

*Adoption and Loss - The Hidden Grief*

by

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Introduction

Although I have lived in Australia for almost twenty years, I am actually Scottish. I consider myself, in fact, an adopted Australian. Australia is my home but I have no Australian blood. Australian history is not the history of my people. My heritage and my ancestors lie in the hills of Aberdeenshire.

I am also a mother who lost my first child through adoption. His name is Stephen and he was born in Edinburgh in 1970. I should like to make it clear that Stephen has been very supportive of everything that I have done in the adoption area, especially of my book. In my book ("Adoption and Loss - The Hidden Grief") I have told the story of my experience of becoming pregnant and losing my son through adoption and of the impact of that experience on my life. As a result of that experience, I found myself, in 1989 joining a support group in South Australia for mothers separated from their children by adoption. Since that time I have spoken with hundreds of mothers who also lost their children through adoption. In writing my book I drew on not only my own experience, but also on the experiences of the many women I had encountered over the years. Because of my own experience and the voluntary work that I did with this support group for many years, I decided to pursue a career in the counselling field. I returned to study in 1995 and completed a post-graduate degree in social work. Throughout my professional studies, I focussed as much as I could on grief and loss issues and how these applied to adoption. In my book I have also described my research from a social work perspective into the impact of adoption on people's lives. Towards the end of my book I describe my views on adoption and my vision for a future without adoption.

For these three reasons, my personal experience, my experience for twelve years as a member of an adoption support group and my professional experience as a social worker and author, I feel that my opinions on adoption deserve to be taken seriously. Adoption is a subject that stirs up a great deal of emotion. I am angry at the hurt that has been caused by adoption, but I am not bitter. Anger can be a positive and productive emotion. Bitterness is only negative and destructive.

The naming of those whose lives have been affected by adoption often causes difficulties. My belief is that it is not the names that are used that are of greatest importance, but rather the views and the intentions behind the terminology. The words that I use and my comments on adoption are not intended to demean or to offend anyone. I am here to present my personal opinion on adoption loss and grief in the hope that it will be of interest to you.

Before an adoption takes place, a child and his or her family of origin are separated from each other. This separation means that losses are experienced. Adoption is based on loss and grief is the emotion that we expect to follow loss. My main focus has always been the grief experienced by mothers who have lost children through adoption, although I have also explored to some extent the losses experienced by adopted people. Much of what I believe about the nature of the grief experienced by mothers applies also to adopted people, as the losses resulting from being separated from their families and being issued with a replacement birth certificate have also traditionally not been acknowledged or understood. I do not address the loss associated with infertility, which is an issue for some adoptive parents, as this is not a loss which is caused by adoption.

I originally became interested in the concept of disenfranchised grief and started to explore how it might apply to adoption. From there I came to form a view of adoption as a whole. I was impressed by this quotation in a book called "A Burnt-Out Case" by Graham Greene. A

character says, "I discovered what seemed only to be a loose thread in my jacket - I pulled it and all the jacket began to unwind". That is what happened when I began by exploring disenfranchised grief in adoption. Eventually, the whole of adoption began to unravel.

### Adoption and disenfranchised grief

What does adoption mean to those involved? Traditionally adoption has been seen as a tidy solution to everyone's problems, which suits all of those involved. However, many people are now beginning to view adoption quite differently. It is now felt that by creating a replacement birth certificate for a child, we are saying that we do not value that child's actual heritage and identity. Otherwise how could we erase them with an adoption order? In this, the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have learned to value each individual, regardless of gender, race, sexuality or disability and so how is it that we still fail to value people's origins? Every time we allow a child to be adopted we are saying to that child that his or her heritage is so insignificant that we are happy to wipe it out completely so that it has no legal standing whatsoever.

Whenever we allow a child to be adopted we are also saying to the parents of that child that we do not value their parenthood, because we are willing to eliminate their role and to provide their child with a new birth certificate, which allows the false assumption that they as parents did not exist. Most children have grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and often siblings. Adoption denies that those relationships exist. The denial involved in adoption devalues the entire family of origin. This is an insult to the child, to the parents of the child and to all other family members. How could we expect people not to be deeply hurt by such an experience?

