On Being Adopted: Julia Murdock Smith

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JULIA MURDOCK SMITH WAS ONE OF THE INFANT TWINS adopted by Joseph and Emma Smith. She was raised as the oldest child in the Smith household. In recent years, biographers have claimed Julia as primary subject material, and her fascinating character and life have begun to take shape. However, in some ways Julia remains an enigma, even to devotees of the prophet and his family—as if even after her death, she has been touched by the same disconnectedness that influenced her relationships and sense of self during her life. She was adopted: not quite a Smith, not quite a Murdock, and to historians of Mormonism, not quite a Mormon.

In this paper, I examine the ways adoption may have shaped Julia's life, drawing on modern psychological literature that characterizes the experiences of those who have been adopted. I ground my approach in the theory that the human response to being given away by one's birthparents transcends generational effects.[1] In other words, Julia's feelings about being adopted shouldn't differ significantly from those of modern adoptees. I will first provide biographical information on Julia. A description of nineteenth-century adoption practices and modern closed adoptions will follow, with comments on their relevance to Julia's experiences. These materials will provide context for an exploration of Julia's relationships with her adoptive and biological families and a discussion

1. A model and rationale for this approach may be found in Paul C. Rosenblatt's *Bitter, Bitter Tears: Nineteenth-Century Diarists and Twentieth-Century Grief Theories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). His approach is the reverse of mine: to understand the psychosocial process of grief through a study of nineteenth-century writers, rather than to understand a nineteenth-century adoptee through current psychosocial literature on adoption. He concludes that "the great landmarks of the life cycle seem to have had the same impact on people then as now. And the things that upset people the most now seem to be the same things that upset them the most then. . . . I will not deny the possibility that in some crucial way the experiences of personal losses by people in the nineteenth century are different from those of people in the twentieth century, but I am unable to detect at present any difference that would invalidate the use of nineteenth-century diaries to understand grief in the twentieth century" (8-9).

of how adoption issues affected them all. Themes emerge: Julia's love and loyalty for those who claimed her as family, her conflicts of identity, and her deep sense of loss of her biologic genealogy. Finally, I will highlight aspects of her personality that often emerge in adopted persons. The end result will be to show that viewing Julia from the perspective of adoption psychology gives us valuable new insight into her life and character.

A Biographical Sketch of Julia[2]

Julia and her twin brother were born to John and Julia Murdock on a spring day in 1831 only a few miles from Kirtland into a family recently converted to Mormonism. The mother, Julia, died after giving birth, and suddenly John was a widower with newborn twins and three older children. On the same day, Joseph and Emma Smith, also living near Kirtland, gave birth to twins. The Smith twins died, and John Murdock gave his own twins to Joseph and Emma to raise as their own although subsequently one of these died as well. His three older children were placed in the care of others as well, but John eventually reclaimed them. Interestingly, he did not place any of his children with his deceased wife's family although they lived nearby and were a large, prosperous clan. John Murdock and his in-laws had severed ties over religious differences when John and his wife joined the Mormon faith.

At the tender age of five, Julia discovered she was adopted. Apparently a spiteful neighbor put it to her none too kindly. Eventually she also learned that some believed her to be an illegitimate daughter of Joseph Smith by one of his devoted female followers. Rumors of Joseph's polygamous relationships only fed gossip about Julia's presence in the Smith home. Julia's childhood was marked by the gradual addition of several younger brothers to the Smith household, constant upheaval as the Smiths moved from one place to another, and the trials of belonging to an adoptive father who was both revered and hated for his religious claims and activities.

Julia was only thirteen when Joseph Smith was murdered in an act of mob violence. Her friends and neighbors in the Mormon city of Nauvoo, Illinois, mourned the loss of her father, then deserted the city for safer haven in the western deserts. However, Julia's widowed mother chose to keep her family in the Nauvoo area. Among those who left was Julia's birth father, whose identity she knew, yet with whom she had not formed a relationship. Julia's adolescence was quieter although when she was 16 years old, her adoptive mother remarried and she gained a stepfather.

