

I

Family, Obviously

This book is about how we weave a family, how we weave ourselves into the world through familial ties.

Mostly, that's the kind of thing people don't even notice. We just do it. We take our kids off to grandma's, drive six hours to wherever our sister lives with a quart of cranberry sauce for Thanksgiving, stop everything and do a bedside vigil when a mother-in-law is dying, wrap endless piles of gifts for our nieces and nephews for birthdays and Christmas or Chanukah or whatever potlatch we celebrate.

The ice-cream truck rings and the little children swarm to the street and cluster at the truck with their assigned grownup. Two kids and a woman with dusty jeans come out of one house, one kid and a guy with a dishtowel out of another, three and a woman with her hair tied back with a flowered scarf out of the third house down, a really little one carried by a woman with her shirt buttoned wrong out of the house next door.

Mostly we "read" these clusters as families. Or not. That woman with her hair tied back—she's black and the three kids are all blonde, their straight, wispy hair flying from matching

ponytail holders. Oh, that one's a nanny. A quick glance at them and we think we've "got" the story. And we probably do.

Victoria and I come out. She's about five years old. When the ice-cream guy turns to me I give her a look, her last chance to change her mind yet again, and then I order the weirdest, bluest thing he has, preferably with a bubblegum nose. He hands it to me, takes my two dollars, gives me my quarter back, and turns to Victoria: And what do you want? She looks at me, shakes her head and says, "I hate when that happens."

What happened was that we were not seen as a family. That wasn't actually my block I described—I don't think you could find three blonde kids on my block, in this decade. And my ice cream guy knows us. But that is the story of our lives together. We don't look like a family. I'm white, and Victoria is black. So we've learned, over the years, the little tricks we need, to make you see us as a family. I learned to stand behind her with my hand clearly on her shoulder when we rang the violin teacher's door. "Hello, I'm Barbara and this is my daughter Victoria," I say before the teacher can so much as open her mouth. And put her foot in it. I call Victoria "my daughter" like a newlywed on a fifties sitcom said "my husband." Often. With a big smile. Straight at you.

Victoria and I "do" family, "present" as family, the way that a transsexual does gender, presents as female. We're just doing what "normal" people do, but we *know* we're doing it.

I think of Agnes, a transsexual that Harold Garfinkel interviewed.¹ Garfinkel was an ethnomethodologist, developing an approach to sociology that tries to "unpack" how people get through everyday life. Part of how we do it is to explain ourselves to ourselves, construct narrative, make a coherent story—as I am doing in this book, making sense out of my life as a mother. Ethnomethodology, in this close look at the everyday, shows how we do ordinary things, how we make things seem

natural. Agnes did it with gender: she presented herself as a woman. But she did it with a man's body, and so for her it was a real accomplishment. But when you stop to think about what it is Agnes had to do—how she had to use her hands, angle her head, move her legs and eyebrows, how she had to *present* as a woman, you realize that's what women do too. Gender, Garfinkel was showing through Agnes's account, is a social accomplishment. It is an accomplishment for women doing "woman" as a performance, and it is for men doing "man," just as it is for those who are border-crossing. Garfinkel showed us that Agnes took the most taken-for-granted actions of daily life and made them obvious.

For those who are doing what they are expected to do, ordinary girls and women doing the expected gender stuff, the accomplishment is hidden, naturalized. Even we don't realize what we're doing most of the time. That doesn't mean we're not doing it. That doesn't mean that we can't recognize the things we do if you call them to our attention. It just means we don't have to think about it.

So it is with family. If you are an ordinary family, an expected family—a mama bear, papa bear and the little bear cubs born to your type of family—you don't think about presenting yourself. It just seems obvious. You don't think about how you construct the family, weave the relationships between the various parts, and present the seemingly solid fabric of your lives to the world.

But if you're a family like mine, a family that mixes race in unexpected ways, it's not obvious. If you're a family in which the mother's in a wheelchair that the kid is helping to push, you're going to have to make clear that you're a mother and her child. If you're a family that does different things with gender—two mothers or two fathers—then you're going to be called upon to account for yourselves. If you look old enough to be your kid's grandmother, or young enough to be her sister, you're

going to have to explain yourself. If you're not ordinary, you have to show just how ordinary a family you indeed are. That "ordinariness" is an accomplishment. You're going to be aware of what most people take for granted.

