

# **Adopting a Life**

By

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Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,  
Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel.

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I, iii

In my heart I know that the most important fact about my life is that I am a father, the father of two teenage children. I am, of course, proud of my professional success as a psychologist and as the author of books about the psychology of boys and the social lives of children. My lecture tours have taken me to Japan and Brazil and Bali. I've even been a guest on the "Oprah" show. All of that has been quite wonderful. Nothing, however, compares with the power of being a father. Even in my career as the author of books on child development, I am an "expert" whom other parents trust in part because I, too, am a parent. I've been listed as a "keynote speaker" in a lot of programs, but like most of the people in my audiences, whose lives are wrapped up in children, I know that being a father has been the most important role of my life, and it has changed me more than anything I have ever done. I am who I am because of being a father.

#### Parenthood: Struggle and Surprise

How did I come to be a father? Was it the usual story of love and marriage, egg meets sperm, and a round of Lamaze classes and eleven hours of labor later the doctor holds up a baby and announces "It's a girl!?" No, for us it wasn't like that at all. My wife, Theresa, and I---though we tried---couldn't have children the regular way. So we adopted our children.

When Joanna was three days old she was brought to our hotel room in Columbus, Ohio by a lawyer. She lived the first week of her life with us in a hotel. As every new shift of employees came to work that week in 1985 at the Picket Suites Hotel and discovered that we had a new baby in our room, they brought us a bottle of complimentary champagne, bottle after bottle. If we had wanted, we could have spent the first week of Joanna's life drunk in a hotel room, but we didn't think that would be a prudent way to start our childrearing years.

The moment Joanna arrived in our lives we were instant parents. It didn't matter that she was adopted. We faced the tasks that all other parents face: diapers, night-time feedings, rules, unpleasant fights, scary illnesses and other unsettling moments, parent-teacher conferences, driving to soccer games. Also like many parents, we came back for seconds. Five years after we adopted Joanna, we adopted our son, Will. He arrived in our lives suddenly; so quickly, in fact, that we couldn't even tell Joanna in advance. We drove up to her school one afternoon, my wife and I sitting up front, a baby car-seat in the back. She spotted it immediately: "Are we getting a baby?" she asked. "Yes" was the answer. We drove to the home of a foster mother in Peabody, Massachusetts who handed us our son. He was three days old. Joanna was the first person in our family to hold Will.

Except for these unusual "birthing" stories, the story of my life as a parent is quite unremarkable in the details. I've been a parent like all other parents. Nevertheless, the central fact remains that it was adoption that made me a father, transformed my life and brought me to this point.

## Many Adoptions in My Life

Joanna's adoption wasn't the first time that adoption had touched me, nor would Will's be the last. In fact, the story of my life is being written in large part by adopted people. Because my mother became quite sick during her pregnancy with me, her doctors warned her that she shouldn't try to have another child. For that reason my younger sister, Amy, is adopted. My wife, Theresa, was adopted out of an Irish orphanage in 1950. When her parents, who were with the U.S. Army in France, traveled to that orphanage outside Dublin, Theresa was eight months old, weighed only eleven pounds, and could not sit up or roll over. Though she was malnourished, she could still smile, and so her parents picked her out of a room full of babies. Theresa's sister and her two younger brothers are also adopted. My brother and sister-in-law have two adopted children. If you were to look at a picture of our entire family, only two of us—my brother and myself—are related by blood. None of us looks very much like one another. My children joined a large and scattered clan in which these extraordinary birth stories – not genes – run in the family.

As it happens, when Joanna turned eighteen she asked to meet her birthmother and Theresa and I agreed that she should. Over summer break she flew to Ohio to meet the wonderful woman, Liz, who had given birth to her, but had not been able to raise her at that point in life. It went well. The following year, in Joanna's senior year of high school, we invited her birthmother to the school's special Parents Weekend event. She came with her husband and—amazingly enough— *her* adopted Chinese

daughter, Olivia, to see where Joanna had gone to school. This remarkable woman would have been at Joanna's graduation, too, except for the fact that she was back in China -- adopting a second baby girl that very day.

