Ally Parenting For Social Justice

by Dr. John Raible

When I was three years old, I was adopted from foster care by young white idealists. It was the early 1960s and society was grappling with pressing social issues like civil rights and desegregation. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Kennedy brothers had not been assassinated yet. My parents, like many other Americans, believed that our society would overcome racism by putting aside racial prejudice and moving towards integration. So when they adopted me, a biracial boy (specifically English, Irish, Norwegian, French, and African American) they set out to raise me the same as my brother and sister. Since my siblings were born into the family (i.e. not adopted), they are white like our parents.

Basically, we kids were exposed to strong liberal humanist values. We were taught to be good human beings. Interestingly, we were not usually marked by race. In other words, we were raised “white,” although no one talked that way, or for that matter, very openly about race. I learned later when I began to study race as a scholar that not talking about race is a fairly typical way for white people to be racialized and to do race. Other people—other “ethnic” people—are seen as the ones who have a racial identity, while whiteness stays as the unmarked category, the supposedly un-raced and normal human experience.

We lived in what I refer to jokingly as "Whitesville." I say that because that's often what it felt like to me as the lone child of color surrounded by white folk. After all, I was the "diversity experience" for my school, church, neighborhood, and town. I was the only brown child in my otherwise all-white schools, taught exclusively by white teachers all the way from kindergarten through high school. Can you imagine that? That was childhood in Whitesville.

Looking back now, I can see that most of my classmates, teachers, and neighbors knew very little about diversity. For the most part, they did not understand the significance of cultural differences or racial identity. From time to time, certain individuals would utter mean things that betrayed their ignorance. Many of them had never met or interacted with very many people from diverse backgrounds and with different racial identities other than white. This resulted in them making stupid comments, telling racist jokes, and acting as if whiteness was the superior identity. Being immersed in a non-integrated environment year after year instilled the clear message that white culture was better than everyone else's culture.
Even though the people around me were mostly nice and kind-hearted, I eventually grew tired of being immersed in such a limiting multicultural environment. Frankly, I found it quite wearying to be around ongoing sometimes subtle, sometimes overtignorance and arrogance. It was also exhausting always being on display.

Everyone could tell I was adopted because I didn't look like any other members of my family. I never got a break from being seen as the Adopted Child, the little brown orphan taken in by the upstanding white family.

Even so, I knew that I would grow up one day and adopt black children myself, after I moved far away from Whitesville. I wanted to live around people that looked more or less like me. I felt strongly that I needed to have more brown people in my family. So when I was working as a teacher in Compton, California after college, I adopted two older African American boys from the foster care system. I figured that I would become a good father because, first of all, I had excellent role models in the example set by my parents, and perhaps more importantly, I had educated myself about race. Plus I knew from firsthand experience what it felt like to be African American and adopted. I thought I'd be all set to parent black boys, and do an outstanding job, because of my own experiences and insights, along with my training in multicultural education.

Boy, was I in for a surprise! (You can read about some of my parenting adventures on my blog, John Raible Online). Now that I have passed the big half century mark (I'm fifty-one as I write this), and my sons are grown and living on their own, I realize that I didn't really know what I was getting myself into by adopting African American boys from foster care, especially as a single dad who is openly gay. From talking to other parents, I've learned that most of us really have no clue about what we are setting out to do when we first become parents. And so I share a few insights now as a parent who is also an adoptee. One other fact you should know about me, before I get to the heart of the chapter:

Professionally, I teach university courses in multicultural education. That means I work with teachers and others interested in diversity as it plays out in schooling and other social institutions. My research looks at the development of youth identities, especially in social contexts where lines of difference must be crossed (e.g., white parents/kids of color; straight parents/sexual minority youth; white teachers/students of color). I teach from a fairly radical social justice perspective, meaning that I am committed to using education to empower individuals. I want to help connect education with struggles to make the world a better place, by linking teaching and learning with struggles against all kinds of oppression.

