**MONDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2014**

[Home is Where Your Story Lives: Giving and Receiving Narratives of Origin by guest author M. Anne Cunney](http://www.thelostdaughters.com/2014/12/home-is-where-your-story-lives-giving.html)

As we move from November National Adoption Month, into the final month of December it might be a good time to consider that this has been the global year of orphaned and homeless children. *UNICEF has just declared 2014 to be one of the most devastating for children on record.*  Up to 15 million have been displaced, driven from their homelands or having lost their families in the Syrian War, the Gaza/Israeli and Ukraine conflicts. This also includes the Central American refugee children at our borders, the now ostracized Ebola orphans of West Africa, as well as many others across the planet.

All of these children will be forever marked by their abandonment and displacement.

I am, myself a once-abandoned child. Now in my sixties, finishing my masters in the [Narrative Medicine Program](http://ce.columbia.edu/narrative-medicine) at Columbia University, I have come to realize how essential giving and receiving a personal story of origin is to finding a sense of both self and home.

As a child I never allowed myself to imagine where I came from or who my birth parents might be. Only after my “life” mother’s death did I feel free to explore my own story of origin.

I recently learned that at birth I was immediately placed in a children’s home for six months. The adoption agency report I received contained details that had been unknown to me, allowing me to piece together that precious period of infancy and to begin to imagine my story of origin.

On the first page the report notes that during the initial interview with my birth mother “she used gestures while talking and appeared to be a ‘typical French girl.’ She was high strung, nervous and very proud, it was difficult for her to accept assistance.” I now can picture her to have been both conflicted and courageous.

After my birth, during those first formative months of life, it was recorded that  “you kissed your caretaker on the cheek, you laughed to yourself and hummed a sleepy song when you were in bed at night.” In my aloneness I sought solace, trying to establish safety, trust and connectivity, essential experiences that influence an individual for life. With these details I could begin to imagine what I experienced.

Arthur W. Frank wrote in *The Wounded Storyteller* that “to experience we have to imagine; imagination is conscious struggling to gain sovereignty over experience.” Imagining one’s story of origin and the benefit that comes from being able to share this story led me to explore how abandonment has been imagined, or represented throughout literature, which is replete with stories of orphans and the displaced.

Seeming to reflect my own experience, Charlotte Brontë writes about the effects of abandonment on orphan Jane, in *Jane Eyre*: “To this crib I always took my doll; human beings must love something, and, in the dearth of worthier objects of affection, I contrived to find a pleasure in loving and cherishing a faded graven image, shabby as a miniature scarecrow.”

An historic example of the results of refugee displacement is captured in the story of the Hmong, a tribe of China, oppressed and driven from their homelands time and again for centuries. In *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* by Anne Fadiman, she explains their amazing gift for maintaining their own culture while living within cultures that both reject them and yet expect their assimilation.

Throughout Hmong folktales there is the recurring character of the Orphan, a young man whose parents have died, leaving him alone to live by his wits. Symbolic of the Hmong’s ancient struggle, the Orphan lives on the margins of society, reviled by others, yet ultimately succeeding in the community.

The importance of belonging and connecting with others is central to the discipline of Narrative Medicine. Giving one’s self to another by encouraging them to tell their story and being there to listen is referred to as the giving and receiving of story, as we must acknowledge the value we too receive as listeners. Gabriel Marcel stated this beautifully in *Mystery of Being*:

“When somebody’s presence does really make itself felt, it can refresh my inner being; it reveals me to myself, it makes me more fully myself than I should be if I were not exposed to its impact.”

Returning to our origins, to our homes, is a central part of life for many, but what about those for whom home and origin are only a memory, now only an imagined or re-imagined place? Perhaps one of the most important things we can offer anyone abandoned or displaced is to truly listen to their story and to provide them the connection with others that establishes a sense of self and home.