From adoptee to counsellor

By Cam Lee Small, MS, LPCC

I confess, I wasn't always interested in adoption. Not even my own.

After being relinquished by my family, and Korea, at the age of three and a half, it took me decades to begin intently and thoughtfully exploring this significant aspect of my story.

I would also realise it's not my story alone. My six-year-old daughter reminded me as we were travelling to visit family during recent holidays, "I have three grandmas: one in China, one in Korea and one in Wisconsin."

A helpful framework

I was born in Busan and lived there with my Korean family for almost four years before I was relinquished for international transracial adoption. After being raised in Wisconsin, USA by two white parents, I navigated, among many adoptee-related circumstances, my own birth search and reunion, which was a significant milestone that still contributes to my current work as a licensed professional clinical counsellor.

This journey is not a one-size-fits-all process. However, the framework of adoption literacy (Lee Small, 2025), presented in this article through my personal story as an adoptee, can help inform the way pastors and community members might grow in their capacity to offer hope-driven care, formally and informally. The framework is comprised of four core relational cues best recalled by the acronym HOPE: humanise adoptee narratives (H), own your part in the story (O), promote adoptee-specific resources throughout the lifespan (P) and elevate adoptees into positions of influence (E).

Humanise adoptee narratives

My transition from Korea to Wisconsin wasn't smooth. Some may have observed me back then and labelled my behaviours as defiant and overly active/reactive. As I look back through a clinical lens, I see a toddler learning how to navigate early adversity. Being separated from family, culture, history, language, familiarity, and placed into someone else's, can be a traumatic experience. Through eyes of grace and wisdom I've been able to see my responses to such events as human responses. You can imagine some of the shame that lifted when someone told me there were names and resources for the internal turmoil

I experienced but didn't know how to constructively process. That was during my graduate training. I was in my 30s. Most of us can agree that adoptees shouldn't have to wait that long for that part of their humanity to be witnessed and held.

To be educated about these internal experiences was a gift. The physical sensations that would come up when I was around different people throughout my life were more than simply "happy or sad or angry or not". I started to realise the depth of these complexities, and by God's grace the depth of active and present help that is available in the midst of them. I started to feel more human. That's part of what continued to draw me further into the field of counselling psychology, specifically for adoptees and their families.

Own your part in the story

In your community, who's making space for the adoptee voice?

I was a son before I was adopted. I didn't need anyone to tell me that back then. A lot of children don't. But they do need folks around them to help with the process of making sense of how and why they became someone else's child. What had to happen for this to occur? What didn't happen that made this occur?

As a teen, I didn't have anyone to help me articulate those questions or much of anything else of what I was going through. There were untapped layers of grief, trauma and identity development that certainly shaped my emotional, behavioural, social and spiritual wellbeing. This is not because my adoptive parents had done anything wrong per se. I believe that if they would have known more about these realities, they would have done everything they could to address them. That's where the framework of adoption literacy can play such a large role in our world; to protect communities from misinformation and help cultivate essential resources to nourish those communities. That can happen individually and collectively; on micro to macro scales. It is important to recognise how it is never too early to begin addressing this. It's also never too late.

For me, there were different people throughout my emerging adulthood who encouraged and supported and even planted more seeds for me to further understand and embrace my experience as an adoptee. I've shared about that in more depth in my book (Lee Small, 2024a). For the scope of this article, I'll share about two people.

Cam, aged three, with his foster mum in Korea in between relinquishment from his birth mother and placement with his adoptive parents in the US.

> **Being separated from family, culture, history, language, familiarity, and placed into someone else's, can be a traumatic experience**

I was in my mid-20s and relatively content just acknowledging I was adopted. I was "saved," and "so thankful that I didn't grow up in Korea because America is _____." I had spent my teen and young adult years filling in the blanks to ultimately assume America was better. At work, Yoonil, one of my managers who also happened to be a Korean adoptee, asked me, "Hey Cam, are you adopted?" He began to share his adoption and birth search story with me. He said, "I've recorded a video

and they're playing it in Korea right now, and I'm asking if anyone has any information about my birth mother." I wondered why anyone would do that. I didn't even know you *could* do that. Yoonil ended up becoming a very meaningful mentor for me; opening up about his own story and making space for my adoptee voice. He said, "You do realise you're Korean, Cam, right?"

In that season, more things started to happen almost at the same time.

At the same workplace, a Korean American pastor by the name of Paul came in to find a microphone for his worship team. He had just planted a church a few blocks from my apartment, and invited me to check it out. I wasn't interested but something felt important about his story so I saved his business card. Later that year something happened to me and I was desperate for some kind of guidance and comfort. I found his business card and attended an early morning service. That was the first time I found myself in a large group setting with other members of the Asian American community. It changed the course of my life not only as an adoptee, but the relationships that formed that season stirred a deeper connection to Korean culture and helped fuel a desire to search for my mom in Korea.

It was through that local church community that I was invited to volunteer at adoptee camps and participate in organised events that adult adoptees on campus were hosting. In meeting adoptees at camps in particular, I was able to witness the range of adoptee voices on a larger scale than I ever thought existed. As I heard testimonies face to face, in person, I was discovering in real-time that, while adoptees are more than some hurting, wounded group of people, there are adoptee stories out there that have yet to be unburied. Those adoptee-specific experiences contributed significantly to my personal and professional awareness about needs that adoptees face and my growing sense of calling to help address those needs.

Promote adoptee-specific resources

Not only do we need the right tool for the job, the right tool has to exist in the first place.