Julia herself married soon after; recent evidence unearthed by researcher Reed Murdock suggests that she eloped when she was seventeen.[3] She and her

2. Biographical details, when not noted, may be found in that study. Mormon Historical Studies 3(2): Fall 2002: 35-60. Sunny McClellan Morton, "The Forgotten Daughter: Julia Murdock Smith."

3. Conversation with S. Reed Murdock, 22 May 2003. Evidence to be fully described in his forthcoming biography of Julia Murdock Smith, publication pending.

husband, who was twice her age, moved to Texas where he soon died in an accident. She returned home to Nauvoo where she married again, this time a local Irish Catholic man, John Middleton. At his request, Julia converted to Catholicism. The young couple moved to St. Louis to build a life together, but John's alcoholism and chronic illness prevented financial success, as well, apparently, as marital happiness. John finally deserted Julia, and she returned penniless to Emma shortly before her adoptive mother's death. By this time, Julia was herself ill. She was cared for by old friends in Nauvoo until she died and was buried in her friends' family plot in the local Catholic cemetery.

Adoption Practices in the 19th and 20th Century: Context for Julia

Adoption in Julia's day was different than the legal and social institution we now know.[4] In the early 1830s, adoption took place through informal community systems; a child was placed in an adoptive family through relatives and friends without any legal involvement.[5] A child could grow up in a town where everyone knew the story of her birth and adoption[6] as was the case with Julia. During her childhood, Julia was surrounded by many of the same Mormon converts in a community that moved from Kirtland to Missouri to Illinois. That group of converts included her birthfather and many others who would have witnessed her adoption firsthand.

During the early 1800s, adoption was viewed as a benevolent act on the part of the adoptive parents rather than as fulfillment of a couple's desire to become parents.[7] Relationships with birthparents sometimes continued, and adoptive families often filled a fostering or surrogate role rather than that of full-fledged replacement parents. Adoptive mothers like Emma were not necessarily considered "real moms" because they hadn't given birth to the adoptive child.[8] Therefore, society *would* have considered Julia to be a part of the Smith household but *not* a real "Smith child" like her Smith brothers. She would still have been a Murdock, especially since her father lived nearby, and it would normally have been acceptable for some sort of relationship to continue between Julia and her father.

But in important ways, Julia's emotional experience with adoption parallels that of those who grew up under the legal framework of twentieth-century closed adoption. By the turn of the century, adoption had become something more than simply finding a place for a child. Would-be parents now sought children to adopt: adopting a child had become a privilege. As adoption agencies formed to serve the needs of adoptive parents, new interest arose in protecting the new par-

4. Julie Berebitsky, *Like Our Very Own. Adoption and the Changing Culture of Motherhood, 1851-1950* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 18.

5. Ibid. 13.

6. Ibid., 20.

7. Ibid., 2.

8. Ibid., 9.

ents' sole rights to the child. Birth parents lost access to their children as a condition of the adoption, presumably to protect the new parents' emotional and financial investment in the child and to prevent complications that might arise from a child having multiple sets of parents. The end result for the child, it was assumed, was full legal and social identity with the adoptive family.

Julia's adoption agreement, although it happened under the older, informal system, anticipates modern closed adoptions. John describes an arrangement laid out by Emma. (He refers to both Julia and her twin brother, who though also placed with the Smiths died in infancy.)

> Sister Smith requested me not to make myself known to the children as being their father. It was a hard request and I said but little on the subject. She wanted to bring the children up as her own and never have them know anything to the contrary, that they might be perfectly happy with her as their Mother. This was a good thought, yet selfish, and I was sensible it could not always remain so. Joseph told me it would one day all come to light, which it appears has taken place without my divulging it, for I have always held my peace. . .I resolved to wait till time and providence should divulge the matter.[9]

John seemed surprised and unhappy with these conditions. Both he and the adoptive father Joseph appear to have consoled themselves with the idea that one day the relationship would be more open, per the norm for the day. John implies that had not these conditions been made, he would have pursued an open relationship with Julia. As further evidence that he still perceived himself as a parent to Julia, John provided financial support for her and her twin brother even after he had placed them with the Smiths.[10]

So Julia had to live by Emma's "closed adoption" policy—meaning that Emma wouldn't allow Julia to identify herself with the Murdocks—within a society that would not allow her to be a Smith either. She got the worst of both adoption worlds. The inherently conflicting setting of Julia's adoption circumstances undoubtedly complicated her ability to resolve issues of belonging and identity.