The work I do as a multicultural educator and multiracial adoption expert is guided by certain assumptions. These assumptions grow directly from my commitment to social justice, which is how I analyze the world. For me, social justice encapsulates the values I was taught by my parents, so in a sense, my work today can be
understood as an extension of their parenting and their values. In this chapter, I will outline the assumptions that guide my work so that readers can better understand the positions I have taken over the years about transracial and transnational adoption. It’s not that I think that I necessarily have the only correct perspective. It’s more like I want to share my thinking as a way to move the conversation forward, so that current and future generations of adoption scholars, reformers, parents, social workers, adoptees, and their allies can build on the work of previous generations. The good news is that we actually now know enough about race and about adoption to be able to make some significant changes in the way transracial adoption is practiced. I hope that by incorporating a social justice perspective, relations between parents and adoptees can become stronger and less contentious, and adoption as we know it can be made less oppressive for all involved.

Social justice and adoption

The problem, as I see it, is that we have not found the will to just go ahead and implement what we now know. Social justice is what is lacking, and that is why we still have not been able to fix the broken system of adoption. The lack of social justice also contributes to the rifts that arise frequently between adoptees and parents. From a social justice perspective, here is how I think about social relations in general and transracial and transnational adoptive families in particular:

Assumption #1: We live in a social world built on systems of oppression. Oppression is more than mere attitudes such as prejudice, or mean-spirited behaviors such as discrimination and hate-crimes. Oppression involves the use of ideologies, worldviews, policies, laws, institutions, beliefs, language, behaviors, and practices to privilege certain groups at the expense of other groups. An example is the systematic or institutionalized use of race, or physical traits thought of in racial terms, to give advantages to lighter skinned people and to deny privileges to people with darker skin. As a system of oppression, racism disadvantages people of color through racial profiling, differences in the quality of schools and academic achievement, and the disproportionate numbers of people of color in prison, in foster care, and living in poverty, just to name a few examples. In my own experience as a light-skinned biracial foster child, race became inscribed on my body when social workers decided, in 1960, that I was "too light" to be placed with a black family and too dark to be adopted by a white family. My biracial background was seen as problematic, and rendered me, in the eyes of child welfare professionals, "hard to place," and so I stayed in foster care for nearly three years.

Assumption #2: Systems of oppression are interlocking. This means that racism works with
sexism, classism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression to keep people down (and to lift other people up). In other words, racism intersects with sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression to maintain power and privilege for dominant groups at the expense of dominated groups. Given the fact that interlocking systems of oppression continue to exist despite the desires of open-minded individuals that may not believe in or support the idea of oppression, it goes without saying that children, parents, and families are automatically embedded within interlocking oppressive systems, whether they like it or not. Oppression has become just an ugly fact of social life.

One way that racism can be seen as intersecting with adulthood in my own childhood experience again goes back to the early placement decisions. Because I was so young, my desires and concerns were not taken into account. Adults took it upon themselves to speak for me. As a pre-verbal infant, my voice was literally absent from the meetings about labeling me as "hard to place," and about where I would ultimately end up. Later, after my adoption in Whitesville, adults again made decisions about where our family would live, again, leaving me with little say in the matter as a child. This is what happens over and over again in transracial families: Well-meaning white adults make decisions about the fate of dependent children of color, often without knowledge about how race operates and the special needs of children of color. Because kids are considered "too young" to know anything, the voices of adopted children of color get left out of these important family decisions.

Assumption #3: Children and youth constitute oppressed groups. That is, ageism and adulthood oppress young people as a class. Under adulthood, adults get to decide the fate of the young simply because they are adults. Adults literally have the power of life and death over children. Despite sentimental views of the family in many societies, and even though genuinely loving relationships do exist between many parents and kids, children and adults are frequently at odds due to adult power and authority. In child welfare practice, when racism, sexism, and classism combine with adulthood in the institution known as adoption, it cannot help but contribute to oppression, especially of young adoptees. As I mentioned before, key decisions about where adopted children will be placed, raised, and forced to attend school are made by well-meaning adults who frequently do not understand racism or take it as seriously as they might if they weren’t unmarked by race (i.e., "white"). Too often these decisions leave adopted kids of color to fend for themselves in hostile environments where they are teased, ridiculed, isolated, and made to feel inferior because they are not white.

