The Presence of Absence: Birth Mother Grief Beyond the Five Stages

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Grief after losing a child to adoption is often invisible, unacknowledged, and misunderstood. For decades, many birth/first parents tried to make sense of their pain through Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance). While these stages can offer language, they were never intended to describe the lifelong grief of losing someone to adoption. In fact, Kübler-Ross developed her model from studying people facing their own terminal illness, not people losing a loved one, and certainly not specifically for parents mourning the loss of a child. This disconnect often leaves birth/first parents wondering: "What's wrong with me? Why don't I fit into the stages of grief?"

In his book, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, J. William Worden, Ph.D., introduced a more appropriate framework for the bereaved, called The Four Tasks of Mourning (1982). Unlike linear stages, these tasks are flexible, lifelong processes that can and will be revisited again and again. For birth/first parents, grief in adoption loss, often feels like mourning the death of our child and is something we must grow the capacity to carry, not a process we finish. This is why Worden's model is especially powerful because it acknowledges grief as transformative, as opposed to prescriptive. Adoption is a relational loss that reshapes attachment, identity, and life trajectory and begins at placement.

This type of grief is liminal—a loss marked by uncertainty, ambiguity, and suspension. The child is not lost to death, yet is no longer present in the parents' daily life. The relationship is unseen, stigmatized, or minimized, leaving the birth/first parent without cultural scripts for mourning. Adoption grief is liminal because it has no clear endpoint: anniversaries, birthdays, and reunions can reopen it again and again.

The process of reconciling grief as a birth/first mother is further complicated by these undefined tasks feeling less like "achievable tasks" but as a fog—a blur of fear, obligation, and guilt/grief (FOG) that clouds their ability to see their loss and

themselves clearly. Emerging from this fog happens gradually, in phases, as awareness deepens. While this article will focus primarily on Worden's grief tasks, it is important to note that for many birth/first parents, the Tasks of Mourning unfold inside, and sometimes in tension with, the FOG Fazes and the liminal nature of adoption loss.

Grief after death and grief after adoption share some similarities: both involve mourning a profound separation, both bring waves of longing and sorrow, and both can alter a person's identity and worldview. However, they differ in crucial ways: Liminal loss is about living in a place of presence vs. absence. In death, the person is gone. The grief centers around permanent absence. In adoption, the child is alive but absent, which means the parent is suspended in an "in-between" state—always wondering, imagining, and hoping. Death has rituals (funerals, obituaries, anniversaries) that validate grief. Adoption loss is often hidden or minimized, leaving birth/first parents with no socially accepted way to mourn. With death, holidays or anniversaries may reopen grief. With adoption, grief can be triggered by ordinary milestones: the first day of school, graduations, or even seeing a child who is around the same age as the lost child. The wound is repeatedly touched by the ongoing reality of the child's life apart from the parent. Society generally allows compassion for the bereaved parent. In adoption, society imposes narratives of "choice," "selflessness," or "moving on," which silence the grieving parent and add layers of shame. Death takes away someone we love; adoption asks a parent to continue living with a split identity—they are a parent, yet not parenting. This paradox defines liminal loss. Understanding adoption grief as a form of liminal loss helps explain why Worden's tasks are so essential, but also why they must be adapted. Birth/first parents do not complete these tasks and move on—they are expanded by them as they revisit them across a lifetime.

Task I: Accept the Reality of the Loss

Worden's first task of mourning is to accept the reality of the loss. Mourners who have not completed this task might find themselves talking about their loved ones in the past tense and recognizing that they're gone, but still minimizing the importance of the relationship, as if that will make the grief easier. This acceptance is about facing the truth of how much the lost person meant to you. In reality, this task isn't fully complete until you can acknowledge both the depth of the relationship and the correlating impact of their absence in your life (Worden, 2009).

When we examine look at adoption loss, the contours of this task remain, but they take on a unique shape. Like death, adoption involves absence but unlike death it also involves presence. It is further complicated by secrecy, shame, and cultural denial.

Where society tends to affirm grief after death, birth/first parents are frequently pressured to "move on" or frame adoption as a gift, making honest acknowledgment of the loss even harder. Acceptance here is not a single moment or decision; it is a repeated reckoning with reality. Birth/first parents often cycle through numbness, disbelief, or minimization, telling themselves, "Maybe it's not as bad as it feels." Yet grief in adoption requires the same dual acknowledgment—intellectual and emotional—that the child is no longer present in their daily life. This process may involve telling and retelling the adoption story—sometimes to the point of repetition—as a way to find language to describe an experience that feels unbearable in order to gradually make sense of what happened. For some, it leads to research, writing, or creative outlets that give language to what feels unspeakable. For others, it means slowly working through secrecy and shame to find safe spaces for truth-telling.

