Missie Osborn

Missie Osborn: Navigating Adoption and Identity

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I had the great honor of getting to know Missie when she was a student in my Social & Economic Justice class last year at The Ohio State University. Missie is earning her MSW and is currently working as a school social worker near Chillicothe. It is always a privilege to get to know my students and build relationships with them beyond the class, but Missie's story of adoption and identity remains fresh in my mind. Below is an edited version (for length and clarity) of the content of the interview.

Introduction

I was adopted when I was one and was brought up in an all-white family in rural Idaho. Other than looking in the mirror and it being obvious that I was different, I was raised by a white family and did not know anything different. I did not know about where I was from and my culture. When I got pregnant with my oldest daughter when I was 19, I wanted to find that part, that missing piece, so to speak. I went to my parents. They were so supportive because I always knew I was adopted. It was never a secret, of course, to look at me, it was kind of obvious. I found out that my biological mom is Native, belonging to the Inupiaq, a Native Alaskan tribe. My biological father is white. It was important for me to find them because I felt like it was always a part of me that was missing, it was always a part of me that I didn't understand. I didn't want my kids to ever look in the mirror and feel like they were missing something like I did.

Discovering Identity and Culture

I went to my little sister's graduation in Barrow, Alaska [in 2016 Barrow was renamed to Utqiagvik as Barrow was the colonized name], and that was my first time really being introduced into that culture. I'm not going to lie. There was a little bit of culture shock because the way they live up there is very different from the way I live down here. My biological father and his family had all the comforts like running water and electricity. But the family on my biological mother's side who also lives in Utqiagvik has no running water. Their home is basically two rooms, one is a kitchen/dining room and then the other is the sleeping/living area. Poverty is rampant.

Growing up and being different, I always wanted somebody to look like me. When I went up to Utqiagvik and everybody looked like me, I was like, 'OK, this is a little strange'. It was really cool to be able to see the beauty, the culture, and how they are such a strong community. When I went up there to meet my family, I was not just meeting my family. I was meeting all of Utqiagvik. There was a party and my brother had invited the whole town. It is definitely a more inclusive kind of culture than down here and that's really because you have to - you're keeping each other alive.

My biological father is married to a woman named Margaret. She has become the Aaka, or the grandma, to my kids. She's the one that gave my boys their Inupiaq names. When I went to Utqiagvik the first time was when my daughters were given their Inupiaq names by my Aaka. The elders are very revered; they really do listen to the elders. The elders are the chiefs; there's no young chiefs. They look up to them and they want to learn from them. I think that's beautiful.

I think some of the most interesting things about the Inupiaq is they utilize everything; there's no resource that they don't utilize all of. When they go hunting, they do traditional whaling in the most northern parts of Alaska, and they use every bit of it: the oil, the fat, the bones, the meat. They make toys and other items out of seal to make sure nothing is wasted. I was really surprised that in the culture a lot of the food that they eat is either raw or frozen. I think I would have had to have been raised there in order to really enjoy the food. When my little sister passed away, I went to her funeral and they had a quaq. A quaq is when all the Native women get together to talk about old times, to talk about the deceased, and raise them up. They eat Native food like raw meat and it is a very bonding thing. My bio dad said, 'Well, I'm going to go get Italian' and I said, 'I'm going with you,' but I helped them because I wanted to be a part of it in some way. Community is essential. That's why whaling is so important. There is so much poverty up there and the whales are what gets some families through the winter. They count on having that to keep them alive, not just physically but culturally. It is still very valid. It bothers me when people talk about whaling and they don't understand the Native perspective on that. For some people it's seen as cruel, but for them it's a necessity because if they didn't have it, they would die. It's also a celebration when they catch a whale and again, no part is wasted. When my son went up there they went dip net fishing on the Kenai River. He learned how to do the traditional process with the salmon. He got to spend a whole summer up there.

The language is slowly coming back. They're starting to teach it in school now. I know that they had taught it in Utqiagvik

when my sister was younger so she is fluent along with my biological mother.

The cost of living is incredibly high in Utqiagvik. A can of food that would cost $0.50 here is $3-5 dollars there. When I was there I had to buy diapers. I wasn't really thinking because my family told me to make sure I brought enough diapers because they're very expensive. It was in 1994 and even then I had to pay $35 for a very small box. If you live on the northside of Alaska, you have to hunt in order to survive. It's not as easy as running to the store and getting something.