Assumption #4: Adoption as we know it is inherently oppressive. This is because the history of modern adoption is rooted in sexist ideas about "fallen" women, racist ideas about "uncivilized" parents of color, and classist ideas about "unfit"
families living in poverty. Numerous scholars have shown how the history of placing children for adoption goes back to old-fashioned ideas about immoral women who became pregnant out of wedlock, and concerns over the salvation and rescue of needy orphans. Such views are tied fundamentally to the idea that adults (whether as parents, social workers, or social engineers) are in charge, which relates to the idea that children are the responsibility—if not the property—of adults.

Of course, we need to keep in mind that adoption is actually a crisis response to adult problems (such as an unwanted pregnancy or infertility). We need to remember that adoption was created primarily to meet adult concerns, and not to meet the needs of children. In my case, it is not hard to imagine that my white birth mother and black birth father simply felt I would be too much of a burden to handle, as their biracial offspring from an unplanned pregnancy. Abandoning me to the system of adoption was a convenient out for them, so they wouldn’t have to deal with the day-to-day challenges of raising a child, and also sidestepping the thorny issue of what to do with mixed race children, widely believed back then to be tragic mulattos saddled for life with racial identity problems.

Assumption #5: Adoptees are an oppressed group. Because most adoptees are adopted in infancy or childhood, adoptees typically have very little power to influence how their adoptions happen, or even whether they will be given up for adoption in the first place. As they grow up, adoptees in many regions still cannot gain access to personal information about their origins, such as original birth certificates, orphanage records or foster care files, birth family identification, and medical histories. I was forced to wait until I turned eighteen to petition the court for information about my birth parents and my family origins, and even then, I could only access what they called "non-identifying" information. The message was clear: Adoption agencies are more concerned with protecting birth parents’ privacy than with providing information to adoptees.

Adoption is oppressive in other ways. Rather than being centered on adoptees, adoption is usually treated as a service to parents. Birth parents use adoption as a way to deal with a child they choose not to raise, or to rid themselves of an unplanned pregnancy. Adoptive parents use adoption as a way to become parents and to acquire children, whether they struggled with infertility or just want to expand their family without the messiness of pregnancy and childbirth. Many individuals and religious groups even use adoption as a way to practice their religion and to spread their faith. Some "sending" nations use adoption as a way of decreasing their country’s surplus populations of children that they see as a drain on national resources.

The main point to remember is that adoption is rooted in adultism because it is an attempt to solve adult problems created by adults. Adultism is perpetuated throughout the system of adoption, since the various uses of adoption center on adult concerns, rather than on what adoptees (of any
age) say they want and need. For transracial and transnational adoptees, the burden of oppression intensifies, due to the added dynamics of racism, classism, and the political legacy that taints relations between nations (such as neocolonialism). Regardless, all adoptees are part of an oppressed class because they have little if any say in their adoptive placements. As if that’s not bad enough, then adoptees are systematically denied the right to information that non-adopted individuals take for granted.

**Parenting as an ally**

I realize that, to some readers, the assumptions mentioned above may sound harsh. This is because the truth about adoption is harsh, yet I believe that we must face it squarely. I think we do ourselves (not to mention youth and our families) a disservice when we try to "pretty up" adoption by talking about it mainly in sentimental terms or to try and package it as an essentially wonderful, "win-win" situation. When we do finally talk honestly about adoption, we have to acknowledge that we are more often than not talking about crisis, and sometimes about human tragedy, or even trauma. To speak of adoption primarily in rosy terms dismisses the lifelong emotional impact on adoptees (and the often over-looked birth families) and the fundamental experience of loss that accompanies adoption. In order to fix adoption, and render it less oppressive, two things must happen. First, the truth about the complexity of adoption must be acknowledged, and secondly, a social justice perspective must be used to analyze the crises and power imbalances that lead to adoption in the first place.

