Mazel Tov, Yuto
Welcome to the tribe

Bloodlines

“Japan is a difficult country to adopt from,” everyone says. Not only are there few children up for adoption, but it’s the only country in the world where you need to get the parents’ extended family’s approval for the process.

Bloodlines are seen as all-important, one’s ancestors are one’s link to the past. The family registry or koseki goes back generations and lists each birth and marriage, tying family to family. When we got married, I did not take my husband’s name, and this caused a commotion at the ward office, as the clerk said there was no “official space” to put my own name on the form.

My husband stood his ground. “Well, make a space,” he said, knowing that was impossible. One thing about bureaucracy is that it most definitely cannot make a space.

It would have been much easier for him to request or insist that I change my name, but he didn’t. He just waited for the bureaucrat to find a way to remedy the situation. I kept my own name and was added to the koseki.

Then doubts start to flood my mind. If we succeed in adoption, I’ll be bucking the system again.

I know how difficult it is to raise a child, let alone one who is adopted in a country that is not particularly “open” to adoption. In Japan, most adoptions are kept secret. Some children don’t even find out until their parents die.

So we brace ourselves and ask my husband’s father for permission. I find out, to my surprise, that his own father was adopted. Samurai on one side, gangster on the other. My husband has them all in his ancestry—geisha, gangster, samurai, rickshaw driver. This assortment of characters
pleases me, makes me feel less strange for my difference, more welcome. My father-in-law says yes.

We ask his sister, since she lives with us. She says yes. We breathe a big sigh of relief. But still I worry. All the possible scenarios tumble through my mind: I am a Westerner and the child will not look like me, so everyone will know he or she is adopted. I know of foreign women who don’t take their half-Japanese children to school as their children are ashamed and don’t want their peers to know they are “hafu.” And because he is “different,” I don’t want him or her to be the victim of ijime, school bullying. That could lead to hikikomori, someone afraid to leave the house who spends his childhood at home. Even worse, it could lead to jisatsu or suicide. I know I am being neurotic, already thinking about the difficulties the child will face in grade school, middle school, junior high, high school and beyond. I know I am already being a mother.

I share my fears with my husband. He was beaten up in school, too.

“We turned out okay,” he says. It was why I studied karate and meditation, which ultimately led me to Japan.

“Yeah, but we got our asses kicked a lot!”

“Maybe we went through it so our child wouldn’t have to,” he says.

“That’s a nice thought,” I shake my head. If only that’s how it worked.

We decide that we are already a rainbow family, he with his long hair and stay-at-home job, me with my red streaks and funky yoga studio, not to mention our strange pit-bull mutt and his family’s eccentric lineage. In a conservative neighborhood in a conservative country, we already stand out as freaks. Why not embrace it completely?

Perpetual Yes

In September, the agency calls about a little girl. We say yes. Nothing happens. In December, they call about a boy. We wait. They offer the child to another family. Many young couples are waiting to adopt, and we are low on the list due to our ages.

I have to do something proactive. I am fiercely committed to living my dreams. If I’m not, who else will be? I contact a dozen international adoption agencies. Most of them don’t write back. The few who do bother to respond say they don’t work with families who live

Photo credit: http://www.123rf.com/photo_13872626_japanese-carp-kites-decoration-on-the-children-s-day.html
abroad. We apply in Vietnam. We wait some more.

Finally, I make Shogo call the orphanage. I insist that he tell them to stop calling us every month to ask if we are interested in a different child.

“Tell them to put a perpetual ‘yes’ on our file, ok? Tell them that whatever child they have available, we are interested.”

“Whatever child?”

“Yes. Whatever child.”

I want to say all those things like “It isn’t fair,” and “Why us?” but I already know the answers to those questions, that there are no answers. This is our fate, our journey, our path.

And somehow, miraculously, it works.

The little boy they called us about a few months ago is available again.

“Yes!” we say, eager to meet the child who is destined to be ours.

But when they come to our house to tell us about him, the information is sketchy at best.

“Do you have a picture?” I ask.

No picture.

This astounds me. More people have cameras in Japan than have driver’s licenses. Japan is the land of the camera--how could they not have a picture?

“Are you interested or not?” they ask. They’re not messing around with this child. He’s suffered enough.

“We’re interested,” we say together.

And for the second time in my life, I get down on my knees and pray.

Mothering Zen

We visit Yuto in the orphanage for hours, days, weeks, months. Finally, we can bring him home for an overnight. Then, finally, we can bring him home forever, just after his second birthday.