The Struggle of Transcultural and Transracial Adoptions

Don't get me wrong, I would never change the fact that I had a very loving family, but I always felt that missing piece. I have always wondered what it would have been like for me because I didn't get the chance to be a part of that culture. I think it's hard for any person of color to be raised in a white home because it always feels like there's something not quite right or there's something not quite there. I don't know if it's a spiritual thing, but I just felt like there was something missing. I remember hearing someone read from the Bible in Inupiaq, the Native language. I was in tears. I had no idea what they were saying but just to hear the language was so beautiful. I don't think people realize that even though you're brought up in a loving home with a family that can give you so many things that maybe your Native family couldn't, you're still missing a huge piece. Even now as an adult, I think there's still parts of me that just wishes I had a better connection because I've always felt that there was something missing. I love my parents; I would never want anybody different to raise me, but maybe it would have been better if I would have been raised in Alaska or been around my culture so I could still be a part of it. You do always feel out of place. You don't really belong. You don't really belong in the white culture because you're not white, and then you don't really belong in your own culture because you don't know anything about it. You can't speak the language. You don't know how to prepare the food. You don't know cultural boundaries. When I first went up there, I said, 'So I'm Eskimo?' and they're like 'Oh no, no, no, no, no. We don't use that word.' I'm like 'what?' It was like 1994 and I did not know that was offensive, so even things like that it's something I should have known. You feel guilty because you don't know. Even with my kids, I felt guilty because my kids didn't know that culture. Being able to send my son to go stay with his grandparents for the summer was awesome because he was able to really thrive. He loved it. I really thought he was going to end up moving there after college. He didn't scoff at anything, even the food. His Aaka said, 'You don't have to eat it all, but you have to try everything!' So he tried everything! Even the fish head soup. To this day I still feel like I don't fit in with my biological family because I don't feel Native enough. I mostly fit in with my family I grew up with because that's what I've known even though I don't look like them. Growing up my siblings would sometimes tease me about how I looked. My parents didn't really understand and there were a lot of times I just wouldn't tell them. I have had to deal with racism for as long as I can remember. A lot of times I just never said anything because I didn't feel it was anything that was going to change. My older sister has red hair and she once equated being a person of color to her being teased about having red hair. I'm like, 'No. I don't care what you have that is different about you, if you're not living in my skin, there's no way you can understand it.' When I was younger, all I wanted was to be lighter and my eyes to not be so slanted; to not look so different from everybody else. Now that I am a school social worker, I want to be able to normalize that a little bit for my students, particularly students of color. I am able to empathize about wanting to be different but I also want them to appreciate how beautiful they are. I think when you're in a mostly white culture you want to be like everybody else and you don't want to be different. I think it's having somebody to hear you but also to reinforce the beauty and embracing who you are.

What Social Workers Need to Know

I think if somebody is in a similar situation, being a person of color and not being brought up in that culture, it is so important to research it. I remember the first time I was at a Native powwow. It is not an Alaskan Native culture tradition, but it still felt good being there. The more I have learned about my culture the more I have found to love. It is so beautiful. My culture, the culture of Indigenous peoples, is not a caricature or a joke. It is important that people don't use traditional dress as costumes and to stop using mascots that are Native. I hear a lot of people say that it's stupid and they know Native Americans who are okay with the mascots or costumes. I can't stand that because I think a lot of the time Native folks just go along with it because it's easier and they don't want to get into a fight. If it's offensive, it's offensive. If it's offensive to one person, it's offensive. Even though it may not seem like a big deal, it's a big deal to us, and that's important. Everything that I've had to endure has made me the strong woman I am today because it has not been easy.

I also think there is a perception that Native Americans do not live in Ohio. I belong to an Alaska Native Corporation, Doyon Limited, as an Inupiaq. [Native corporations are tribe groupings that have specific ownership rights to land in Alaska. The Doyon Corporation consists of the Athabascan, Inupiaq, Yup'ik, Cup'ik, Unangax, Sugpiaq, Eyak, Haida, Tsimshian, and Tlingit tribes.] The corporation had a get-together of people in the Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Indiana area several years ago. I was really surprised how many Alaskan Natives are in the area. There were over 100 people at the event who are a part of the Doyon corporation. At that event I met someone who was part of my tribe, the Inupiaq, and lives in Circleville! There were several people there who live in Dayton and the surrounding areas. It really surprised me because I always thought that me and my family were the only ones out here in Ohio. I was wrong.