So what are parents to do? Do we not adopt? Do we not fulfill adult desires to parent? If we accept that adoptism exists as one of the systems of oppression, how do we address the inherent power imbalances between adults and children within our families? How can parents from dominant groups effectively raise children from dominated groups? For me, these are some of the questions that require a social justice orientation to answer. They are taken up in the remainder of this chapter.

To begin with, let us recognize that adopting a child means entering into a system that is flawed, oppressive, and skewed to favor adoptive parents. Potential adopters must acknowledge this even before they set out to adopt. When I adopted two school-age boys from foster care, I was keenly aware of their early life circumstances. I held sacred the stories of how they were removed from their mothers by child protective service workers. I kept in the forefront of my consciousness the fact that they were both placed in multiple foster homes. I did not try to sugar coat their early life histories of separation and loss, as they left behind first birth families and subsequent foster families. I had to figure out ways to honor their early life histories, and to acknowledge the lives they lived before I was lucky enough to become their father through adoption.
Of course, some potential parents will opt NOT to participate in such an oppressive system, while others will work to minimize the damage done through their tacit support of the system. From a social justice perspective, you can begin to understand why many adoption activists call for an end to adoption altogether, or at least for serious adoption reform. For me, this is one of the reasons I continue to speak out for adoption education and against unethical practices in adoption. I have always tried to use my privilege to advance a critique of adoption, not to try to shut it down, but in order to try to correct some of the inherent power imbalances. Because I benefitted from the system of adoption, and also suffered on account of it, I am keenly aware of the need for reform. This is why I have spent much of my adult life working with agencies, parent groups, and speaking at adoption conferences to try to bring overlooked perspectives and voices into the conversation.

Adoptive parents who choose to proceed along the path to adoption can work to share power with others in the system of adoption, for example, with birth family members and adoptees. They can expand the outdated model of the adoption "triad" to include foster parents and siblings, birth siblings, extended family (in foster families and birth families), and others who may have a vested interest in what happens to the child after adoption. Incidentally, I really question the usefulness of the "triad" concept, because it privileges parent concerns over those of children.

Since we are on the topic of the "triad," let me say a few words about why I find it problematic: If we think of the adoption "triad" as a triangle, two sides are made up of parents (i.e., birth parents and adoptive parents), leaving the third side to reflect the adopted child. Obviously, there is no room for other children—brothers and sisters—in this triangle, whether they are siblings by blood, foster care, adoption, or choice. I also resent the implication that the three sides of the adoption "triad" are somehow equal players, when we know this isn’t the case at all. The "triad" model, as I see it, is an outmoded attempt to normalize adoption, making it seem benign, as if adoption is a transaction between equals. Clinging to the "triad" model sugar coats adoption and hides the inherent power imbalances that, in my view, need to be highlighted and transformed.

Turning again to how adoptive parents might interrupt some of these power dynamics: Adoptive parents with financial means might decide to share their wealth or other resources with orphanages, charities, or social justice groups that work in "sending" communities in order to keep families intact. Even the term "sending" community is a euphemism for skewed relationships based more on coercion or misunderstanding than on any real choice to "send" children out for adoption. Allies could pay for education, send clothes, or purchase farm stock and seed for struggling families in the developing world, or co-sign self-help loans to assist families in impoverished communities here.
in the United States. Adoptive parent allies can also work to reunite family members that have lost each other through adoption. They can advocate for open records so that adoptee oppression can be decreased. These are just a few examples of concrete steps that people with privilege can take to lessen the harm done through adoption.

