

EXCERPT



***The Adoptee's Journey***  
*From Loss and Trauma to Healing and Empowerment*

June 4, 2024 | \$20, 240 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0704-4

Adoption is often framed by happy narratives, but many adoptees struggle with unaddressed trauma. Narrating his own and other adoptees' complex stories, counselor Cameron Lee Small unpacks the history of adoption and the church's influence, helping adoptees regain their agency and identity on a journey of integration and healing.

## A Fountainhead of Lament I Didn't Know Existed

Could a mother be ours the moment we see her?

Can we ever feel too thankful to grieve?

Being adopted is carrying an infinite number of possibilities around in your body. Lives you could have lived, people you could have been, strangers who could have been your parents.

It's a being, trapped in time, while others live on without you. It's a travel through time, while you live on without the others. It's a living contradiction as you become members of multiple families. *Members*, plural, due to the roles we carry: gift, rescued, child, sibling, plan B, the replacement for, the inevitable surprise, the relinquished, the chosen, the one who was "ours the moment we saw her."

Grief is an inward response to an external loss of someone or something significant. It helps us know what's important. It raises the stakes in our relationships and throughout our lives. It reminds us of our humanity and the range of our capacity for change. It calls us to action. Grief is a principal investigator.

### Permanence

There was a time when I cried out for my mom. And a time when she didn't answer back. Permanently.

"Omma!!" . . .

"Omma!!!" . . .

A part of my inner world was ruined.

I've had reoccurring dreams throughout my life. They still come back from time to time. There are four themes in total. One begins inside a blue-dark tunnel, big enough to fit a small raft. The sounds of drips and splashes echo softly. I float cautiously on a stream of runoff water, inward, toward some large epicenter shaped like a hollow cement cylinder the size of a skyscraper. When I arrive near the opening, my point of view toggles as if looking down from a drone. No light, but somehow I see there are multitudes of tunnels, water steadily pouring in from each one, all lined up around the perimeter leading to this single location, which is dark and bottomless. That's as far as the dream ever takes me. I still have questions:

Did I get poured into the abyss? What does the abyss represent? Would I try to paddle back or jump out of the raft at the last minute? Am I allowed to? Who put me in the tunnel? Does anyone know I'm in here?

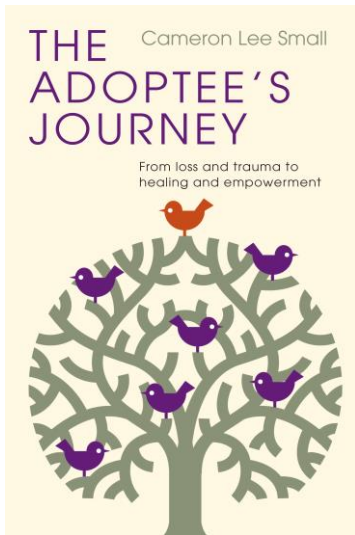


Tara Burns, print and online publicity  
800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or tburns@ivpress.com

Krista Clayton, author interviews  
800.843.4587 ext. 4013 or kclayton@ivpress.com



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I began to wrestle with those questions again during my reunion trip to Korea, at night, in a taxi cab. Two friends and I crammed into the back seat. There was a lull in our conversation and I glanced out the window, in awe, driving through Seoul's busy streets. Colorful city lights and neon words displayed on buildings, the Korean language mesmerizing. I started wondering about what it would have been like to grow up here, with my mom, my family.

That's when my grief erupted. Nearly thirty years of it. In a way I'd never felt before. Crashing back onto its home shore as if it were saving up from the moment I left. An event horizon in my journey as an adoptee. As a person. Blood with a heartbeat returned to its body. Something inside me was awakened; resuscitated; resurrected.

I tried to hold it in, but under a tidal wave like that I just had to endure it—this consciousness—and stay with the feelings that had finally outgrown the fictions that hemmed them in. A few drops, welled up, turned into sobbing and convulsing. My friends didn't know what to do. I didn't either.

