Adoption Language
By Daniel Lee Kearns

Do not separate text from historical background.
If you do, you will have perverted and subverted the Constitution, which can only end in a distorted, bastardized form of illegitimate government.
- James Madison, 4th U.S. President (1751-1836)

In a culture bent on the penultimate importance of politically correct, positive and respectful language, the majority of the adoption community follows suit. I was born in Seoul and adopted by a family in Pennsylvania ten weeks later. Shortly after my twenty-first birthday, my adoption agency notified me that they had found my birth mother; since then, we have written many letters and some months ago I traveled back to Seoul to meet my birth mother and her parents. I offer this information to you in order to firmly establish myself as a member of the adoption community; I am not a psychologist or social scientist peering into the world of adoption. I am, myself, a member. I fully admit this membership brings with it both truth-telling insights and heavy biases. Without any further ado, I must make my confession.

Surrounded by the politically correct adoption community, I feel like a black sheep. Alas, I have already incriminated myself. Why should the black sheep feel like the outsider, and why should sheep be perceived as unintelligent animals that blindly follow a shepherd? So let me rephrase. In a tolerant community of diverse and welcoming perspectives, I am a unique existential entity with opinions and personal truths that should be both recognized and respected. But there, Shakespeare tell us, is the rub. For a politically correct environment welcomes all with his/her/its arms flung open; all, that is, except for those who fail to tolerate his/her/its tolerance. That would be me.

Positive adoption language, according to OURS Magazine, was developed to counteract "the negative talk that helps perpetuate the myth that adoption is second best. By using positive adoption language, you'll reflect the true nature of adoption, free of innuendo." The article continues to espouse the importance of positive adoption language: "Words not only convey facts, they also evoke feelings ... By using positive adoption language, we educate others about adoption. We choose emotionally "correct" words over emotionally-laden words. We speak and write in positive adoption language with the hopes of impacting others so that this language will someday become the norm."

Respectful Adoption Language (RAL) share a similar vocabulary with positive adoption language. Patricia Irwin Johnston describes the content of this vocabulary as, "Chosen to reflect maximum respect, dignity, responsibility and objectivity about the decisions made by birthparents and adoptive parents in discussing the family planning decisions they have made
for children who have been adopted ... the use of RAL helps to eliminate the emotional overcharging which for many years has served to perpetuate a societal-held myth that adoption is a second-best and less-than alternative for all involved ... the use of this vocabulary acknowledges those involved in adoption as thoughtful and responsible people, reassigns them authority and responsibility for their actions, and, by eliminating the emotionally-charged words which sometimes lead to a subconscious feeling of competition or conflict, helps to promote understanding among members of the adoption circle 2.

For the sake of protecting myself, I'll let Shakespeare interject.

"The friends thou hast, and their adoption tried, grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel, but do not dull thy palm with entertainment of each new-hatched unfledged comrade 3."

How dare he be so obscure, disrespectful and emotionally-laden in his word choice. How dare he prefer the finer nuances and ineffability of language over a clarity that reflects "maximum respect, dignity, responsibility and objectivity". You may argue with me, "Shakespeare wrote fictional literature. We're attempting to construct a forward-thinking, precise language to enhance and clarify interaction within the adoption community and the greater community of mankind." But real life, I submit to you, resembles far more closely the literature of Shakespeare than the scientific and emotionally "correct" positive or respectful adoption languages.

Before I'm completely written off as a criminally unjust critic, let me speak a few words in the defense of positive and respectful adoption language. Actually, I don't mind being written off. After all, if I'm perceived as a criminally unjust critic, it's the fault of the perceiver and not the perceived, because what's criminally unjust is immoral and morality is subject to culture, culture is subject to consensus, consensus is subject to individuals, individuals are subject to change, and change is subject to chance. Thus, you see, my criminal behavior is merely a random product of chance. But back to my defense of positive and respectful adoption language. These vocabularies suggest we use the terms "birthparent" and "biological parent" in place of "real parent" and "natural parent". In these cases, I welcome the clarity of the former terms. On many occasions in the past year or so since I've begun communicating with my birth mother (and on a less frequent basis for my entire life), I have been asked puzzling questions such as, "How is your mother doing? I mean, your real mother?". The dichotomy of "birthparent" and "adoptive parent" is far clearer than any term including the word "real". Still, positive adoption language suggests that "parent" is a more positive term than "adoptive parent". I believe this belies an element of adoption language that the OURS Magazine article fails to address. [MORE]

While I abhor the "everything (including truth) is subjective" perspective held by many, I do believe that language is subject to context. Thus, any meaningful attempt to create a respectful and responsible adoption
language should realize the overwhelming importance of the relationship between communicating parties. This world is a muddled affair, entangling individuals with itself, others, and even themselves. While I respect any efforts to untangle this world with a language of precision, I thought this enterprise was recognized as a failure nearly a century ago by philosophers and mathematicians alike (see Hilbert, Frege, Godel, Putnam, Carnap, Derrida, etc.). For instance, when I am speaking with a friend or a social worker, it is most helpful to recognize my two families with the terms "birth parents" and "adoptive parents". On the other hand, I do not address my birth mother as "birth mother". As I began writing to my birth mother, this issue plagued me. How does one begin such a letter? "Dear birth mother" reeks of sterility and coldness. Using her name seemed just as strange; I never address my parents as "Joe" or "Barb". In the end, I wrote (and continue to write) to her as simply mother.