I've been fortunate to have come across formal and informal support to navigate nuanced and complex needs related to identity, loss and grief, trauma related to family separation, and birth family search and reunion, including language interpretation services while I was searching for my family and while I was in Korea to meet them.

I was in a coffee shop in Seoul when I received a text message, "Your mom cancelled the meeting. She can't bear to meet you. The guilt is overwhelming."

Some adoptee-focused resources seem to age out after an adoptee turns 18. I had just turned 30 and was realising personally how relevant and even life-saving it can be to have adoptee-specific support long after we become adults.

I was shocked, devastated, angry, upset. I didn't go outside for days. It felt like I was wrestling with God, "Why?! What in the world is going on here?"

> **"They may not have had all the answers, but they were willing to be there in that space with me**

Then there were friends from camp who were able to sit with me. And other members of the adoptee community who I was able to reach out to, even folks from the local church who seemed to just get it; who understood. They may not have had all the answers, but they were willing to be there in that space with me. Eventually, I came to a revelation, a resolution perhaps, that I wasn't going to let meeting my birth mom be the highlight of my life.

I also wasn't going to let not being able to meet her be the low point of my life. A part of me was still deeply convinced that there could be good work happening in and through me and throughout the world. I began to trust in that truth with more conviction; a kind of desperate hope I'd lean on more than ever.

The next morning, my phone rang. It was the adoption agency. They said, "Cameron, good news. Your mom changed her mind. She wants to meet you."

Elevate adoptees into positions of influence

In her book *Trauma and Recovery*, Dr Judith Herman states, "The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma … When the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery" (p. 1).

> **There are adoptee stories out there that have yet to be unburied**

Adoptees aren't always granted the dignity and privilege of leading those processes, not only in academia but throughout the way adoption is framed in casual and clinical discourse. The hope, though, is that that's changing.

For me, returning to Korea and meeting members of my birth family opened up a new range of confession, even a visceral sort of internal awe at the realities of being connected to something larger than myself. I felt permission and encouragement to be curious about where I was from, *who* I was from, what that's like emotionally and beyond, and how I'm still connected to Korea and the Asian-American diaspora. There was a sacredness in being able to explore, embrace and even consider what it means to be faithful with and steward those dimensions of my lived experience that I've been granted. Not that I'd wish the atrocities of family separation on anyone, but to transform it into something empowering is a process I believe we're all capable of, individually and collectively.

It has been through my connection to the adoptee community that I've been able to experience layers of that truth telling, along with the healing aspects of what it's like to be witnessed without judgment or shame. That's been especially helpful during the most challenging aspects of my adoptee journey. Part of our development together, in community and in spiritual fellowship, is to continue fostering those kinds of relationships; cultivating those atmospheres and conditions for hope.

It takes a village

A few months before I went to Korea for my reunion trip, just after the summer camp season finished, I asked the camp director, "Where can adoptees get this kind of support outside of camp?"

He said, "I'm sorry, Cam. There really aren't many places out there."

Cam arriving in America at Chicago O'Hare airport with his adoptive parents.

A few months later, when I returned from Korea, I was struggling to make sense of everything that had just happened and integrate it into the next steps of my personal and professional journey. My advisor on campus suggested I look into clinical counselling as a career as adoptee-specific mental health support was a growing need. The vision of it resonated with me so profoundly that I began applying to graduate programmes around the region.

That was about 15 years ago, and that's why I do the work I do today. No adoptee in any generation should have to face this road alone. Our children and children's children likewise will benefit deeply from such person-specific support throughout their lives. I've been so fortunate to have met with adoptee scholars and advocates in the field and have been inspired, challenged, uplifted and blessed by their pioneering work as we continue building those spaces together.

At TEDx Minneapolis (Lee Small, 2024b), I shared that it takes a village to relinquish a child, and another one to keep them from talking about what happened. A lot of people have to be in on it. There are a multitude of social, systemic and other contextual factors that shape a mother's decision to place her child for adoption. For example, adoption in child welfare has historically been framed as a 'win–win–win' solution (Baden, 2016); a solely protective intervention to provide safe and stable families to children, relief to birth parents who were deemed unfit for childcare responsibilities, and hope to adoptive parents

who desired to raise a child (Javier et al., 2007). Those cultural assumptions tend to neglect systemic conditions that lead to family separation in the United States and beyond. Adoptees then seem to be working against the tide when they respond to such ongoing life events in terms that go beyond gratitude and complaisance. It can be a force that keeps them from exploring and addressing their needs altogether.

The good news is we can be a different kind of village.

1. **H**umanise adoptee narratives.
2. **O**wn your part in the story.
3. **P**romote adoptee-specific resources.
4. **E**levate adoptees into positions of influence.

The more contemporary view that adoption represents a complex negotiation of losses, connections, adversity, trauma and transformation has become increasingly accepted and seems to be more aligned with the actual needs of adoptees that present uniquely and universally throughout their lives (Brodzinsky et al., 2022; Lee, 2003).

If you're reading this, thank you for your willingness to consider how that hope could come alive uniquely for adoptees and families under your care and within your community, that they'd be invited and compelled to tell their stories – and find healing through them, too.

About the author

Cam Lee Small, author of *The Adoptee's Journey: From loss and trauma to healing and empowerment*, is a clinician, advocate and thought leader in adoption literacy and mental health. His work, informed by lived experience and professional expertise, has been featured by TEDx Minneapolis, CBS Minnesota, and national adoptee-focused and child welfare organisations. Cam offers counselling, workshops and online courses, creating impactful resources for adoptees and advocating for community-based change.

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