### Why Am I Dragging You Through All of This History?

Why am I telling you all of this? Why am I dragging you through my family's history? If you think about it for a moment, the fact that there are nine adopted people in my wife's and my immediate family means that a ton of people, both adoptive parents and birth parents, ran into unexpected events in their lives. There are a lot of infertility ordeals and surprise pregnancies woven into that narrative. These complicated stories combine to make a simple point: life rarely turns out the way you imagine. Rarely? Hell! It *never* turns out the way you expect. And what do you do when you get surprised by life? You adapt -- and you adopt.

There are times in your life when you feel that you are going to be disqualified---or are already disqualified---from having what everyone else is having. I remember feeling that desperately when, at the age of thirty-five, I wanted so badly to be a father and I thought it was never going to happen. It seemed as if everyone else had the luck and I didn't. But then, a few years later, my luck came in the form of adoption. That's why I'm standing here today, a lucky man.

I have had a lot of time to think about this thing called adoption and I have come to the conclusion that almost everyone's luck comes in the form of adoption. I don't mean it

strictly in the sense of adopting a baby. That's only one form. I'm talking about adoption as that miraculous moment, when someone unexpected, someone who isn't your blood or your genetic material, someone whom you didn't create or even imagine, suddenly appears in front of you. And you respond by taking that person into your life, by adopting him or her. You cannot be passive at these times. It isn't enough to have the person appear like an angel with a message. You have to reach out. You have to take the risk. You have to take them into your mind, your heart and your soul.

Remember how adoption works out in schools? When you are a student, sometimes you adopt a teacher. Actually *always* when a great teacher-student relationship develops, it is a mutual adoption. Sometimes a teacher really thinks you're special, and you feel the same way about the teacher, or visa versa. Perhaps that happened to you when you were in school. I hope so. When I walk into an elementary classroom and the teacher speaks of the children as if they were all her kids, or when I hear a child say that she "loves" her teacher, I know that that process is underway. That is why I believe so passionately in small class size and reasonable teacher loads. If the teacher has time for personal after-class conversations, or can remember details from a student's life, that child is going to want to work for that teacher.

A few years ago when my friend, Ned Hallowell, heard that his former high school English teacher was sick with lung cancer, he went up to New Hampshire to visit him in the hospital. The teacher, Fred Tremallo, was sitting up in bed, writing furiously on his laptop computer. He looked up and said, "I don't have much time. I have to finish these college recommendations

before I die.” Now, that’s a dedicated teacher, but Ned was also a loyal and dedicated student. He gave the eulogy at his teacher’s funeral and when he looked out over the audience, he saw that the church was full of Mr. Tremallo’s former students. Ned wasn’t the only student who had adopted Mr. Tremallo or felt adopted by him. If we’re lucky in our school years we find that kind of relationship at least once.

But it never “just happens” that a teacher and a student develop a relationship like that. The teacher has to signal that he is interested in more than a dutiful show-up-in-class interaction and the student has to get past the uncool feeling that comes from crossing the line from the world of kids to the world of adults. It asks something extra from both, an extra measure of attention, something the pressured pace of the ordinary school day works against.

So it is with friendship as well. Lots of possible friends come and go without your making a real commitment to them. But sometimes it happens that you take them in. Sometimes a friend adopts you and you adopt a friend and it can also develop into a life-long relationship. But friendship never happens without work. Friends move away, they marry people you don’t like quite as much as you like them, everyone gets busy. If you want to stay friends, you have to work at it. You have to stay in touch; you have to write and visit; you have to visit one another in college and embrace each other’s new friends. It is not easy to do. Shakespeare knew all about it. In Hamlet he wrote:

“Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,  
Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel.”

## Adopting a Country and Manny Ramirez

We often speak about people who “adopt” a new country as their own. Some of you who traveled to the United States from other countries found a community that adopted you when you were thousands of miles away from your own parents. And maybe you took your new community into your heart a bit and it became your substitute family. Perhaps it was just a temporary adoption that will live on only in your memories and you dream of returning home. Or who knows, your years here may have opened the way to your adopting the U.S. as your country, and perhaps to U.S. citizenship.

We all have a deep yearning to adopt and be adopted. Even in the world of professional sports where, as everyone knows, it is all “just a business” and athletes move constantly from city to city fans still hope for an athlete to adopt their “home town” team. I am going to use an example from my home town of Boston. For the first few years he played for the Red Sox the fans were upset with Manny Ramirez because he didn’t always run all the way to first base on a routine out. At a deeper level, however, we weren’t sure he had really adopted Boston as his home, despite the millions of dollars the team was paying him. It hurt our feelings and so we withheld our love for him.