Finally we should note that both of these adoption models show mixed feelings about adoption in general. In the earlier model, adopting a child, while part of the open life of the community, is a (perhaps grudgingly granted) favor; in the later model, adopting a child is a privilege, yet also a sometimes shameful secret. These ambiguous feelings would have imbued Julia's adoption experience with cultural meaning that she may not even have recognized and probably couldn't reason away. One clinician describes the conflicted societal attitude toward adoption in the following way:

9. John Murdock, "Autobiography," 148-149. Microfilm. Historical Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

10. John Murdock, "A Synopsis of My History," Typescript, 168. Historical Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

> Although adoption is a widely accepted form of substitute care for children whose biological parents could not or would not care for them, there is still a feeling within most cultural groups that it is a "second best route to parenthood" and a "second best way of entering a family." To be part of an adoptive family is to be exposed continually to the challenge represented by society's ambivalent attitude about adoption.[11]

Julia's Family Life: Love and Loyalty, Identity and Loss

Two points should be made before discussing Julia's family relationships and the psychological impact of adoption on them. First, adoption psychology reflects general themes and trends. Whether and to what degree individual adoptees and their families experience any of these issues vary by circumstance. Second, just because adoption has a psychological impact does not mean that adoptees are psychologically troubled. One recent study, in fact, provides evidence that adoptees are no less functional than non-adoptees, emotionally or otherwise.[12] Many adoptees never have clinically-significant psychological issues. However, when adoptees *do* look for psychological help, adoption issues often play a role in their difficulties.[13] Psychologist Betty Jean Lifton explains this phenomenon in the following way:

> Hearing that one was not born to one's mother is a profound and unrecognized trauma. . . .The child finds it incomprehensible. This is not to say that the child is irreparably damaged. . . .Children are known to be resilient, to suffer all kinds of early abandonments and other traumas and to recover. But when the adopted child learns that he both *is* and *is not* the child of his parents, the shock connects to that earlier preverbal trauma the baby had at separation from the mother and has retained as an inner experience.[14]

Julia's overall psychological health is impossible to determine. Her letters contain a full spectrum of emotional tones, including affection, empathy, teasing, melancholy, grief, resignation, homesickness, hope, and confidence in her ability to cope. She writes lively comments on a full range of subjects, including family visits, neighborly gossip, local weather and culture, and even politics. These

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11. David M. Brozinsky and Marshall D. Schechter, *The Psychology of Adoption* (New York: Oxford UP, 1990), 17.

12. Ann E. Brand and Paul M. Brinich, "Behavior problems and mental health contacts in adopted, foster, and nonadopted children," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 40, no. 8 (1999): 1223-25.

13. Brozinsky and Schechter, 23, 42; Daniel W. Smith and David M. Brodzinsky, "Coping with birthparent loss in adopted children," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 43, no. 2 (2002), 213.

14. Betty Jean Lifton, *Journey of the Adopted Self: A Quest for Wholeness* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 48-49. While other major psychological texts cited in this paper contain much of the same information shared in Lifton's book, Lifton is most often quoted due to her readable writing style.

characteristics do not point to modern-day symptoms of depression like lack of energy or of interest in life, withdrawal, flat emotional affect, or persistent, overwhelming sadness—although, again, a real diagnosis is impossible to make. Specifically where adoption is concerned, Julia's passionate expressions of anger, bitterness, and grief toward her birth family at what "might have been" are common and certainly not pathological: unresolved adoption issues didn't appear to consume her life or thoughts for extreme periods of time. Neither, it seems, did her relationships with her adoptive family members suffer permanently.

