Leah L. Culler, an adoptee (adopted person, if you prefer), is a writer and editor living in Washington, D.C. She is fascinated by the effects adoption can have on individuals and their relationships and loves learning about other people’s ties to adoption.

I started to think about the words we use to describe adoption and the parties involved at a pretty young age. When friends would learn I was adopted, they would often naively ask things like: “Do you know anything about your real parents?” I always found that choice of words strange, and my response was always along these lines: “My real parents are the parents who raised me and fed me and taught me about right and wrong. There is nothing fake or unreal about them.”

Of course, my biological parents are every bit as real as the parents who raised me. They played an essential role in who I am because they created me. But when I refer to my parents, I always mean my adoptive parents. They are the only parents I have ever known as parents.

I know my birth mother now, and I have a friendship with her. I would never call her mom, but I sometimes wonder how I should refer to her. I choose to use her name, and I refer to her as my biological mother or birth mother when telling others about her. It’s tricky for her, as well. When people ask her how many kids she has, she’s always had an answer — does that answer change now that I’ve re-entered her life after all these years? When her nieces and nephews ask how I’m related to them, what does she say?

I have friends who have reunited with biological family members and feel closer to those people than the people who raised them. That’s certainly not uncommon. And if it feels natural and comfortable for that son to call his biological mother “Mom,” then he by all means should.

Family is always complicated. Adoption creates a unique challenge when it comes to language, but there is no right answer. We should use the words that feel comfortable to us and to the people with whom we have formed relationships.

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“Who are you?”

“I’m — her daughter.” I waved my hand at my mom’s immobile body. Duh I thought.

“I don’t think so,” she said.

My eyebrows shot up. Who was this woman?

“How in the world are you related to her?” She came closer to the edge of the bed squinting at me.

“I was adopted,” I replied.

“Ohhhh,” she said. She cocked her head to the side. “From where?”

“Korea,” I said flatly.

“Korea! Humm. So, you must want to search for your real mom huh?” she asked.

In normal circumstances, I hated that question. But this was ridiculous. My mother was lying right there. Right there. I wanted to spit on the ground (just for dramatic effect) and give a long-winded speech. I’d tell her it was none of her God-damned business if I wanted to search. I’d scoff, saying that the notion of a birth family search was the most clichéd and disgusting glamorized rendition of the only problem adoptees had to face. And that if she had to know — I was not one of those adoptees claiming that if I found my birth mother, I would find me. Bullshit.

But mostly, I wanted to tell her that I was so sick and tired of justifying my right to be my mother’s daughter. So what — I didn’t look like my mother. Right now, all that mattered was that my mother knew that she would be the only mother to me.

In the past and in the future, I’d do things to try to reclaim that sense of lost ness. But one thing I would not do — was search for my birth mother or refer to her as my adoptive mother. My mother was lying right there. Right in front of me. I could touch her. She chose me and now I chose her as the only “real” mother I wanted to know.