In terms of parent-child interactions, becoming aware of adultism and the enormous power and privilege that adults receive at the expense of children becomes paramount. Parents can take classes in anti-authoritarian parenting, such as the "Peaceful Parenting" sessions offered at the child-led free school in Los Angeles known as Play Mountain Place. Adults need to invest time analyzing the politics of childhood and adolescence, and learn to uncover their own biases and beliefs that reinforce ageism and adultism. Liberating the young requires that adults own up to patriarchal views of the family. We can begin by rejecting the notion of children as property and stop treating them as extensions of the adults called parents.

Adolescence is the time when many of these challenges come to the surface in families in a real way. It is harder and harder for parents to hold onto adult power and privilege when our teenage children test us and push for greater autonomy and independence. When my sons were teenagers, we took advantage of community resources such as counseling and mediation services, in an effort to level the playing field and foster better communication. At times, my sons even went to live elsewhere temporarily. Yet this didn't mean I didn't see them, stay in contact, and continue to parent from a distance. The teen years were by no means easy, but I remained committed to finding ways to support these emerging young men in their individual struggles with grief, anger, and other adoption-related issues, while at the same time strengthening our family bonds by trying to understand adult-child interactions, parent-child power dynamics, and adoption issues in a new light.

It goes without saying that it is not enough to simply analyze power imbalances and adult-child interactions theoretically. While it is vital that we connect the dots between adultism and adoptee oppression and other systems of oppression, the point is to make real changes in the way we treat children and youth. Becoming an ally in the struggle to transform oppressive relations means continually asking questions. It requires that we reflect on—and then act on—our own observations of our interactions with the young. It also means that we find ways to open ourselves to feedback from children and youth on how we are doing. As a parent, then, I must ask myself: How do I encourage open communication? How do I invite dialogue? Especially during disagreements and conflicts, how can I use conflict mediation skills to make sure that children get heard and are included in the resolution of the conflict? How do I share power with the children entrusted to my care? How do I actively support their growing independence and autonomy?
For me, the shift in thinking was coming to understand myself as a true ally to the young people I thought of as "my kids." I sought to figure out what an ally can do on behalf of adopted children and youth. To begin with, allies can provide access to resources. What do adoptees need? Many times, adoptees simply need information. I asked myself, how can I gather information about the places and people they lived with before I came along? Adoptees may need stronger connections, and help in reconnecting severed relationships. So I asked myself, how can I help keep young people connected to earlier caregivers and to other children in the foster homes and orphanages they left behind? Adoptees need empathy and understanding. The questions flowed forth: How could I provide access to competent individuals that understand the complexities of adoptee identity and the emotional experience of adoption losses? How often am I providing time with therapists, older adoptees, adoptee peers, and adoption savvy professionals? How well am I encouraging and supporting the development of a proud adoptee identity and connection to the growing worldwide adoptee community?

These questions continue to resonate, now that I am parenting adult sons that are in their thirties. It’s not as if the adoption issues have gone away. At each developmental stage, as the experts tell us, adoption rears up and intersects with the developmental tasks that need to be accomplished. With every challenge, old scripts are resurrected, and it is easy to revert back to unjust patriarchal responses that feel less than loving or socially just. It is precisely at life’s most challenging parenting moments that I need to remember to see myself as an ally to my adult sons. Maintaining this stance as their ally certainly helps me stay calmer and more focused on being the kind of dad that I truly aspire to be.

Of course, it goes without saying that transracial adoptees—like other youth of color—need parent allies who "get it" when it comes to race and cultural issues. Parents can ask themselves: How am I continually educating myself about racism and racial identity? What resources do I bring into my home regularly that reflect the communities that entrusted children of color belong to? Who are my "coaches" to help me learn about racism and how to take race seriously? Who can I rely on to teach me to see things from the perspective of oppressed communities? For myself and for my family, I mostly found these resources in the African American community. I made friends with other parents, served on committees at school and in the community, and generally got involved with like-minded parents and activists that were concerned about multicultural education, anti-racist and social justice issues, and raising strong children of color in less than supportive environments.

