

Adoption

Inspiring stories

We speak to four families about the surprising ups and downs of adoption.

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they opened their hearts to me. I only got to know all this background once I was adopted."

Saira continues, "I freaked out at hearing that a young child had to carry such responsibility and immediately wondered what was going to become of her." Then, after her mother's death in the hospital, no one could find Saberah. "It was a Friday. I imagined how she would be abused or preyed on by men; her whole life could be ruined. I couldn't let her go back. I went home and took it up with my husband, who is a very kind-natured person." The family decided to find Saberah and bring her home for the weekend.

On the Saturday, Saberah arrived with her brown suitcase. "She was fearful," says Saira. "I will never forget her face." Although the Rashids meant well, Saberah's youth and the trauma of her mother's death made it a difficult transition. "The sudden change in the course of my life was a mixture of shock, confusion and worry," Saberah concedes. "Even today I am still shocked, confused and worried, because I never got to close a previous chapter of my life before the new one was opened for me. I think I'm still trying to heal – it's a long process."

Just two days after her mother's death, 13 years old and due to enter high school after the holidays, Saberah moved in with her new family. And so her life took a complete turn.

"I was already Muslim," she continues, "which I guess made it easier for my new family to adopt me. But I was black, and they were Indian." Everyone found the cultural differences vast. "I had come from a Zulu-speaking background. Even though I was fluent in English, since I was at an English-speaking school, switching to English as my primary language, at home and socially was a shift."

The young girl worried that she was being treated differently because she was adopted or because she was black. "Quite soon after arriving, I was given a room with en-suite bathroom, but I wasn't sure why. I questioned whether, despite loving me, it was a sharing that my new family just couldn't do. I know this sounds petty," she sighs, admitting that childhood memories and emotions can be blurry. Saira's explanation is quite different: "We made sure that she had her own bedroom, to boost her self-esteem and give her privacy," she says.

Saberah continues, "All these little nuances and differences contributed to my culture shock ... I had been a poor kid in an informal settlement, and suddenly I no longer had to run to the shop to buy candles for light. Everything was suddenly convenient, at a switch. Running water, stove, fridge, electric lights and everything else that an informal dweller could only dream of." Saberah is acutely aware of the advantages of her situation: "I'm glad I never ended up at an

orphanage or became a statistic in a child-headed household.

On top of the complications of joining a new family and a new school, the Rashids were concerned about Saberah's HIV status. "Because I was working at a doctor's practice, we could see to all her health needs. In those days, there was a stigma attached to HIV/Aids and all kinds of misconceptions." Saberah went through a medical examination. "We all remember the joy when she tested negative."

Saberah's case is unusual in that she was not formally adopted. She explains, "I'm not fostered. 'Foster' in Islam, refers to a woman who has breastfed a child who is not naturally hers. Milk bonds are as strong

as blood bonds, so the same rules apply when a child has been fostered as when they have been adopted. I consider myself adopted, even though it's not official, because I did not suckle from my adoptive mother." Saira explains that this type of fostering came easily to them, because it is acknowledged in Islam. "The Islamic Educational Institute of South Africa held Saberah's guardianship. And they kept checking with me, asking if it was still okay with me."

Saberah continues: "Being adopted is more than a lifestyle change; it is a continuous education. I'm confident about my cultural knowledge though.

Having been thrown into the deep end means that I am a quick learner and quick adapter. I handle hardships better, because I have been through them in my early stages of life. I have also learnt that you can't make assessments of other people until you live with them. No generalisation about culture is true. You have to live with people for a good ten years or more to begin to understand them."

Slotting in with her new family was fun, mysterious, confusing and – at times – just plain scary. For one, Saberah had to get used to three new siblings. "It took us a while to warm up to each other – but we had to, because we shared a room for the first few months." Her new family had to adjust to her as well, but it didn't take long. "Soon I was introduced to relatives; they had varying reactions to me – some knew about the 'new kid,' some didn't. The funniest (and sometimes most annoying) thing was when they used to stroke my hair; I still don't get the fascination with the Afro thing." Another frustrating experience was people assuming that she couldn't speak English. "However, the most annoying of all responses (which still happens)," continues Saberah, "is when people assume that I'm my family's maid. I'm used to it, but it still makes my blood boil."