No one, however, was critical of him when he missed a game ago in order to fly to Miami and become a U.S. citizen. Everyone understands how hard it is to give up your own country and culture, and adopt a new one. It is an act of extraordinary commitment and Manny made it. He signaled that he had completed his adoption by returning to the outfield at Fenway

Park waving a small American flag. Suddenly the fans began to open their hearts to him. We began to adopt him because he made a commitment to us.

In the modern economy, as in professional sports, we have resigned ourselves to the idea that work is temporary, that no one stays with the same job for a lifetime anymore. People often say, “Well, it’s just a job. I don’t get too attached.” We say that to protect ourselves psychologically; it doesn’t mean we have given up the wish to feel something more than that.

The truth is you want to feel attached. You want to feel part of a company that expresses some sort of commitment to its employees, and it’s hard for people when they don’t feel that. Not every company can give you your birthday off or throw a party, but everybody needs a cupcake with a candle lit. And that’s what you see people do for each other in some places, whether the company provides it or not. When people work for faceless corporations they endeavor to do what they can for their coworkers to make them feel that there’s a family there. Even a cupcake and candle with a circle of co-workers singing “Happy Birthday” makes a huge difference to us in terms of our morale and our willingness to make a commitment to a job. When other people adopt us, we adopt them back.

### This Guy Isn’t Really Talking About Adoption

You might say I’m not really talking about adoption -- that all I am really talking about is loyalty and making a commitment. That’s true in some sense. But I am also talking

about making a certain kind of commitment: an open-ended, full-hearted, go-for-broke, commitment. Total and unconditional. It has no exit strategy. That's why I use the word adoption, because the kind of commitment I'm describing is not temporary, not just something to do until the next new thing comes along.

We live in a strange time in America. We are certainly the richest country on earth, and yet studies show we are not the happiest society on earth. We suffer from what has been called the "paradox of affluence" or the "paradox of choice." As the U.S. has grown richer, people have not grown more satisfied. Indeed, psychological research has shown that the more choices people have, the less satisfied they are with all their choices.

I was sitting on a plane once talking with the fellow next to me about his daughter's college application process. It appeared that his daughter was quite a strong and capable student; nevertheless, nothing in this family was left to chance. He described this gargantuan family effort to get her into the "right" college: many visits, expensive SAT prep courses, many outside consultants and counselors. Ultimately, he told me that she had been admitted to a fine college and that she was starting her sophomore year. I thought that was the end of the story; indeed, it should have been the end of the story, but no, he couldn't stop shopping. He said to me, "I don't know, I'm still thinking that Cornell is not the right fit for her." It was all I could do to keep from throwing my cup of tea all over him and shouting, "Oh, get over yourself!" His daughter will either adopt her college or she won't; she will either make it meaningful for herself or she won't. His endless tweaking of the possibilities does not contribute to her life or to her luck.

A friend confides that her family has traded up in houses, schools, cars, and computers more times than she cares to count, and, in retrospect, more often than has been financially prudent or even personally worthwhile. She thinks about great neighbors they have left behind, family and friends who have been harder to see across greater distances, and other benefits of sticking-with or making-do that, she realizes now, they overlooked at the time in favor of the impulse to upgrade.

The only way out of these paradoxes that surround us is to stop generating an endless number of choices, and develop a philosophy of commitment. Take what is in front of you and make it work for you. Adapt and adopt. Too often we just keep shopping: shopping for just the right home, just the right town team (as if the kids on “select” team have a better experience—they don’t), the fabulous coach, the ideal college, the ultimate vacation, the flawless child. In other words: the perfect experience. People will never find it, because what creates meaning in your life is not how objectively good something is supposed to be, not its ranking, not its winning record. It is whether *you* put *your* heart and soul into it.

### Dinner in Kampala, Uganda

Over the course of a year, in connection with my work, I meet thousands of people, both adults and kids. Talking with so many people gives me a chance to do my own unscientific survey of personal happiness. Let me tell you about the happiest group of people I’ve had dinner with in the last twelve months.

