves, questions arise, sometimes accompanied by a desire for further information. For children who joined their family through international adoption, these questions reflect not only curiosity but also loss.

What is it like in the country where I was born? Do I look like people who live there? What kind of houses do people live in? Do people wear the same kind of clothes that we do? Do kids go to school? Where was I born? Does anyone remember me? Does my birthmother think of me? Do I have any brothers and sisters living there? Do they know about me?

For many kids, there is a longing to echo Paul Harvey in saying "And now you know the rest of the story."

The opportunity for a child to visit his or her birth country helps fill the gaps by providing a stronger sense of story, self and identity. Jenny Bailer, an adoptive mom who has traveled to Korea with her kids states, "In my humble opinion, a trip like this is a MUST for kids to fully form their identities and begin to understand where they fit in a world that includes two cultures."

Traveling Into My Space via a Heritage Journey

With increasing frequency, families formed through international adoption are returning to visit the country where their child was born. Often referred to as a heritage journey, this

journey back is also a journey forward. The experience adds to the sense of story, and nurtures a sense of self.

Here's how.

Sense of Beginning - Internationally adopted kids have few if any pictures of themselves or their life before joining their family. Because little concrete evidence exists of that time, kids often feel their life began as they joined their adoptive families. Intellectually they know this is not true, creating unsettled feelings. Returning to the place where their story began seems to acknowledge that time period and validate one's presence in it. As 15 year old Theresa points out after her journey to Peru, "You will know your own history from experience."

Sense of Information - Each time a different person tells the same story the emphasis, importance, and recollection of details vary. When it comes to telling their own story, children need to gather information about and assign importance to the details of their life. Participating in a heritage journey encourages children to think about the beginning of their life and explore what missing pieces of information are important to their rendition of their story. Some of those missing pieces may be sought and found when traveling. Or perhaps different threads to one's story are discovered. And sometimes it is the lack of information that leads to the acceptance of one's story.

Sense of Place -- Kids living in a country other than where their life began straddle a bridge between "over here" and "over there." Learning about their birth country through their parents' memories, exposure to information, and participation in culture camps and other events creates an awareness of similarities and differences. The opportunity to visit the place where life began moves awareness to ownership and pride. Upon her return from Cambodia, 10 year old Jesse writes, "I can't believe I came from here. It's so cool."

Sense of Belonging - Several years ago, Greg and his mother traveled to Chile, Greg's country of birth. They returned to the Massachusetts Cape during the height of the tourist season and frustrated by the slow moving traffic, Greg told his mother it was time for the tourists to go home. Mom reminded Greg that just a week ago they were tourists in Chile and no one asked them to go home. Greg quickly responded "You might have been a tourist, but I was a native." The conviction of this statement gives voice to the strong feelings of belonging kids experience after visiting their birth country.

Those feelings are a direct result of meeting, interacting, and being accepted by people they meet while traveling. As Emily wrote after visiting Paraguay, her country of birth, "I can say with pride that I have two countries to call home."

It is important to recognize that feelings of "loss of place and belonging" are part and parcel of identity building. Thirteen year old Lucy described her loss in these words: "I learned that even though I was born in Paraguay, I have not lived here and experienced their culture so I am therefore not a TRUE Paraguayan." Interestingly, on the very same trip, 18 year old Jesse adds, "Paraguay is what makes me "ME". It is those conflicting pieces that when added together help a child find "self." And that's a good thing!

Sense of Connection - A heritage journey provides kids the opportunity to discover links, or connections, with their country of birth. For some, like Amy, these links are intangible. During her stay in Korea, she and her parents visited the clinic where she was born. While in the waiting room, 11 year old Amy flitted from one chair to the next pausing momentarily

to sit in each one. Although her parents observed this behavior as boredom, Amy later announced she had sat in the same chair as her birth mother. And indeed she had since she sat in each and every chair. She was connecting in a way that worked for her. I have often pondered that day for Amy, being so thankful that she was able and willing to share with her parents what might otherwise have gone forever unnoticed, an intangible connection cloaked in what seemed like disinterested behavior.

Other times the links are much more tangible and recognizable. For example, while in Peru, three girls sharing the journey each carried a plastic bag while visiting ancient ruins. As they boarded the bus one day, the guide noticed the bags were full of sticks, stones, bottle caps, and assorted other "finds". She asked the girls if they planned on taking home this "junk". Incredulously the girls replied, "Junk?!? These are pieces of our ancestors." Time and again, we have seen kids collecting soil from their birth country, bringing home bits and pieces of a country they want and need to stay connected with in order to move forward.

The Journey Continues

From Life Books to Face Books – Traveling Into My Space can be viewed as a metaphor to describe child development. It recognizes that a child's sense of self is initially described by a parent, eventually grows to include outside influences, and continues to be a work in progress. The opportunity to visit their country of birth enables the international adoptee to interact through concrete experiences to their heritage and story. Empowered by the messages of journey—belonging, pride, and understanding—the journey "into my space" continues as kids build a strong sense of who they are.