I've been raising kids for so long. More than half my life, and I'm not young. They're widely spaced, my kids—fifteen years between the youngest and the oldest—so here I am, three decades into motherhood, and I still have a kid, a child at home. And I'm a sociologist. So what with one thing and another, I've had time to think about it. And it's striking how much of what was ordinary, unquestioned, not really thought about with the first two, my white kids, had to be constructed more overtly, tenderly and lovingly and strategically, with the third, my black kid.

I've had other moments of marginality—we all do now and again. I brought Daniel with me to share the celebration when I was elected president of one of my professional associations. He was about twenty at the time. And I overheard a bit of gossip about what a young husband I had. I had to (or felt I had to) clarify that one. I can still remember this odd moment from my teens: I was with a boyfriend, and a kid came over and asked if I was his brother. I must have done the white girl hair-flip thing,² something to show I was a girl. I got pushed around in a wheelchair for a little while once, with a badly broken ankle, and saw how totally dismissed I was as any kind of real person—mother, worker, anything. Irving Kenneth Zola, the person who established "disability studies" within sociology, called me the day I got home from the hospital, and said, "Barbara, this is carrying participant observation altogether too far!" But actually it wasn't; it was just far enough. I learned what I needed to know.

Years ago, before I had adopted, I was at some meeting somewhere when a little black toddler darted out and was reaching up to pull on a tablecloth. I dashed over to keep him from pulling the table over on himself, and scanned the room. A white

woman was right there in front of me, but she didn't register—until she scooped up the baby, smiled at me, and said: "It's OK, it wasn't obvious."

I've used her line a million times since, and thank her for it.

When things are not what people expect, it's not obvious. And so you have to think about how to make obvious who you are, who you are with, what you are doing.

If you think about your life, there will undoubtedly be those little moments, sometimes comical and sometimes not, when you too were just a bit off-center and got a fresh glimpse of how the world works, because you had to *make* it work. If you step just an inch off "ordinary" family—the inch that adoption moves you, or the extra inch that an "obvious," transracial adoption gives you—you get a fresh angle on family.

Adoption is probably interesting enough in and of itself. As is race. As is motherhood. But what is so interesting to me is the way that putting these things together shows you ordinary, taken-for-granted, obvious stuff in American life.

We have race, and ethnicity, and community and family, and the nation and the global economy—but we mostly don't see them. We don't see ourselves establishing our place in the family, the world, the communities in the in-between levels. Take a kid from a Chinese orphanage and put it in a middle-class "Euro-descent" American home, and a lot of what parenthood is about in America is put into sharp relief. Take an African American kid and put it in a white home, and the same thing happens: you can see how race and family are put together in America. They're put together—race constructs family and family constructs race—when a black woman is raising a black child and when a white woman is raising a white child, but it's almost invisible. It's that water-to-a-fish thing. But move across that race line in your mothering, and the relationship between motherhood and race jumps right out at you.

Each person has a place in families and friendship groups and communities and ethnic groups and races and nationalities and the global economy. We have our place in those social systems when we are part of “ordinary All-American families” and when we are not. When we are not, we become very aware of how we fit ourselves in. We notice that we are *doing* what other people think they are just *being*.

Fitting in, finding your place, belonging: these are important to everybody. They’re crucial to kids. No kid wants to stick out, to “not belong.” I love *Sesame Street*; they did many, many good things. But they did screw up on one. There’s this song they sing:

*Three of these things belong together
Three of these things are kind of the same
Can you guess which one of these doesn’t belong here?
Now it’s time to play our game, time to play our game!*

In reading the literature of transracial adoption and of mixed-race families, and just plain hanging out with people who grew up on *Sesame Street*, I’ve heard more complaints about that song! All those little kids, identifying with the one that “doesn’t belong.” They tried to make it better, the *Sesame Street* people being far from stupid. When they sang about kids, they never said “doesn’t belong,” but “is doing his own thing.” That’s not what the now-grown kids I’ve been reading and listening to remember; they remember that the odd one out doesn’t “belong.”

We belong. Our kids by birth and by adoption belong. They belong to us, they belong right where they are, however they got there. Our families belong. We belong to the larger families and the communities we’re in—however we got there.

But it’s not obvious.