Several months ago, I attended a conference of the African Association of International Schools in Kampala, Uganda and I went out to a Chinese restaurant with a group of teachers, speakers, and administrators. I found that the woman next to me—a white woman—worked at a school in Kenya where 45% of the local Kenyan staff and maintenance crew have HIV or AIDS. So gripped was this woman by the painful epidemic afflicting the country that she, a single woman, had adopted two Kenyan boys, both AIDS orphans.

As we began talking, the woman on the other side of me began to talk about the Vietnamese girl she had adopted years earlier. And then from across the table a woman began speaking of how she had adopted a Peruvian boy when she had lived in Quito. Soon, everyone at the table began to talk about their families and we realized that among the nine of us at the table there were something like twelve adopted children, in addition to many natural-born children of these parents. This group of international teachers had literally adopted the world: they had adopted the continent of Africa as their home and they had adopted abandoned and needy children from everywhere. I must report honestly that these folks had faced a lot of challenges and difficult days with their children. I can also say confidently that my dinner companions were the least whiney, least complaining, most satisfied group of people I have dined with in the past year. Indeed, they all considered themselves very lucky.

I want to share one final story, one that is not about luck or adoption at all, in the conventional sense. It is a tragic story, in fact, but also one that is inspiring to me. Last spring, I was invited to give the commencement address at my daughter's high school

graduation at Cushing Academy in Ashburnham, Massachusetts. Due to the devoted commitment of a man named Tony Fisher, a young millionaire and a generous benefactor of the school, Cushing had been able to build the academic building that the administrators had long dreamed about and offer scholarships to students who would otherwise not be able to attend the school. Tony Fisher was killed in a private plane crash the year before, while flying to Cushing with his thirteen-year-old daughter who was making an admissions visit to the school. She walked out of the plane unhurt just before it blew up and killed her father. He was forty-three years old.

The school community had been, and was still at the time of commencement a year later, devastated by his loss. But this wasn't about Tony Fisher's money. They didn't remember Mr. Fisher because he was wealthy; there are lots of people with money in the world. We remember people whose giving is an expression of their genuine caring and partnership. The Cushing community remembers him because he adopted the school and made its health and future his special project. It is tragic that he died so young, but no one doubts for a second that he found meaning in his life. He adopted the school that had cared for him when he was a boy, and he made it possible for others to follow the path that had served him so well in his youth.

Whenever we recognize people for the contributions they have made, the difference they have made in peoples' lives, we are really recognizing the way that particular quality of commitment, the spirit of adoption, has transformed the world around them. It may be a world we don't see, the world contained in the relationship between two people. Or it may be in the wider world,

where we see someone adopt a school, or a community, or a cause with unfaltering commitment, as Mr. Fisher did.

### The Lasting Magic of Adoption

Many of you have already discovered the magic of adoption. I do not delude myself that I am the first person to have these insights. You may not have called it that, or even noticed it, but I imagine that at some point in your life you have been transformed by a commitment you made and didn't give up on, even when it might have been easier to bail out.

I don't know whether it was a kid you met, or taught, at school. Maybe a child you first got suckered into tutoring on Saturday mornings, and then discovered had taken root in your life. I don't know whether it is the older neighbor or family member who depends on your help, or the library where you agreed to help sort books one weekend, then just kept coming back. Maybe it was just a lost mutt who showed up at your door one day.

I know a teenage girl who had zero talent for basketball and no desire to play. But when her new and very small high school found it didn't have the numbers to field a girls' basketball team without her, she joined and dutifully did her rookie best, even when she would have preferred to be anywhere else but on that court. The next year, when she had the opportunity to move to a larger and more prestigious school nearby, she chose to stay where she was. Top on her list of reasons: "Here, I matter."

I don't know who or what it was for you, but I know that if you have ever experienced that kind of commitment, you've got

a start on luck in your life. And I know that if you have not yet adopted someone or something, you may have been fooled into thinking you need to search for the perfect opportunity: that perfect person, place, or project, or a better time than now. I don't know where you'll find it, but I can assure you of this: If you want to feel lucky in life, stop waiting for the right thing to come along, the right life to come along. Adopt someone or something and turn the experience into the right thing for you. I encourage you: Stop shopping and start adopting.