

Marci Karplus/2018

We are in the fifth week of our memoir writing class. I turn to the woman sitting next to me and sheepishly confess that I do not remember her name. "Barbara". How can I forget her name? She looks like a Barbara: with black wavy hair and a warm open smile.

Maybe because this is a "memoir" writing class, my mind plunges back to my childhood in post-War Seattle. I am five years old and my parents take in three foster children who the priest has described as "unwanted". To our already full household is added an adorable toddler who can barely walk, her wide-eyed four-year-old brother who literally utters not a word for the first six months, and their older sister Barbara, standing tall with grown-up dignity despite her nine years of age.

I already had two older siblings, and I had acquired the designation of the perpetually annoying little sister, a pain-in-the-ass in any given activity. Maybe Barbara treated her younger siblings in a similar vein. But between Barbara and me a different refreshing relationship unfolded. I loved her.

A year and a half later, Barbara and her younger brother and sister were reclaimed by a relative. I sobbed as I climbed into my bunkbed that night. My family lost contact with these three children: the rules of the foster agency did not allow continued interaction. I would never see Barbara again.

We did not have a name for it in the 1950's. I recently realized we were a "biracial family" at a time and place where everyone in the community was Caucasian and by-&-large refused to allow, let alone welcome, others who were not white. The camera shows us as we were: three tow-heads and three Native American Indians all jumbled up either wearing dungaries out in the backyard playing at the swing-set or standing side-by-side dressed in our Easter finery.

My parents swore they would never again take in foster children because they could not bear the pain of losing them. All three of these children held an indelible place as members of our family. A few years after their departure, my parents by chance ran into their case worker who informed them that the youngest, the toddler, was up for adoption. We were able to formally legally include her permanently as part of our family. Barbara remains in my heart as the lost sister.