"My own family also raised their eyebrows, but that was temporary," says Saira. "Now she regards my mom, dad and in-laws as her grandparents." Saira always felt

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values and principles. "She was an ardent champion of the underdog, participating in the anti-apartheid struggle, housing Winnie Mandela and her family while Nelson Mandela was imprisoned on Robben Island and in Pollsmoor prison."

Mymoena's father was often unable to join them abroad, since someone had to hold down the fort back at home. "But I used to miss him a lot ... Okay, not a lot ... Actually, to the point where I used to cry to go home!" But the benefits of her travels are there. "Due to my late mother's very liberal lifestyle, we were exposed to so much that broadened our horizons and shaped our mindsets. She might not have worn a headscarf or been modestly attired enough for some, but she was an empathetic, optimistic, dynamic, ambitious Muslim woman who fought against injustices – however big or small. She had a huge heart, helped the poor regularly, and even cooked for Uncle Nelson. She was an icon in her own right."

Mymoena is now an entrepreneur, running her own training business, as well as helping her dad with his accounting. Like her mother, she is meticulous, yet adventurous and free-spirited. "She was not the kind of person you could tell what to do or demand anything of," she says of her mother. "In fact, she was a force to be reckoned with. That's what comes from having two degrees: a BA in English and an MBChB."

Despite the family's liberal lifestyle, the young Mymoena and Shukri learnt about their religion. "During school holidays, the local imam, our very first Ustad Maulana Hashim Cassiem, taught us practically everything we needed to know about our faith from a practical perspective. Learning to read the Noble Quran was done at the hand of our late teacher Maulana Baderoodien. My father led us in prayer daily, and we got our fair share of knocks when we did not know our recitations. It never instilled any fear in me as a child, to hate our faith or dislike reading the Noble Quran. On the contrary, as I grew older, I became more spiritually aware, even though my dress sense did not validate this progression at all."

"In 1990, when my brother and I were 15 years old, my father took us on pilgrimage. We were reluctant to go, but once I saw the Holy Kaaba, the tears started streaming down my face. I never knew till then that Islam was such a diverse and unified faith. I guess, coming from apartheid South Africa, it never crossed our minds that our faith was filled with all sorts. That was the most profound moment in my life and the lesson I learnt that day resides within me till today."

Mymoena says that her father hurt a lot with the passing of their mother, becoming quite reclusive. "I think he also did this to protect my brother and me, because we were not biologically connected to my

late mother and relatives were knocking on the door demanding their rightful inheritance. According to Islamic law, adopted children are not allowed to inherit directly from their adoptive parents." My father was still alive at the time, so I do not know why they made such a big fuss. But what is that Afrikaans saying? 'Erfgeld is swerfgeld'."

Mymoena then found herself having to adopt a new mother figure. "It was a very troubling, trying time for all of us in the home. My dad had his youngest spinster sister, Aunty Mariam, move in. At first, we just did not get along; today you cannot get an aunt and niece who are closer than we are, and I thank Allah SAW* every day for her self-sacrificing role."

Mymoena never considered searching for her biological parents. "I guess I was way too happy and content with my parents to ever be bothered about any of that. I still have no desire to know who my biological parents are. I am where and with whom I am meant to be with, with whom I was divinely destined to be surrounded by. Yes, many people said mean things and made snide remarks when my parents were not around. But I am 35 now, it confused and hurt me then; now I just laugh it off. Within the Muslim community, adoption may still be an issue, but not to the extent it was during my childhood. Much of the nastiness revolved around features, ethnicity and inheritance. You know the saying, 'Tis not the faith that is the problem but the faithful'."

