

Identity is a continuum. Who I am today is not who I will be tomorrow. For tomorrow I will be a culmination of who I have been in all my “yesterdays” and who I hope to be in my “tomorrows.”

Identity Building

The Impact of Birth Country Travel

**By Becca Piper, Founder/Director
The Ties Program—Adoptive Family Homeland Journeys**

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “*What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.*”

But how do we know what lies within us without knowing the past or the future? Is it possible? Certainly we live life without knowing the future. But the past...

It’s the “past” that gnaws at us because we feel like we “should” have it, because unlike the future, it can be possible to know. Further, we’ve been told “we learn from the past” and “history repeats itself.” We’ve come to accept that history defines us and provides us a foundation upon which to grow. Like seeds planted in the ground, without knowing our soil and environment we don’t know if we will become a palm tree or a mountain pine. And it bugs us, despite the fact that both are immensely beautiful.

A person’s birth country is more than a place on a map. It is more than soil, more than environment. It is the core upon which international adoptees create their identity. Each of us begins building identity within a geographical sphere that starts with our place of birth and the circumstances of our conception. Throughout our lifetime, that sphere expands to all the places we’ve been, and integrates all the experiences we’ve had and all the people who have touched our lives. A unique identity emerges, and like a fingerprint, no two are ever alike.

But unlike a fingerprint, identity changes from day to day, indeed from moment to moment as life unfolds.

So, how do we help those we love so much find their *soil*? How do we help them complete the sentence “I am.....”?

One of the ways is through birth country travel. Perhaps the most significant and exciting thing about homeland travel is what kids are doing with the experience related to identity building. It is so interesting to see kids country after country doing the same kinds of things as they work toward understanding of self.

Step One....Literally off the Plane

As kids step off the airplane and onto “home soil” a universal moment happens. Beneath the airport chaos, it’s like you can hear the thought: “*Wow, everyone looks like me.*” And then the actual conversation begins. The kids talk about this a lot and find it both overwhelming and comforting. A new very “**visual sense of self**” begins to take shape, one that transforms with each and every experience and interaction as we are traveling.

Step Two: Language

For most kids on a homeland journey, language and the ability to communicate is an immediate piece of how they see themselves. Very few are able to speak in their birth language. As a result, their first interaction with people in their birth country is usually awkward and unsettling. Thankfully, for kids traveling with other kids, the moment happens almost simultaneously. Almost in unison, we hear, “*I was at this shop, and this lady was talking to me thinking I could understand her and I had NO IDEA what she was saying!*” Because awkward things tend to feel less awkward when they happen to other people at the same time, the kids do something really wonderful at this point. They use the experience as a bridge to one another, bringing them closer together and better able to help one other. Amazingly, something that divides can also connect.

Language is actually such a big issue that many adoptees talk about wanting to learn the language so they can connect better with people the NEXT time they visit. This desire seems to reflect the hope of integrating “where I come from” with “where I’m going.”

Step Three....Blending & Dual Identity

Given the opportunity, many kids are anxious to walk a few steps ahead or a few steps behind whoever they are traveling with (sorry Mom and Dad, it is really a necessity!) to see what it feels like to blend in, to be “like everyone else.” For most, it is the first time in their lives where they have had the chance, and the call is somewhat frightening, but irresistible. Kids tend to consciously factor in the language issue, sharing (usually afterward), “*I thought that if I just didn’t talk to anyone, no one would know.*” And for short periods of time, that works.

Despite being in a country where blending feels like an option (and to an extent, it is), the kids quickly pick up on the more subtle differences. Their inner self is saying, “*Wait a minute, I STILL stand out?*” **Somehow they know they are not seen as 100 percent Chinese or 100 percent Guatemalan or 100 percent Cambodian.** Issues of dual identity become front and center.