Patricia Irwin Johnston would probably disagree with my choice of words. "Those who raise and nurture a child", she writes, "are his parents: his mother, father, mommy, daddy, etc. Those who conceive and give birth to a child are his birthparents: his birthmother and birthfather ... before she [a pregnant woman] gives birth, she is an expectant parent. Not until she gives birth and actually chooses adoption would she be appropriately called a birthparent. It is easy to agree with Johnston. Those who actually raise the child deserve to be called his mother and father. But as I have already mentioned, life is not nearly so simple.

I was an illegitimate child. The positive term would be "born to unmarried parents". But I was not born to unmarried parents, for my birth father fled from the scene as soon as he discovered my birth mother was pregnant. I was born to a desperate woman in a culture where pregnant but unmarried women were despised and expected to kill themselves, abort the child, or give it up for adoption. She attempted the first (which would have resulted in the second) and relinquished herself to the third option after being taken to a hospital after her failure to kill both of us. Positive adoption language claims that she did not "give me up" or "give me away". She terminated parental rights and made an adoption plan. I find myself both wounded and offended at this notion. I often try to recreate the situation in my mind; a young, frail woman shivers as her thin hands grasp the cold steel bars of a hospital bed with whatever little strength remains in her body after many hours of intense labor. Ridden with the guilt of naively sleeping with a man whom she believed would care for her the rest of his life, torn by the humiliation of failing to take her own life in a responsible manner, she is not even given the chance to see or hold her infant. Instead, a curtain is draped over her, separating the eyes from the body. Eyes blurred with tears of pain and strained with a single-minded desperation of gaining even the slightest glimpse of the child, her child.

It seems so judicious, so merciful to claim I was not illegitimate, but rather born to unmarried parents. But the tactfulness of the term ignores the overwhelming (and yes, emotionally-charged) truth of the situation. While the majority of the details concerning my birth remain unknown to me (strange that my birth mother would feel so incredibly sensitive and private
about making an adoption plan), I imagine she was not accompanied by a
social worker calmly reassuring her that terminating parental rights was the
wise choice; best for both herself and the child. I was undoubtedly
conceived in an emotionally-laden encounter between my birth mother and
birth father. I grew in the womb of my mother in circumstances just as
emotionally-laden. She hid her pregnancy from her own brothers, for I was
not carried by an emotionally "correct" unmarried parent. I was an
illegitimate child, conceived, carried and birthed in a muddled mess of
conflicting emotions. My conception, my mother's pregnancy, my eventual
birth; how do we describe these experiences in a language that captures
maximal respect and dignity? I submit that positive and respectful adoption
language does no such thing. Indeed, I would argue that there is very little
dignity to be found in my birth; the only respect and dignity to be found in
the situation is an honest depiction of the painfulness of the experience.

Positive language adoption claims I was not an unwanted child, but a
child placed for adoption. Ah, how false and emasculated the simple,
politically correct term strikes me. I was a child unwanted. I was a child
wanted. My birthmother wanted nothing more than to raise her own child.
Yet I was born into a culture that disdained illegitimate children, banning
bastard children from schools and government jobs. Even my own
birthmother must have experienced moments when I was unwanted; I
believe my adoptive parents have felt the same way about both myself and
their own, biological children. At some point, every child aggravates their
mother or father to the extent of the parent thinking (momentarily, one
hopes) that perhaps conceiving or adopting a child was not the wisest of
choices. Language that claims I was a legitimate, wanted child seems
wonderfully reassuring on the surface. But almost every adoptee
experiences strongly conflicted emotions regarding their past. To pass over
this conflict and claim it is simply unwarranted guilt or unnecessary, self-
induced stress essentially invalidates our history.