Mymoena's father still practises medicine in Bishop Lavis. "He refused to leave the community," she says, "and by now I think they could name a road after him. He is very passionate about medicine, but more so about how it can help to heal his patients. My dad has a policy: he has no time limit to his consultations. If you have a problem with a full diary, you should go to see another doctor!"

"My dad and I are exceptionally close," she says. In fact, so close we will hold hands in a mall. I rarely have words with my dad; maybe once every few years and then we both feel terrible and empty." Mymoena's father has taught her to apologise very quickly and make up. "We can't handle the other being angry."

Mymoena admits that the person she is today is largely due to her father. "I admire my father in ways that cannot be explained, it comes from the heart and soul. Every single person in my life has helped shape me into who I am, but my father is the one who moulded me into the Muslim woman that I am, without him even realising it." Mymoena's eyes glow as she wipes away a tear, "I love you, Daddy."

* *Salaallahu alayhi wa salam* (Allah's blessings and peace be upon him).

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because we were not married when he was born, and because it was a shame that my father could not live with. We never thought we'd see our son again. We simply carried on with our lives, got married, and tried to be good parents to the children we had after him."

Forty years later, Lynette recalls Antony's call. "I answered the phone tentatively. My voice wasn't my voice. There was a delay. And then his voice, 'Is that Lynette? This is Antony.' Tears welled up; I had to breathe through my nose. 'Antony. I have waited 40 years to hear your voice. You don't know how wonderful this is,' those were my words." An emotional moment full of catharsis for Lynette, in stark contrast to the trauma of her teen pregnancy: She recalls the drive back from the doctor, with her mother and father. "For a moment all was still. And then my father started banging. He pounded his fist on the steering wheel and the whole car shuddered. Thud! Thud! And he was screaming. 'Do you know what you have done? You are going to disgrace us! How am I going to face anybody?'" For Lynette, these two moments span a wide gulf of time-bound social mores.

Before to the 1980s, the laws governing adoption meant that biological parents had little chance of reconnecting with their relinquished offspring. Contact was up to the child, but adopted children don't always want to track down their birth parents. Antony was nearing his 40th year when he found a scrap of paper while looking through a box of souvenirs. On the tiny piece of paper, two names had been jotted: Lynette Zinn and Max Langman. By then, his adoptive parents, the Egnals, had passed away, so he couldn't turn to them for answers.

He wondered about those jotted names, so he checked the phone directory and made a call to a Zinn in Cape Town, who immediately recognised the name "Lynette Zinn" and was able to give him the whereabouts of Lynette and Max. Antony called the adoption agency in Cape Town, which acted as intermediary, and soon he had Lynette's phone number, along with the permission to call her.

Antony Egnal, who lives in Seattle, recalls his motives: "I always knew I was adopted and never gave any thought to looking for my biological parents until I went to Texas to fetch my son Marc. I was raised by the most amazing, loving parents, Joe and Selma Egnal. They put their kids first and sacrificed everything for my sister Mandy (also adopted) and me."

"After meeting Marc's birth mother and seeing the love she had for him, I realised that placing a child for



ABOVE: Lynette meets her long-lost son Antony Egnal.
LEFT: Antony and Marc, whom he adopted.

adoption has to be one of the most unselfish acts of human kindness: to give of your own flesh and blood because you can't provide that child with the life you would want for him and to give another couple the privilege of raising that child. It struck me – then and there in the hospital – that someone had done that for me 40 years earlier." Antony realised then that he needed to say thank you to his birth mother for her *mitzvah* (good deed). And so began the journey.

"It has now been almost nine years since I connected with my birth family. I can look back and say that there is no doubt I did the right thing. There have been some interesting issues that have

arisen over the years, but I believe that all of the close family involved have enjoyed the reconnection. I am also acutely aware that most other adoption stories do not have the outcome my situation has. It's just very rare to find your birth parents, who got married after placing you, and have stayed married all these years and who have supplied additional full-blooded siblings."