Country after country, kids spend a lot of time saying things like “*Am I Indian or am I American?*” Or “*Am I Russian or am I American?*” Even in countries where race is not an issue, the dual identity conversation goes on, and it sounds like this, “*Do you think it is because I can’t speak the language or is it more than that? Do I stand differently? Are my facial expressions different?*” Taking a few steps, we’ll hear “*Do I walk differently?*” And in unison we all ponder the complexities of fitting in but still feeling different.

It’s a struggle, but in the end, the struggle tends to bring people to a better understanding of themselves. Carmen Knight, a Peruvian adoptee shared, “*I started to see that I am more like a chameleon. I can interact and sort of fit in both groups, maybe not completely but to a certain extent that I am happy with.*” Lynelle Beveridge, founder of Inter-Country Adoptee Support Network and an adoptee who was raised in Australia, very eloquently says, “*It was this trip that opened my eyes to just how resilient and strong these people were—something I had connected to being an adopted person. I suddenly*

became aware that my strength and resilience were ingrained within me, and I had everything to be proud of to be 'one of them.' I think in many ways my journey as an adoptee has been all about incorporating these two worlds, and coming to accept and choose who I want to be and how I want to live." Even at age 11, Andrew Abraham echoes the same sentiment, "I can be happy being adopted and I can have two families, two cultures and two homes."

Some adoptees see dual identity in a different light. In talking with 23 year old Andrea Christensen, who traveled to her birth country when she was 18, she said, *"Being adopted and having two cultures is really only a part of my identity."* *"In many ways,"* she continued, *"being Asian has been more of an issue for me. People don't look at me and immediately think I am adopted, but they do immediately know I'm Asian."* Racial identity is a huge topic, and one kids discuss a lot as they travel. A homeland journey cannot take away the pain of teasing or prejudice kids have been the brunt of in their past. That will remain a part of who they were in their "yesterdays." However, as kids get more comfortable with who they are, which a homeland journey can help with, it shifts who they become in their "tomorrows."

I often think how wonderfully supportive it is that during this time, parents, siblings, spouses, grandparents and close friends, are often in the wings as a safety net, not really being able to fully understand the emotion that goes with it, but honoring those they love by giving them the opportunity to explore that part of themselves.

Step Four: My Birth Country is REAL and so am I

Thankfully, more and more kids have opportunities to explore their birth countries through a wonderful array of books, and by attending culture camps that expose them to the food, customs and traditions. Those things are terrific ways to help your child get ready for experiencing their birth country. In a recent study done by Hollee McGinnis of the Evan B. Donaldson Institute, it is interesting to note that the *"external aspects of culture that we often use to help children become aware and have pride in their birth cultures were (rated) rather low in terms of what the majority of respondents thought to be helpful to their formation of identity."* But, she continues, *"That doesn't mean we shouldn't do them. It just means in doing the real work of coming to terms with ones' trans-racial adoptive identities, we must make sure we are accommodating real opportunities to fully engage and immerse in the culture."*

The message here is that there is something very powerful about first hand, experiential time in ones birth country. In Carmen's words, *"Through our senses we are able to make a connection to the place where we started our lives. While there are many wonderful things about our countries, there usually are some things that are sad and are hard for us to confront, such as poverty. Yet, the processes of making our birth countries and culture real is acknowledging and accepting all that makes our birth countries what they are, the good and the bad. Once we can come to terms with all that is our birth country, we can be proud in where we come from."* As described by 18 year old Landy Hancock after traveling to her birth country, *"For the first time in my life, I felt complete and at peace with who I am."*

The "realness" comes from on-the-ground, fully immersed experience. For many adoptees, their very existence is being validated by things like seeing a file or an intake chart that includes their name and quite possibly a picture. Andrea Christensen recalled how emotional she had become when seeing her file. *"I think I had always known there would be nothing there about my birth family, but there was always this part of me that had hope. When there really was nothing, I cried, and I don't usually cry."* When asked if that experience created greater sadness as time went on, she said, *"No, I think it brought me more to acceptance and being ok with it."* Aimee Sonkiss had a similar experience traveling as a teenager. As she looks back on where the "not knowing" has taken her, she says, *"Like those who have lost a parent through illness, or absenteeism, I know I have an emotional burden of the uncertainty,*

hurt, and unfairness of the situation surrounding my birth parents and unknown history. But like many others, although I can't say I've found peace with the situation, I've come to terms with it as a part of my whole. Instead of covering the emotions over and pretending they're not there, I think I've learned to accept their existence and live alongside them."