For many, this experiential task overlaps with early FOG Fazes such as Disengaging, Denying, and Defending — which serve as protective strategies that allow a birth/first mother to survive the initial trauma of relinquishment. Some disengage so deeply that they detach even from their pregnancy, convincing themselves they are carrying a baby "for someone else," or acting as a surrogate. Others defend their adoption decision by clinging to cultural or religious narratives, such as the idea of adoption being a selfless act that gives the child opportunities the birth/first parent might not have been able to provide, such as a two-parent home or abundant financial resources. In contrast, others see adoption as a divinely ordained plan of God where the birth/first parent is "meant" to carry the child for the parents that were deemed worthy to raise them.

Over time, as birth/first parents begin to face the deeper truth of their loss, acceptance expands beyond the intellectual awareness that their child was placed for adoption. It also involves dismantling the cultural and religious messages they've been given about what that loss 'should' mean. In this process, birth/first parents begin to gather new information, integrate their lived experiences, and give themselves permission to grieve without erasing their identity as mother or father. Acceptance, then, is not about abandoning that identity, but about finding honest ways to carry both the reality of the loss and the truth of the bond that remains.

The complexities of moving through this task increased because of the liminality in adoption loss - the "in betweenness," neither fully included nor fully excluded, both parent and not parent. In this way, acceptance for a birth/first parent never feels complete. Unlike death, where the reality of absence can eventually be absorbed, adoption grief forces birth/first parents to live in the tension of "my child is alive, but

not with me" – it's the presence of absence and the absence of presence that we must learn to accept the reality of the loss.

Task II: Process the Pain of Grief

Worden's second task is about allowing yourself to actually feel the pain of the loss — all of it. Grief can show up as sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, numbness, or even relief, and every one of those emotions has a place. The trouble is, our culture teaches us to avoid pain or to "stay strong," but that only pushes the hurt deeper. When we refuse to face what we feel, the grief doesn't go away — it just waits and resurfaces later, often as depression, physical illness, addiction, or the kind of complicated grief that keeps us stuck. It's only by allowing the pain into our lives, as raw and uncomfortable as it is, that healing can actually begin.

Adoption loss is not "clean grief." It is layered with trauma, stigma, relief, guilt, shame, anger, love, and longing—all of which can coexist. Birth/first parents often fear that if they open themselves to grief, they will drown in it – FOG Faze #6. Society reinforces this avoidance, offering distraction (you'll go on to have your "own" children) but rarely permission to grieve. Processing grief means allowing oneself to feel it—in waves, with support, and with recognition that it may return unexpectedly across the lifespan. This can take many forms: crying or raging when the feelings rise to the surface, finding expression through writing or creative outlets, seeking therapy with someone who is adoption-competent, or leaning on the support of other birth/first parents who can bear witness with compassion and without judgment.

Here, the body and nervous system react strongly. The task is about allowing our nervous system to be in charge of discharging the physical pain associated with grief. Birth/first parents may feel like they are "falling into the abyss," terrified that the pain will consume them. This step often corresponds with the FOG phases of Deconstructing and Drowning—when the positive adoption narrative unravels and the full weight of grief, trauma, and regret breaks through. Due to the liminality of adoption loss, the pain resurfaces repeatedly: at milestones, holidays, other new losses, when others minimize their parenthood, or when society insists they "move on." Liminal loss means there is no closure, only recurring waves that require radical empathy and space to process. As we face the pain of the grief, our capacity to hold the grief and manage our day-to-day lives grows as well. The more we avoid the pain, the greater our grief grows as opposed to allowing it to flow through us, growing our capacity to exist with it.

Task III: Adjust to a World Without Your Child

Worden's original third task is to “Adjust to a world without the deceased.” Loss asks us to adjust in more ways than we usually expect. There are the *external shifts* — the practical aspects like taking on new roles, managing money, and establishing daily routines. Then there are the *internal shifts* — the identity questions, the “Who am I now without them?” that can feel unsettling and raw. And finally, there are the *spiritual shifts*— the way loss forces us to re-examine what we believe about the world, about ourselves, and about meaning. These layers of adjustment matter because loss doesn’t just change what our days look like; it reshapes who we are. Finding a way to live into these changes is part of what makes resilience possible.