We go to a playground where he can see the bullet trains passing overhead. At the playground, he comes up to the other kids and wants to play with their toys, or play with their balls, or play with them in general. He likes to hold hands. He wants contact, touch, closeness. Because he grew up in an orphanage where everything was communal, he misses it. He has no concept of personal ownership.

The first time we give him Ai-Ai, the stuffed monkey we’d brought to take with him in the car—he tries to leave it behind at the orphanage. We have to convince him that he can keep it: he’s never had a single thing of his own.

He is the opposite of other kids, who have to learn how to share. He brings his own toys to share, but the other kids don’t take much interest in them. I don’t want to try to make sense of things like this, or explain everything to him. He’ll learn. I want to cut a path in this crazy forest of life with him. Sitting Zen. Walking Zen. Playing Zen. Mothering Zen. It’s all practice, and we have a lifetime.

But my aunt doesn’t. I want him to meet her before she dies.

So we bring him to San Francisco. He loves his 7-year old cousin Shaviv, but he cannot pronounce Sh, so he calls him Habib. My sister tells me Habib means “friend” in Hebrew.

We see a homeless man with a cat on the street in front of Macy’s on Union Square. The cat has been hit by a car and the man needs money for its hospital bills. Everyone rushes by the man and the cat, but Yuto pulls my arm, insists on petting the cat. Then he sits down on the pavement and tries to pick up the cat to hug it. I tell him the cat is hurt and he shouldn’t touch it. So he pets it instead. Now people stop to look at the little boy sitting on the sidewalk, blocking their way. Some mothers pull their children away. A photographer stops to take a picture. Others put money in the basket. More children come to sit by his side.

Somehow, he brings together the splintered worlds of strangers. He is a healer of cats and hearts, a small wonder in this world of so many wonders. If I ever felt any doubts, I do not now.

All That has Divided Us Will Merge

Though there are many customs for birth in Japan—the mother returning to her parents’ house, a celebration of the child’s first solid foods—we’ve missed them all. So we return to California to hold a Jewish baby naming ceremony for Yuto. Many people from my mother’s community gather to welcome him, though we are strangers. Yuto is given the
name Benjamin after his maternal grandfather, who came from Ludz, Poland, and Walter Benjamin, the Jewish writer/philosopher and member of the resistance in WWII. There is a ceremony where we throw all of our sins into the Napa River. Any time between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, in the Jewish tradition, it is customary to throw breadcrumbs into a body of water as a symbolic act of repentance. The ritual is called Tashlich, A Sending Out. We gather at a waterfront to “cast away” the sins of the past and resolve to have a better year in the year to come.

My mother and stepfather, father and stepmother, my sisters and their sons are there. The whole family has gathered to heal and rejoice. All over the world, it is a holy time. In India it is the Ganesha festival, honoring the Elephant god of new beginnings and remover of obstacles. In the Muslim world, it is Ramadan.

My mother’s friends, most of whom I don’t know, come up to congratulate us. Some tell me their stories, of how they too were adopted, or how they have adopted children, and what a wonderful mitzvah it is.

Tossing bread into the water, everything is still. It is a beautiful moment.

The congregation has prepared a special blessing for the occasion. It says:

May the one who blessed your ancestors bless you. We hope that you will be a blessing to everyone you know, humanity is blessed to have you.

Yuto sits atop his father’s shoulders wearing his beaded yarmulke, smiling and dancing. Yuto is Jewish and Japanese, he is universal.

I look at Shogo and see that he is crying, too.

Humanity is blessed to have you.

The adults gather and say a Shabbat prayer:

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And then all that has divided us will merge
Then compassion will be wedded to power
And then softness will come to a world that is harsh and unkind
And then both women and men will be gentle
And then both men and women will be strong
And then no person will be subject to another’s will
And then all will be rich and free and varied
And then the greed of some will give way to the needs of many
Then all will share equally in the Earth’s abundance
And then all will care for the sick and the weak and the old
And then all will nourish the young
And then all will cherish life’s creatures
And then all will live in harmony with each other and the environment
And then everywhere will be called Eden once again.
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My mother has ordered a special cake for Yuto decorated with Pokemon, though Yuto seems to be the only one there who does not know who Pokemon is. He devours the cake, which says: “Mazel Tov, Yuto. Welcome to the Tribe.”

This excerpt was adapted from a piece originally published by Shambhala Sun. It appears here with permission.

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