Like many kids, Andrea had other experiences that are common when traveling to their birth countries, experiences that address "who am I?" She visited an orphanage where she held a baby girl. *"When I put her down, my heart went out to her,"* Andrea recalls. With her adoptive family, Andrea was able to meet the police officer who found her, and visit the place where she was found. He was able to tell her pieces of her story, giving her the ability to tell HER story from a very real, first hand perspective.

It is important to note that not all kids want to meet their birth families. It is a very big step and a very individual choice. In her MSW clinical research, Andrea interviewed adult adoptees and learned what others before her have learned. One respondent said, *"My parents asked us...if we wanted to search for our birth parents. I thought long and hard about it, and I [realized] I am very content with my life. I am very happy with knowing what I know and so I said no."* In other words, she was saying, "I don't need that part of my "soil" to continue to grow as me." Not everybody does.

Step Five: Why?

"Why was I placed for adoption?" The question of "Why?" is on the mind of all as it speaks to the very initial sphere at the core of identity building that includes circumstance. In a journey that allows for discussion, kids are often able to begin to process social stigma, government policies, and individual birth family circumstances should that information be available. Because it is so prevalent and overwhelming, poverty tends to be a piece of nearly all birth country experiences whether it is the reason for adoption or not. The adopted person's constant echo: *Could that have been me?* Amy Silverbrandt, a young adult Chilean adoptee worded it like this: *"I believe that my soul weeps each time a child confronts me for money. The uneasy feeling that brews from our common human bond hurts me to my core while, the adoptee inside of me balances guilt, thanks, and hope."* Yet even with that extra layer of hurt, kids traveling to their country of birth seem to find peace. All who travel struggle with poverty, but they also see "beyond it." They see the hope in people, the warmth of the soul, and they integrate that into their experiences and who they are.

Step Six: Exploring Loss

For all of us, those things we feel as losses become part of who we are, and the ability to grieve is what gives us comfort, and shifts how we see ourselves. Not all adoptees feel huge loss. One of the respondents in Christensen's research reported, *"I never felt like I lost something or [was] shorted somehow."* But more often than not, adoptees feel loss at some level (often times many levels), and being in their birth country provides lots of opportunity to create a shift for themselves. What they are doing frequently goes completely unnoticed, unless you know what to watch for. Primarily, kids use **"linking mechanisms"** —a very positive and healthy way of soothing the grief and helping themselves move forward.

So, what is linking? The most classic example I can think of involved a nine year old girl, now a young adult. Amy and her family were visiting the clinic where she was born. They were scheduled to meet the doctor who delivered her. After their visit, Amy's Mom came to my hotel room, crying. She said the visit had been awful. *"Amy couldn't have cared less. While we were in the waiting room, she was all over the place, first sitting in one chair, then another. She really didn't care about being there."* We hugged and talked about visits not always being what we dreamed about. Mom left and I was sad.

About 30 minutes later, there was a knock on my door again. It was Mom. Through her tears, she said, “*Amy just told us she sat in every chair in the waiting room so that she would be sure to sit in the chair where her birth mom must have sat.*” **Linking. At nine years old.**

Interestingly, linking often is connected to “soil” quite literally. At all our international gateways, customs agents have no doubt had conversations about the number of little plastic bags filled with tiny amounts of dirt being brought from far-away places. Bringing a part of one’s birth country home is a very real way to stay connected. **Linking.**

Kids are going to great and necessary lengths to put their feet on the soil of the place where they were found. They are reaching into the unknowns of their past, visiting orphanages, caregivers and foster homes. Some are taking great and necessary (for them) emotional risks in reaching out to the families into which they were born. All in hoping to ease the loss, all in hoping for clarity and understanding. Hoping to find their soil.