"I was warned by Eileen Jordan – the social worker who originally handled my adoption reunion request – that the birth family may become a bit too attached, try to reclaim the long-lost son. Part of the issue – especially in my case, since I already had such fantastic parents – is that I wasn't looking for another set of parents. To me, a parent is the one who raises a child, changes the dirty nappies, feeds and clothes them. I did make this very clear in the beginning and I have respected the way Max and Lynette have dealt with this issue."

He compares his situation to the relationship between a husband and his in-laws. "When you fall in love and marry a spouse, you get their parents thrown into the deal, whether you like it or not. You are in love with your spouse, not their respective parents. But, over time, you grow to love them as you get to experience life with them, although it's hard to really get to know people at a distance. I have enjoyed our annual get-togethers and almost weekly phone calls."

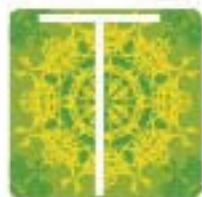
Speaking of his own child, he says, "My adopted son Marc is beginning to process the whole situation. I know one day he will realise what an impact he has had on so many people's lives the day he came into our life. I also know that his adoption story won't end like mine. But hopefully he will fully understand how much love and fun he has brought to those around him. I'm so glad I made that phone call to Lynette, 40 years after she gave birth to me." For all involved, it has turned out to be the right kind of surprise.

Religion

and

ADOPTION

Thinking of adopting? Three religious leaders share their views and their faiths' teachings on the issue.



The Children's Act states, "In all matters concerning the care, protection and well-being of a child, the standard that the child's best interest is of paramount importance must be applied."

This means providing a loving home and an education, but also teaching the child about their culture and religion. We asked three religious leaders for their advice on adoption. What makes these three leaders extra special as our expert panel is that they have all adopted children themselves.



Sheikh Abdurraghem Sallie

The way to understand adoption in Islam is to understand the story of Zayd bin Harithah*, the adopted son of our Prophet (SAW)*. This story serves as a lesson that no mother or

father has the right to give up their child for adoption to anyone, irrespective of their social or financial conditions.

If, however, the child is abandoned, as is often the case here in South Africa, then we as Muslims must step in and try to provide as best we can for such children, since the child is a brother or sister in the eyes of the Creator (as we are all children of Adam). In Islam, there are specific rules governing adoption:

- If the child is illegitimate, they must be known by their name and their mother's surname. The child is linked to the mother and her family by the surname. The child's maternal family is held responsible by Allah for their wellbeing. The same applies if the child is adopted and we do not know who the father is.

- If the child was born within a marriage and has family from both sides, then they must be known by their name and the surnames of both parents, but especially the father's. He and his family will be held accountable.
- If the child is adopted by a family member, then they child must be known by their name and their father's surname. They must know who their family is. It is a sin in Islam to break ties with members of one's family.
- If we do not know the child's parents at all, then they should be called our brothers and sisters in faith. We do whatever good we can for them as foster parents. If adoption is necessary because of a country's laws, then this legal route may be taken.

All of this explains why a Muslim family would not go to an adoption agency and enter a process of closed adoption (when the details of the birth parents are kept secret). As Sheikh Sallie explains, "Most Muslims go via the community grapevine for their [adoption] needs."

Let us assume that a Muslim couple does adopt a child via closed adoption. According to Islam, they are duty-bound to find out about the child's biological parents eventually. This is in order to cement family ties, and also to avoid someone marrying a blood relation that they did not know of. The child must be cared for and slowly guided towards the fact that they must go and look for their roots one day. Although the parents must stand by them and grant them every assistance, finding their roots is ultimately the child's duty.

* Visit our website to read the story of Zayd.

* *Sallallahu aleyhi wa salam* (Allah's blessings and peace be upon him).

USEFUL WEBSITES

- Private social workers facilitating adoption: www.adoption.co.za
 - Reconnecting children with birth mothers: www.adoptionreconnect.org
 - Parenting advice: www.parent24.com, www.muslimmums.co.za
- For more adoption resources, visit our blog www.treasure-yourself.blogspot.com