I will first explore Julia's relationships with her adoptive family members because these were the first and most significant relationships she knew. Without question Julia loved and accepted Emma as the only mother she ever knew. Julia's letters to her adoptive mother are filled with love for her. She signed letters to "my Dear Mother" from "your ever affectionate daughter,"[15] and "loving and affectionate child."[16] She always referred to Emma as "mother" except when she wrote to her birth family. Then Emma became "foster mother." Julia shows her love for Emma in the opening paragraph of a letter to her:

> Your most welcome letters of May June and August came safe. . .and it was a real treat to get them and most eagerly I read them I assure you[.] God Bless and preserve my Mother to write to me many more such kind good letters[. P]oor Ma It is such a Task for you to write, but Dear Ma It is such a great comfort to me to read one of your letters[.] I have not the Heart to say don't write although it is selfish in me, but take your time to write them. Oh how much I wish to see you.[17]

Lifton writes about the adopted person's hunger for a mother:

> No one is more romantic about mothers and mothering than the adopted. They are like a blind person who tries to envision the radiance that nature has bestowed upon a flower [s]he will never see. Those who know their mothers cannot imagine what it is like not to know the woman who brought you into the world.[18]

An adopted baby "wants its own mother, and can only perceive of her disappearance as abandonment. . . .This sense of abandonment and mystery about origins [shapes] a child's life."[19]

Emma needed Julia as well. Emma's grief over the loss of her own first two children was fresh when Julia came to her, and Julia probably served as a balm. Lifton proposes that the adoptive mother and child share a mutual need, offering as evidence the finding that adoptive mother-child pairs emotionally make up

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15. Julia M. Middleton to Emma Smith Bidamon, 8 September 1873, St. Louis, Missouri.
16. Julia M. Middleton to Emma Smith Bidamon, 28 January 1872, St. Louis, Missouri.
17. Julia M. Middleton to Emma Smith Bidamon, 8 September 1873.
18. Lifton, 13.
19. Lifton, 20.

for lost prenatal time: one study showed no less attachment between adopted toddlers and mothers than toddlers and birth mothers.[20] However, Emma's maternal insecurity was evident from the beginning when she insisted on John Murdock's complete abdication as a father. Hers was a common expression of an adoptive parent's fear that somehow she will lose exclusive emotional ties and emotional control over the child or that the child's well-being will be compromised.[21] That possessiveness betrays her need for Julia.

Julia showed great affection for her adoptive brothers as well. She corresponded with them and often mentioned how much she missed them. She was especially close to Joseph III and signed one of her letters to him, "with much love I am always *your sister*."[22] She had a maternal love for the youngest boy David Hyrum, whom she helped to raise. She wrote a homesick letter about him the first time she left home, and even as an older adult reminisced about caring for him as a baby.[23] Julia's relationships with her adoptive brothers appear not to have been threatened by adoption conflict. As for Julia's relationship with her adoptive father, that ended abruptly when he was murdered. She never mentioned him specifically in reminiscences to her adoptive family.

When she was away from Emma's home, Julia ached to be there. Her memories of fireside and friendship are all of Nauvoo. She spoke of extended Smith family members as her own: Grandmother, Aunt Sophronia, even cousins.[24] One letter reveals that her heart was with the Smiths even when she was in Texas as a newlywed. She recites a poem that repeats a phrase about longing to be with "those we've left behind us." She also writes

> I often think of you all I can ashure you and Dream of you to for you are never out of my thoughts, my Dear Mother, and I Some times immagin I can See you all as I left you[.] The last time I Saw you the Boyes and Geralda were in the North Room and you were in the front Door and Joseph was beside the Gate. . . .Every night I breath a prayer to [God] to Grant that we all may meet again in this World.[25]

Julia's letters to the Murdocks tell another story, one of insecurity and loss, conflicting loyalties and desires—a story that shows that although she did her best to be a Smith, she knew she didn't belong with them. The first hint of her anxious desire to know her birth roots appears in her mention of a visit from her

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20. Lifton, 34.