However, along with the confusion and sorrow, even guilt for allowing such a reaction to be alive inside me, there was a strange comfort. Not from people. But the soil whispered up to me,

*"You're so sad."  
"You're here, now."  
"I see you."  
"You wish things could have been different."  
"You have so many questions."  
"It doesn't make sense."  
"You've held it in for so long."  
"It hurts. You've endured so much."  
"I've missed you."*

A fountainhead of lament I didn't know existed. Maybe I'd dreamt of it or maybe this was a dream. My heart was emptied and filled at the same time. Grief poured onto the land where my mother saw me for the first and last time. I was filled, my existence validated. Not full completely. But affirmed simply by being. And by allowing what was—to be. I returned to a form of dust through which my Creator knit me together and was met with a resounding message: "You're allowed to be here. You're not crazy. The lot is complicated, but you're not alone."

It was mirrors and windows in psychological and spiritual dimensions. Not prepared for, yet hungered for. And it was empowerment, somehow, as I began to accept this inner groan that felt too deep for words.

—adapted from chapter 3, "Loss and Grief"



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**Cameron Lee Small, MS, LPCC**, is a licensed clinical counselor, transracial adoptee, and mental health advocate based in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He was born in Korea and relinquished into foster care at age three. He was then adopted in 1984 to a family in the United States. His private practice, Therapy Redeemed, specializes in the mental health needs of adoptees and their families wherever they may be in their own adoption journey. His work has been featured in *Christianity Today*, the National Council for Adoption, and the Center for Adoption Support and Education.

# Hope Is the Rule, Not the Exception

**In your view, what is the meaning of the phrasing "The Adoptee's Journey?"**

**Cameron Lee Small:** "The Adoptee's Journey" does not simply mean we go from experiencing just one to experiencing only the other. The Adoptee's Journey is about acknowledging that our stories are inevitably open to the entire range; from loss and trauma to healing and empowerment. Jesus' life was a bit like that, too. But that's only the inevitable.

**What is your challenge, hope, and calling for adoptee readers?**

**Cameron:** The challenge, the hope, and the calling for adoptee readers is that we could turn what's inevitable into something irrevocable. Pain is inevitable. But true healing and empowerment can't be taken away; only expanded, plumbed deeper, aimed higher, implied wider, created and exercised beyond all limits of genre, tradition, body, and law. The jurisdiction of Hope has no limits. There is no higher authority. Hope is the rule, not the exception.

**What would you say is at the heart of this book?**

**Cameron:** Adoptee testimonies are at the heart of this book. There are references throughout to abuse, neglect, various degrees of trauma, loss, grief, interpersonal and institutional violence. In my quest to preserve confidentiality and abide by terms of ethical storytelling, the vignettes shared are linked with pseudonyms and are fictitious (aside from the ones who've made themselves known publicly or those who've allowed me to interview them for this book). They are composites based on the lived experiences of many different adoptees who I've met through my work as both a clinician and a volunteer in community spaces such as summer camps, nationally organized gatherings, and local events. I've done my best to integrate multiple perspectives on adoption without compromising an individual's personal specificity or the recognition of multilevel systemic realities. I have attempted to bring together several bodies of knowledge to introduce concepts that apply equally to spiritual, social, and political dimensions of the adoptee journey.

**Finish this statement: To be an adoptee is to . . . ?**

**Cameron:** To be an adoptee is to be separated from someone and something. Our journey includes the process of learning how to sit with that discomfort. To feel it. To acknowledge its capacity, while also acknowledging our capacity as humans to live and grow despite the inherent potentials associated with being adopted. My overall aim in this book is not to pathologize us but to recognize variables in our adoptee experiences that are too deep for words. And then to go. Act not as spectators but as strugglers, in a real world, longing for real deeds of truth and love to arise.



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