This task is not about “moving on,” post-adoption, but about adapting to a profoundly changed identity and reality. Birth/first parents must learn to live their daily lives without the presence of their child, adjusting externally to routines and experiences that do not include daily parenting, while simultaneously having the experience of being a biological parent. Internally, they face the painful work of reshaping their identity—from mother or father actively nurturing a child to being a birth/first parent whose parenthood exists in a different, often unrecognized form. Spiritually and emotionally, they are challenged to rediscover meaning, belonging, and direction in a life permanently altered by relinquishment.

Many birth/first parents struggle with pressure to appear “put together” while internally unraveling. They may hear, “You made your choice, now live with it.” But adoption is not a moment in time—it is a permanent shift that requires continual adaptation. With no cultural blueprint, misunderstandings and mismatched expectations are common among those impacted by adoption. Trust must be built slowly. For some, this task begins in the Developing phase of the FOG Fazes model—when a birth/first mother reclaims the truth that the child she lost is her own child and begins to shed shame-based roles (like “hero” or “harlot”). This shift in identity development can feel threatening to adoptive parents if their parental identities were contingent on the birth/first parent’s loss of identity.

Open adoption does not mitigate the losses associated with relinquishing a child for adoption. Similarly, having a reunion with an adult child lost to adoption does not heal the grief of the previous years lost. Forging a relationship with your relinquished child, who you did not parent, will not have the ingredients necessary to feel like a typical adult-child/parent relationship. The relationship between the two must be able to hold the space of continual shifts in identity formation in both the birth parent and the relinquished child.

Because adoption is a liminal loss, these adjustments are never “completed.” A birth/first parent may appear adjusted in one season and then find themselves undone

in another. The adjustments must be continually renegotiated across a lifetime. As the birth/first parent continues to successfully navigate various milestones, they gain greater capacity to experience the suspended state they find themselves in time and time again. This task does not necessarily become “easier”; instead, we must become better at navigating it.

Task IV: Find an Enduring Connection While Moving Forward

Worden’s final task describes the transformation that comes with grief; finding an enduring connection with what you’ve lost is about learning how to carry it with you while still moving forward in life. It’s not about “letting go” — that phrase misses the truth of grief. Instead, it’s about weaving the love, the memories, and even the lessons into the fabric of your life in a way that feels real. That might look like honoring traditions, carrying forward values, or simply remembering with love. When we don’t do this, we risk swinging to extremes — either feeling guilty for living fully or shutting down memories altogether. Both of those block healing. The task is to hold on in a new way that lets life keep unfolding.

Adoption does not permanently sever the parent-child bond—it reshapes it. Birth/first parents often find that their child is always present: in memories, anniversaries, dreams, songs, smells, or reunions. This task is not about “closure.” Closure is a myth in adoption. Instead, it is about weaving the child into one’s ongoing life while still cultivating one’s own growth, relationships, and future. For some, this enduring connection is symbolic (rituals, letters never sent, storytelling). For others, it is relational (open adoption, reunion, or contact in adulthood). Either way, the goal is not forgetting but integrating: carrying the love and loss together while still moving forward. This is often like navigating a wedding and a funeral, simultaneously.

This resonates with the final FOG Faze of Deciding—the moment a birth/first mother embraces a more integrated identity that includes her motherhood, forgives herself, and chooses to live with clarity and peace. Liminal loss means the connection can never be fully resolved: the child is present and absent at once, held in memory, imagination, and—sometimes—relationship, but it is an altered relationship. The task is not to “move on,” but to live with the paradox of presence and absence.

In conclusion, Worden emphasized that grief has no timeline. For birth/first parents, these tasks do not unfold over months or years but across a lifetime. They are not boxes to check—they are movements, cycles, and returns.

The FOG Fazes remind us that before a birth/first mother can fully engage the tasks of mourning, she must often navigate the disorienting fog of fear, obligation, and guilt. The concept of liminal loss reminds us why this grief is uniquely difficult: it is suspended, ambiguous, and socially unrecognized.

In this way, the Tasks of Mourning, the FOG Fazes, and the lens of liminal loss are complementary. Together, they give language to the universal and adoption-specific layers of birth/first parent grief.

Progress is not about "finishing grief." It is about noticing movement—sometimes forward, sometimes backward, sometimes sideways. Even the most miner shift is worth honoring. Birth/first parent grief is lifelong. But with time, gentleness, and support, these tasks—and the courage to walk through the fog of fear, obligation and guilt/grief and the liminal in-betweenness—can help transform a raw wound into an integrated scar: always part of the self, but no longer the whole story. Together, they remind us there is no wrong way to grieve—only the ongoing work of reclaiming one's authentic self as a parent.