21. Lifton, 241-243.

22. Julia M. Middleton to "Dear Joe," Joseph Smith III, 5 January 1877, emphasis added.

23. Julia M. Middleton to "My Dear Mother," Emma Smith Bidamon, 28 January 1870, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

24. Julia M. Middleton to "My Dear Mother," Emma Smith Bidamon, 8 Sept 1873; Julia M. Middleton to "My Own Dear Mother," Emma Smith Bidamon, 18 March 1853, both at Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

25. Julia M. Dixon to "My Dearest Mother," Emma Smith Bidamon, 25 March 1851. Community of Christ Archives. Lewis C. Bidamon Papers, P12-2, f17.

birth mother's cousin, Henry Moore. He tried to visit her in Nauvoo when Julia was about seventeen, but she was out of town at the time. All that is known is Julia's later recollection:

> [Henry] did not call on my foster Mother, not knowing what her feeling might be, he said. But he could rest assured of one thing, she would have received him kindly on my account. . .I wrote to Cousin Henry to this effect, and he answered it.[26]

This gesture by her mother's family must have meant a great deal to her. It was probably the first time any birth relative had stepped forward to claim kinship as well as her first opportunity to learn firsthand about her mother's large, prosperous family back in Ohio and their undoubtedly strong opposition to her adoption into the Smith family. In fact, when Julia wrote to her birth father about ten years later, she used some of her maternal relatives' complaints as ammunition against John. She wondered why she hadn't been placed with her biological mother's family, commenting, "If she [my birth mother] has seen the way her family have been divided and estranged she must feel unhappy, I think."[27]

The most compelling evidence of Julia's longing for her birth family comes in her reply to a letter from her biological brother, John Riggs Murdock. Julia was about twenty-eight when John Riggs wrote to her (he was about four years older). She responded to his letter; her response was forwarded to their birth father John Murdock, who then responded to Julia. This triangle of letters is filled with anguish, loss, accusations, and explanations. In Julia's letter to her brother, she seems to release years of pent-up emotion:

> John, can you imagine a brother and sister raised as we have been, so totally estranged from one another? It is awful, God knows. Mine has been no easy life. Until I was a child of five years old I was happy, it was then I was first told I was not a Smith, and by Mrs. Walker, she was little older than myself, and she done it through spite. . . .From that hour I was changed. I was bitter even as a child. O how it stung me when persons have inquired, "Is that your *adopted* daughter?" of my foster mother. John, you little know what I suffered in my early life, and even since I was grown. . . .*Why was it, I have often said to myself, that I could not have been raised with my own blood and kin and not with strangers, and bear a name I had no claim on?*[28]

Such feelings of alienation and loss are common among modern adoptees. While many adopted children fare well with their new families, by the time they reach adolescence, they begin to understand the implications of being adopted

26. John Murdock, "Autobiography," 142.

27. John Murdock, "A Synopsis of My History," 163.

28. John Murdock, "Synopsis of my History," 164, emphasis added.

and realize how different their situation is from non-adopted children. They feel keenly that in order for them to have been "chosen" by their adoptive parents, their birth parents had to reject them. They feel identity limitations when their family or genetic stories don't deepen in complexity or relevance. As Lifton states, "If your personal narrative doesn't grow and develop with you, with concrete facts and information, you run the danger of becoming emotionally frozen."[29] Adoptees learn of their loss of an entire biological heritage,[30] both in terms of ancestry and in terms of a personal prenatal and newborn life narrative.[31] In a parallel manner, they lose the heritage of the adoptive family. These losses can lead to feelings of alienation and rootlessness. While some of these feelings are unavoidable, recent research has proposed that feelings of alienation and loss are intensified for adoptees who have been denied knowledge of and relationships with their birth families as was Julia.[32] That Julia herself was aware of her changing perceptions from childhood to adulthood is reflected in a statement written to Emma as a young adult:

> This is a strange world I think and the longer we live the mor[e] it puzzles us to account for some things. . . .I think in Childhood we see every thing through a Coulerd Glass as it were and it Coulers every thing in the most Brilyant light and Pleases our Eye but as we Grow Older we see through a Glass Still I think but it is a magnifying one and we see things as they really are.[33]

Julia wrote that even as a child, she longed for her birth family, yet she purposely avoided John Murdock during her childhood in Nauvoo. Perhaps that avoidance was Emma's rule, but Julia didn't blame it on her. She focused on her deeply conflicting feelings, which are consistent with those of many modern adoptees who choose not to contact their biological families. Julia explained to her biological brother:

> I shunned you and my father, and why? Because I had a dread of being taken from those I was raised with and loved, with the same love that should have been yours. Many a sleepless night I have spent thinking of this when I was a child. But I was a woman in thought, even then. After seeing some of you [the Murdocks], I have almost cursed the day I was born. . .*I chose to love those I knew.*[34]

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29. Lifton, 65.