Respectful adoption language also emphasizes that any interaction
between an adoptee and his or her birth family later in life should be referred
to as simply a meeting or making contact. This way, the emotional build-up
and pressure of referring to this interaction as a reunion will be lessened.
After all, while you may share DNA, you have lived two very different lives.
You meet as peers, as friends who cannot fulfill the roles of a proper parent
and a proper child after decades of separation. Last May, I met my
birthmother for the first time. We did not interact as peers. With tears in
her eyes, she embraced me as a prodigal son; a long lost child finally
returning to his motherland. From our first moment together until the day I
boarded a plane to race me back to America, she held my hand, stroked my
arm and smiled at me. Often through moistened eyes. Tears of joy, for she
finally found her only son. Tears of sadness, because I am now an adult, and
she cannot go back in time and raise me as her own child. Legally, she
chose to terminate her parental rights. But can one ever fully terminate the
emotional, spiritual and physical attachment between a a biological mother
and child? Legally, I am no longer her child. And yet I am her child; her
only child. For two decades, she fought through the darkest and loneliest
moments of her life by clinging to one small hope and dream: someday, perhaps, her son would return.

I understand the intent of emphasizing any interaction between an adoptee and his birth family as nothing more than a meeting or making contact. The expectations involved in a more emotionally-laden reunion cannot be understated. At times, it has made my relationship with both my birth mother and my adoptive family much more difficult. After all, I cannot turn back time and become a true, fully devoted son to my birthmother. Two decades of separation and the bond forged between myself and my adoptive family make it difficult for me to be her child. Yet in this world, we take what we can get. And I believe she deserves another chance to be a mother, even if the word cannot be used to its fullest extent. Once again, I refuse to “clean up” the conflict involved in an adoption by invoking a language that pretends these difficulties can be alleviated with the use of proper terminology. Our language falls short of describing relationships; our relationships fall short of fulfilling terms such as 'mother', 'father', or 'son' to the fullness of their meaning.

Later in her article Patricia Johnston writes, "When it is appropriate to refer to the fact of adoption, it is correct to say "Kathy was adopted," (referring to the way in which she arrived in her family.) Phrasing it in the present tense-- "Kathy is adopted"--implies that adoption is a disability with which to cope ²." One is forced to ask what Johnston means by a disability. Adoption is not an unsurmountable barrier to the relationships between an adoptee and their adoptive family or even an adoptee and their birth family. But similarly, physical and mental handicaps do not prevent an individual from functioning largely as a normal being; they simply pose difficulties with which one is forced to cope. In the same way, as I observe friends whose parents are divorced or separated, I see a disability on their part. Issues of trust and vulnerability arise in their relationships with friends or significant others; some flee into the arms of a boyfriend, girlfriend or spouse only to be disappointed, while others isolate themselves from the world. As an adopted child, I am perfectly aware of the emotional baggage I carry with me in this life. It is not a wholly paralyzing handicap, but to deny the height of the hurdles placed before me denies the truth of the matter.

You may be wondering why I began this essay with a James Madison quote. More likely, you and I have both forgotten the content of the quote altogether. The fourth president of the United States offered a word of cautionary advice on the interpretation of the Constitution. "Do not separate text from historical background," he warned. "If you do, you will have perverted and subverted the Constitution, which can only end in a distorted, bastardized form of illegitimate government." His words seem poignant on many levels. Firstly, he uses the emotionally-charged words 'perverted', 'subverted', 'distorted', 'bastardized', and 'illegitimate', in a constructive and legitimate way. Madison uses words on the naughty list for the greater good of society; perhaps we in the adoptive community can likewise use words such as 'illegitimate' and 'unwanted' judiciously under necessary circumstances. In addition, the very scope of Madison's caution appears to speak into the importance of interpretation methodologies. "Do not separate
a specific term from a background of circumstances," he might warn the adoption community. If you do, you will have perverted and misapplied adoption language, which can only end in a distorted, bastardized, and illegitimate form of language.

Perhaps positive and respectful adoption language does eliminate some of the emotionally-charged nuances of the language I prefer. But even if this is the case (and as I have already submitted to you, oftentimes, I do not believe this to be the case), my preference remains the same. As the philosopher Michel Foucault once said, "Everything is interpretation." Madison cautioned the Americans against separating text from historical background; I challenge you to not separate adoption language from context. Unarguably, a nuanced language wrought with emotion requires a greater level of interpretation and hence a greater probability of misinterpretation. Just as Shakespeare demands a more sophisticated interpretation than the Hardy Boys. Just as Carl Sandburg expresses a world of emotions in the same number of words that it takes Dick and Jane to run up a hill and see Spot. At some point in our lives, we must dare to enter the world of ineffability, where we do battle against the difficulty of linguistic interpretation with our own experiences, wisdom and tact. A precise, immutable set of linguistic terms and definitions shackles our hands and feet. And I would rather dance through an emotionally-charged world of words, where "the soul's bliss and suffering are bound together like the grasses" than lay bound by the weight of a precise and sterile language, stripped of emotional weight and significance.


3: William Shakespeare's "Hamlet"

4 - Jane Kenyon's poem Twilight: After Haying

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