STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY

By John Raible, Ph.D.

There were six transracially adopted adults who participated in the filming of "Struggle for Identity: Issues in Transracial Adoption." That was in 1997, so I was excited by the invitation to participate with the original cast members for the shooting of "A Conversation Ten Years Later." Yet as happy as I was to see Michelle Johnson again, she and I both expressed disappointment that the two of us were the only adoptees to show up for the film shoot to update the movie. Naturally, we speculated about why no one else chose to participate. Regardless of the stated reasons given as to why nobody else made it to the shoot, I tend to think that there may be a few unspoken reasons that reflect how difficult it can be for "public adoptees" to remain in the public eye and to keep telling our personal stories to eager audiences.

Throughout the years, I have spoken with Michelle and with another friend and colleague who also speaks and writes a great deal about transracial adoption. We agree that, as adult adoptees, each has paid a high price for our willingness to go public with our stories, and to use our lives as case studies from the transracial adoption experience.

Not only must we relive the tough times we experienced years ago, as we educate audiences about our lives and the challenges we faced, but we must continually counter our critics and selectively choose how much to disclose publicly. Knowing that our messages will be analyzed, interpreted, misinterpreted, quoted and evaluated by complete strangers, friends and family, juggling the potential consequences of our outspokenness requires faith in the power of our stories to express and teach audiences, as well as a belief in the righteousness of our cause. Sharing our personal rather than adoption was the solution to a larger problem of abandonment and relinquishment, of my not having a family to call my own, of my lingering for nearly three years in foster care limbo. But to me, an adoptee, adoption looms so much larger than mere placement into a loving home after an extended stay in foster care as a "hard-to-place" child.

In my mind, adoption incorporates my initial relinquishment and my experience as a foster child and my placement in my adoptive family and the ongoing emotional and psychological issues that I contend with at various stages in my life. Adoption, as much as more than a single happy moment of placement and my "forever family," for me represents extra challenges and burdens.

As my friend and colleague Leah O'Leary puts it, an adoptee goes through the predictable developmental stages that all individuals must negotiate, adoption turns the volume up to 11.

During the filming of the original "Struggle for Identity," I was the eldest of the six adoptees. Even now, whenever I listen to their stories, it is fascinating to locate myself in them and to recognize myself at various stages of my own journey through adoption. For example, I remember my early years as a bisexual young person when I was fairly oblivious to race and cultural issues, and how in college I resisted the pressure to self-identify as one race only, or to align myself with one community — the one of color — rather than another one, the more familiar white one. I also remember feeling like I had to explain myself to other African American students, as was discussed by another black adoptee in the film. I recall the questions and confusion about the "performance" of my black identity among people who look like me, but who were not raised by white parents.

When the reunion invitation came 10 years later, I was curious to hear and see how my cast member colleagues were doing. I often think about transracial adoption as a grand social experiment, so it strikes me as fairly obvious and understandable that audiences would be interested in hearing more about our lives and how may have changed in our thinking about family, adoption, race and identity.

As the title of the film suggests, the story of the six adoptees is told in the form of a conversation, with each adoptee sharing their experiences and reflections on their journey. The conversations are interspersed with footage from the 1997 film, "Struggle for Identity," which features the cast members as children. The conversations continue to explore the challenges and experiences of growing up transracially adopted, including the emotional和社会 implications of adoption.

In thanking my parents for adopting me and for sticking with me through good and bad, I realized that I was truly accepting them as my real parents, and in an important way, coming to accept this momentous adoption experience that happened to me as a child, and that continues to influence my adult life in profound ways. By taking part in the two films, and by continuing to speak to public about transracial adoption, I am grateful to discover ways in which I can influence the public's growing understanding in ways that may benefit more children and their families.

Author and educator John Raible, Ph.D., currently works as a professor of multicultural education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He was adopted by white parents in 1961 and has gone on to adopt two African American boys from foster care.