30. Brodzinsky and Schechter, 13-14.

31. Lifton, 36.

32. Irving G. Leon, "Adoption Losses: Naturally Occurring or Socially Constructed?" *Child Development* 73, no. 2 (March/April 2002): 661, J.V. de Monleon , "Who are my parents? Filial adoption and the function of time and place" (French, English language abstract) *Arch Pediatrics* 7, no. 5 (2000): 529-35.

33. Julia M. Dixon to "My Own Dear Mother," Emma Smith Bidamon, 18 March 1853, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

34. John Murdock, "Autobiography," 141, emphasis added.

In this statement, Julia expresses her loyalty to the Smiths and a fear that she would lose the Smiths if she were to become close to her birth family. This fear still paralyzes many adoptees and their adoptive parents and prevents or delays many reunions between birthparents and children.

Herein lies one of the major tensions felt by many adoptees: They can feel deep love, loyalty, and gratitude for their adoptive families while still feeling angry at having been placed with them. They want to be part of both their birth and adoptive families and feel that they will never really "belong" to either. Lifton comments:

> Adoptees, then, are caught between the loyalty they feel to the adoptive parents who rescued them and the invisible loyalty to the [parents] who gave birth to them. Troubled as they are by feeling ungrateful, they remain ambivalent about accepting their adoptive parents as their "real" ones. Yet because they have not had any real experiences in the real world with the birth [parents], they cannot accept [them] as real either. Their split loyalties prevent them from resolving their issues with either set of parents. . . .The task of adopted children is to reconcile these [two sets of parents] within them—the [parents] who made them [orphans] and the psychological [parents] who [parented] them.[35]

Some adoptees keep their distance from their birth families while waiting for a sign that their birthparents want them. These adoptees don't want to feel rejected by their birthparents for a second time. Julia may have had such feelings, given her silence toward her biological kin until they initiated contact with her.

It is difficult to imagine Julia's feelings when she finally read a letter from her birth father, who responded to the emotionally-charged questions and even accusations she had filtered through her biological brother. One can almost hear his voice trembling with emotion as he wrote ". . .with feelings of gratitude to my Father in Heaven for the privilege of [receiving your letter]. . . .It was a great treat. . .like receiving intelligence from the dead. . . .For, my Dear Julia, you have been a lost child to me all your days."[36] He continued with an invitation for her to come visit him, as he was old and his health was failing. He also added a fervent religious desire that she would come to Utah, be taught the Mormon gospel, and participate in temple rituals that would unite them in faith and family.

This reunion appears never to have happened, and no further correspondence between Julia and her father has been found. It is not known whether their relationship progressed past this point. Julia may not have worked through her grief and anger at having been given up by her birth father, especially since she had lost her adoptive father as well and therefore never had a fulfilling, mature relationship with a father. However, it may also be that John's religious appeal

35. Lifton, 57, 14. In these passages, Lifton specifically mentions "mothers," which I have replaced throughout with "parents."

36. Murdock, "Autobiography," 142-143.

actually prevented her visit, as by this time she was already married to John Middleton and had become a Catholic herself. Middleton's active dislike of Mormonism would not have helped.

An interesting indication of Julia's feelings about herself as a Murdock is the fact that she did not use the name "Smith" in her correspondence. The name "Julia Murdock Smith" seems to have been imposed by historians after her death as an easy way of identifying her with Joseph and Emma. Julia took her middle initial from "Murdock" and used this throughout her married life. "M" for Murdock even appears on her tombstone.

Julia's claiming of her biological family's name anticipated a trend among modern adult adoptees:

> Even when they cannot have a relationship with their birth parents, adoptees may reclaim their names as a way of reclaiming their original identities. They may use the first name, or take it or the surname as a middle name. . . .Sometimes adoptees will use both their adoptive and their birth names, as if not sure which is the real one and which the imposter.[37]

The Adoptive Personality

It seems curious that Julia's letters to the Smiths never mention adoption-related issues. She may have discussed the topic with them, but not in letters;[38] she may not have approached it at all. It has been found that, in some modern, upper-middle-class families, the absence of "adoption discussions" actually reflects the absence of a serious problem.[39] Another psychologist explains that adopted children may shut out the subject of adoption when their culture requires them to emotionally abandon their birth parents.[40] A third explanation stems from some modern adoptees' feelings that loyalty and gratitude prevent their sharing feelings that might cause pain to the adoptive family.