Step Seven: You Are So Beautiful To Me

One of the most beautiful things in life is being a witness as kids notice the kindness and genuineness of people in their birth country. Despite the language issue, despite the cultural differences, kids are feeling the warmth of the people who share their heritage and seeing it as a reflection of themselves. And it’s really powerful. The best analogy I can think of is that sense we’ve all had when we first meet someone. As a “still picture” we often see “plain.” But once we interact, and experience the person as kind, gentle, charismatic, charming, funny, warm, etc. the very same person elicits an entirely different emotion.

Many years ago, I was in Seoul with Ian and his family...Mom, Dad and three “stair step” kids ages 7, 9 and 11. Ian was the youngest of the three children, and we were having chops made, Korean signature stamps. As adoptive families tend to do when traveling, we were drawing attention. A crowd of Korean men took an interest in what was happening, and as they watched, they would talk, then laugh. It was the kind of laughter that made you feel comfortable. We knew whatever was being said was coming from gentle hearts and kind souls. The scene continued—a circle of talking and laughing. Finally, one man could hold back no longer. He walked toward Ian, gently tussling Ian’s hair. As he made this magical gesture, we again heard warm laughter. At that moment, Ian turned to me with a HUGE smile and said, “*Mrs. Piper, aren’t Korean’s NEAT!!!*” Over the years, I have replayed that moment in my mind many times. What a gift for a young child to feel such emotion as he draws together the pieces that define him.

Similarly, the experiences the kids are having with the other adoptive kids cannot be overstated. Their comfort level with each other is evident from the start. No explanations needed. “*We all bonded on the first night. We came here as strangers and left as a family,*” reflected 15 year old Nicholas Brunson. With a foot in two worlds, they gain a realization that they also have a community that they can be part of if they choose. We often hear, “*Wow! I am not alone. I have made friends that will last a lifetime.*” I often think it is the greatest gift of the journey—the gift of community built around two worlds and shared experiences.

The other amazing piece of the transformation is how it shatters the sense that the all beautiful people have white skin, blond hair and blue eyes. Once that barrier is broken, the lens changes. It turns beauty and love inward, and before we know it, a few of the kids are holding hands, expressing affection where it didn’t exist before. It’s a good thing.

Step Eight: Reverse Culture Shock and a Lifetime of Processing

We usually think about culture shock as the unsettling feelings we have when going somewhere, but don't realize we are likely to have reverse culture shock upon return. Emily Freeman, who was 15 when she traveled, and is now 19 writes, *"I was confused when I returned home because I began to see things differently. I felt so different than the other students who were focusing on the latest fashion trend or cell phone that they had to have. I hated seeing how much everyone had and how it was taken for granted because my birth country is so poor. That is something that I have been struggling with all my life, but what the trip did show me was how I can make a difference. Seeing how much just giving my time and love made people happy, made me want to do as much volunteering as I could."* That is an amazingly accurate description of the feelings that surround reverse culture shock. It's really a perspective shift that one can only receive through profound experience.

Perspective shift or processing is a lifetime experience. Dan Pratt, 18 reflects, *"It's important to know where you're from. It will always be a part of you. After going to the place where you're from you appreciated and find the importance of your heritage."* Very profoundly, at age 13, Andrew Piper (no relation to the author) states, *"I would describe it as finding a new me...."*

And that's what the entire journey is about...evolution in thought and understanding of self and others. It's about deciding you can be a palm tree or a mountain pine, but that you also can be a spectacular palm tree sitting high upon a mountain, filled with beauty and uniqueness, and never alone.

Becca Piper is the founder and co-director of The Ties Program, Adoptive Family Homeland Journeys. Ties Programs are available to Korea, Peru, Paraguay, Chile, India, Guatemala, China, Russia, Romania, Vietnam, Cambodia and the Philippines. For more information, see www.AdoptiveFamilyTravel.com