Transracial adoptees also need to see role models that look like them, strong people of color that have created healthy responses to oppression by developing clear identities and liberated consciousness. Parents need to ask: What models
do the children entrusted to me see on a regular basis? Who mirrors their racial backgrounds and identities? Who models various responses to oppression, and in so doing, teaches children how to navigate oppressive social landscapes? Again, as a transracial adoptive parent myself (I learned from my sons when they were younger that they didn’t necessarily see me as black) I knew that I needed assistance with raising black boys. Again, I turned to multicultural groups, anti-racist organizations, and perhaps most importantly, to adult friends in the black community, many of whom were dealing with the same challenges we faced as a family, including trouble with the law, racial profiling, interracial dating, (un)employment, violence, and academic achievement issues, to name just a few.

As an adoptee, I understood implicitly that adoptees need empowerment and self-determination. I asked myself: What names do the children entrusted to my care claim? How can I support a child’s lived experience as a member of several families? When it came time for two “Adoption Days” in court (i.e., the time to finalize the adoptions legally), I had discussions with each son about what his legal name would become. Since they were both old enough, I wanted them to feel included in this life-altering decision. My first son decided to keep his first name, take my last name, and chose a new middle name (the name of a black South African social justice and AIDS activist). A few years later, my second son chose to hyphenate his last name, blending his birth family’s surname and the Raible family name.

Other questions I continue to ponder, thinking always as an ally parent: How do I move towards the families of entrusted children? How do I demonstrate that I value diversity and equality? How do I show daily that I hear the voices of children and youth, of adoptees? How do I demonstrate my commitment to social justice for adoptees? How do I live my commitment to social justice, both in adoption and throughout society? In my public career as an outspoken adoptee, I appreciate it when parent allies defend adoptee voices, especially when they are under attack in the blogosphere and in the comments section and op-ed pages of mainstream media. Parent allies go further and teach other adoptive parents about their power and privilege as adopters. And of course, parent allies practice anti-racism and anti-oppression all the time.

I am well aware that this is not easy work. And it is ongoing, never-ending. Yet being entrusted with the life of a child should be understood as a lifelong, awe-inspiring responsibility, regardless of how the parent becomes attached to the child. I leave you with the Four Ls for Allies that I developed specifically for individuals that want to commit to working for social justice throughout adoption:

4 Ls for Allies:

Listen to adoptees.
Learn from adoptees.
Let adoptees lead.
Level the playing field between adoptees and parents.

If parents and other allies can enact these four simple steps, and revisit them at regular intervals to assess how close they came to realizing their potential, I believe we could fix the broken system of adoption. I also think the 4 Ls can push us a long way towards forging healthier and more just relationships between parents, other adults, and the young. Social justice is within our grasp, if we have the genuine will to pursue it. Social justice in adoption will not simply happen by itself. Social justice will become a reality in adoption only when we make it so.

Dr. John Raible is a professor of multicultural education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He was adopted transracially in the early 1960s, and adopted two boys from foster care as a single gay father. His research in multicultural identities examines marginalized youth populations, such as queer youth and transracial adoptees. He speaks and writes widely on issues of race, adoption, and social justice.

The Challenges Of Passing On A Culture

by Lorial Crowder

There's A Baby In My Belly

I often fantasized what motherhood would be like, as any girl would, and automatically believed I would produce a "mini me"—feisty, and comical. When I found out I was pregnant and having a boy, I locked myself in the bathroom and immediately called my mom bailing about what I would do with a son! Her response still resonates with me.

"You can shape the future of your child unlike your unknown childhood."

It was at that moment that I felt some relief that my unknown past did not have to haunt me; that in many ways I could live vicariously through the life of my future son, and also play an integral part of his upbringing.

The physical pregnancy was easy and with little complications until the delivery. I did grapple with the emotional difficulties of being adopted, compounded by the trepidation of motherhood. I felt detached from my pregnancy for the first few months; not knowing what this little human being would look like, what his