> Adopted children, who get the message that not only were they chosen, but they were chosen to be the light of their parents' lives, often do not feel entitled to express any negative feelings, such as grief or anger at being cut off from their origins. Some become so successful at splitting off their feelings and keeping up a cheerful façade that they do not even know when they are angry.[41]

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37. Lifton, 268.

38 Rosenblatt comments that grief also tends not to be expressed in writing, i.e. emotional responses to life events (like loss and adoption) are "worked out in conversation, reverie, and. . .ritual" rather than in written form, and that the "writing [conventions of the day] did not allow for substantial expression of [feelings] that may have been bottled up" (100).

39. Brozinsky and Schechter, 21.

40. Lifton, 51.

41. Lifton, 89.

Lifton describes how adoptees assume the role of perfect, grateful substitute children. "The adoptee continues in [this] artificial role rather than risk losing her place in the family, but goes underground with her forbidden thoughts, which make her feel more isolated and alone."[42] This "underground" is the fantasy world or alternate reality of the adoptee. This imagination zone is often described as the adoptee's "what if" world, in which birth family members figure prominently. Sometimes in these fantasies, the birth family raises the adoptee; a birth parent kidnaps the adoptee; there are battles between the birth and adoptive families; a birth parent assumes an imagined celebrity or infamous identity. Interestingly, in some adoption fantasies, the adoptee imagines that she has a lost or invisible twin.[43] Julia was in fact born with a twin, but he died as an infant. It would be interesting to know how this other loss played out in her mind. Some of the most important manifestations of the adopted person's fantasy world are the psychological presences that can follow the adoptee in real life.

> "Psychological presence," simply put, refers to some person being in a family member's heart, or on his or her mind. It is the symbolic existence of an individual in the perception of other family members in a way that influences thoughts, emotions, behavior, identity, or unity of remaining family members.[44]

An adoptee might feel the psychological presence of her birthmother watching over her, of the birth child her adoptive parents really wanted, or of the child she might have been had she been raised with her birth family.[45] Birthmothers are nearly always psychologically present.[46] Julia's writings to the Murdocks reveal the psychological presence of her birthmother. She was quick to follow up on contact from her birthmother's family and to incorporate their perspective into her own. She was defensive about "the stain on my mother's name" when her own legitimacy was called into question.[47] Finally, she flung her birthmother's presence at her birthfather: "If [my mother] has seen the way her family have been divided and estranged she must feel unhappy, I think." Additional psychological presences that may have followed Julia, although they are never mentioned, are her biological twin and the Smith twins, who themselves were born and died on the same day that Julia was born and whom Julia and her brother were supposed to "replace." Lifton states that "the adoptee who replaces. . .a dead child. . .must bear the burden of the parents' unresolved. . .grief over not having their [birth] child, while trying to be what that. . .child would have been."[48]

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42. Lifton, 56.

43. Brozinsky and Schechter, 50.

44. Jayne E. Schooler and Betsie L. Norris, *Journeys After Adoption: Understanding Lifelong Issues* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 2002), 18.

45. Lifton, 11.

46. Schooler and Norris, 21.

47. John Murdock, "A Synopsis of My History," 164.

48. Lifton, 46.

Finally, Julia's personality and choices show some curious traits common among adoptees. One interesting trait is the tendency to marry someone quite a bit older, who will be a parent figure who does not abandon them. This tendency is more pronounced in male adoptees; however, Julia's need for a father may have led to her acting out this tendency. Remember that she lost both her birth father and adoptive father. Her first marriage was, in fact, to a man twice her age. After a whirlwind summer courtship, she flouted her family's wishes by eloping with this man when she was only seventeen.[49] However, references to Julia after her marriage make her sound happy with the flush of first love. She was understandably devastated when her husband soon died in a work-related accident. She later described that period of her life as "the darkest days I have ever know[n]."[50] If he really was a father figure to her, he would have been the third one she'd lost. Sadly, her fourth important relationship with a man would turn out to be an unhappy marriage to an alcoholic.

Another unusual trait of adoptees is a tendency to identify with animals, perhaps because they share some state of grace that is outside the human condition. "Many adoptees have [a feeling] of being a stray who has been taken in, and is not suited for ordinary human attachment. They may feel more comfortable with animals than with people."[51] Julia had a special place in her heart for pets. In one letter she mentions having three birds and a dog who "is doing well and is as much of a Pet as his Mistress is;" she also laments the loss of another pet, Chloa. She even included a philosophical poem about nature's way of taking away dear pets and flowers through death.[52] Another letter mentions that she had gotten "another" dog;[53] yet another discusses the fate of a family horse.

Taking a Step Back

It is surely important to emphasize one of the hopeful findings of this paper. Julia loved the Smiths and was obviously well-cared for in their household. That her psychological issues with adoption were not more intensely evidenced in her daily life can probably be credited to the nurturing environment in which she was apparently raised. In fact, Lifton states:

> Probably the most important interpersonal factors influencing the adopted child's adjustment are the experiences he or she has with family members. These experiences are related to the general quality of the caregiving environment, the adjust-

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49. Evidence of the elopement was discovered recently by S. Reed Murdock. He provides further details in a forthcoming biography of Julia.

50. Julia M. Middleton to "My Dear Mother," Emma Smith Bidamon, 8 Sept 1873, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

51. Lifton, 73-74.

52. Julia M. Dixon to "My Dearest Mother" Emma Smith Bidamon, 25 March 1851.

53. Julia M. Dixon to "My Own Dear Mother," Emma Smith Bidamon, 18 March 1853, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

> ment of adoptive parents, and the way in which adoption issues are communicated between parents and children.[54]

In other words, if Julia had to experience the trauma of losing her birth family, the Smiths were at least able to help her cope with it as best she could.

It is difficult to conclude whether Julia ever resolved her adoption issues satisfactorily. (It seems a small consolation to say that at least she had pets.) It is unknown whether the intense emotions she expressed about her Murdock connections were "left hanging." According to psychologists, a great deal of emotional work remains after an adopted child reconnects with a birthparent. Sometimes the reunion brings rejection, unanticipated information, a new sense of grief and loss, confusion, or even depression.[55] An adoptee must respond to the reunion by reframing her family ties and her sense of self. It is not known whether after her contact with her birth family, Julia accepted their reality and their response to her expressions of confusion and abandonment. Whether and/or how she redefined relationships with her adoptive and biological families are also unknown.

Julia must have maintained some kind of relationship with the Murdocks. It is painfully poetic that she finally formed a relationship with a Murdock during the last days of her life when her biological brother John Riggs Murdock paid her an extended visit in Nauvoo. According to his own account,

> I found her at the home of a Mr. Moffet, whose wife took care of her with a sisterly kindness. Julia's foster mother, Emma, had died, and she was left without a home and under the most distressing circumstances. She was suffering from a cancer in her right breast. . . .I remained with her about one month, but on leaving I left sufficient means to provide for her and cover the expenses of her burial and of a tombstone. She died soon after my departure.[56]

After a lifetime of tragic losses and the feelings of abandonment and alienation that accompanied her adoption, Julia must have been deeply moved to be attended to on her deathbed by a Murdock brother. One hopes this experience would have healed some of her feelings and answered some of her questions in a way that gave her a measure of peace in her final days.

Taking Another Step Back

Clearly modern adoption literature has relevance to Julia's life and experiences. This method of approaching Julia, while by definition somewhat speculative, does shed new insight on her personality. Additional insight may possibly

54. Brodzinsky and Schechter, 16.

55. Schooler and Norris, 224.

56. Quoted in J.M. Tanner, *A Biographical Sketch of John Riggs Murdock* (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1909), 169-170.

be gained by exploring existing literature on other relevant subjects, such as grief in children whose parents are killed violently; grief in young widows; the psychological effects of being raised in the public eye (children of celebrities); and the effects of spousal alcohol abuse. Each of these areas of study may illuminate Julia in ways that make her life even more accessible and relevant to twenty-first century readers.