Adoption creates a permanent legal separation within a family. When family members are separated from each other in this way, they are lost to each other. You cannot have adoption without loss. Grief is not only the expected response to a loss, it is also a positive and beneficial response, because grieving allows us to process our loss. Community education programmes are vital, to highlight adoption loss and grief issues and to increase understanding and awareness of the need for adoption-related support services. We expect those who have lost a family member to grieve that loss and community support is generally provided for that grief. Because of the lack of community understanding of the grief which follows adoption loss, however, there has been an unfortunate lack of community support for adoption-related grief. The secrecy and denial involved in adoption have contributed to the difficulties in resolving adoption-related grief. A lifetime shadowed by sadness is actually exactly what one would expect for someone whose life has been affected by adoption. For too long, however, those seeking help have been made to feel inadequate and have been labelled as having made a "poor adjustment" to their situation. In fact, they are the fortunate ones who are approaching the issue with openness and honesty and are already on the path to healing because of their awareness.

Although obviously each case is unique, some general conclusions can be drawn from the various studies which have been undertaken on the outcomes for mothers who have lost children through adoption. Most of you are probably familiar with Dr Condon's study of mothers in South Australia and with Winkler and van Keppel's study of mothers Australia-wide. They found that, in the majority of cases, mothers reported that their anger and sense of loss actually increased over time. I found that very interesting because it seemed to contradict community expectations of the process of grief. When we suffer other types of losses in our lives, the sadness generally decreases as time goes by, which is why people talk about time being such a great healer.

It seems that the grief which results from adoption loss more often follows a pattern which is the exact opposite of what one might expect in the case of other losses. I have reached certain conclusions on the grief associated with adoption loss, based on my own experience, the experiences of the women I have encountered and the books on grief and grief counselling which I have read. It became obvious to me that the common models of grief counselling would not work with mothers who had lost children through adoption. I concluded that the grief resulting from the loss of a child through adoption was fundamentally different from other types of grief.

I explored grief associated with abortion, with stillbirth and neo-natal death and with loss of custody. Although there were some similarities, it seemed that adoption grief was unique. I read a book called "Disenfranchised Grief" edited by Kenneth Doka. His description of disenfranchised grief was very interesting, but nowhere in his book is there any mention of the grief experienced by mothers who have lost children through adoption. I decided to apply Doka's definition of disenfranchised grief and see if it fitted with what I already knew about adoption grief. Doka says that grief is disenfranchised when the grief is connected with a loss which cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported. He also says that in many cases of disenfranchised grief, the relationship is not recognised, the loss is not recognised or the griever is not recognised.

The loss of a child through adoption is usually a loss which cannot be openly acknowledged, which is why mothers often suffer in silence. Losing a child through adoption is seldom publicly mourned because everyone is so busy pretending that it has not happened and it certainly is not socially supported. Traditionally, community support has been very much in favour of adoption.

Doka says that people who have experienced any type of loss often feel anger, guilt, sadness, depression, hopelessness and numbness and that in cases of disenfranchised grief, these feelings can persist for a very long time. Doka states that mourners whose grief is disenfranchised are by virtue of this cut off from social supports and so have few opportunities to express and resolve their grief and that the result can be that they feel alienated from their community. Doka also says that the lack of recognition of their grief often results in them holding on to it more tenaciously than they might otherwise have done. All of that sounded very familiar to me.

Everything that I read about adoption loss from then on was informed by my conviction that the grief resulting from adoption loss was disenfranchised. I read about the role of ritual in assisting productive grieving and the purposes of funeral rites. These include; announcing the death, recognising the place which the dead person held in society, assisting the bereaved through the process of grief, delimiting the period of mourning, allowing the grievers to express their emotions publicly and allowing the members of the community to gather to support each other. Rituals provide the bereaved with a very public opportunity to grieve.

There is no formal ritual surrounding an adoption loss. There is usually no public announcement by the mother of either the birth or the loss of the child; far from it. In many cases the intention was to keep that information from as many people as possible. There is no recognition of the place which the child held in society, because the child who was born becomes a non-existent person after adoption. Once the new birth certificate is issued, that original child has no place in society because society denies that child's existence. Generally, no one assisted the mother through the process of grief. Most mothers were not allowed to express their emotions publicly. They had to hide their feelings after the birth as they had learned to hide them throughout their pregnancies. In the case of adoption the community usually does not gather round the person who is grieving; in fact they often avoid her. There is no public outpouring of grief. There are usually no photographs, no mementoes. For mothers who lost children through adoption there were no rituals to facilitate their grieving and to provide limits to the period of mourning.

I read about intrapsychic disenfranchisement. This occurs when the mourner feels responsible for the loss and it results in feelings of shame and guilt. Because of their sense of guilt and responsibility, many mothers who lost children through adoption disenfranchised their own grief. This resulted in them feeling that they were not as good as other mothers. They felt that they were not entitled to grieve and so they suppressed their grief. As a result they cut themselves off from some possible sources of support.

I read about the role of silence in grief suppression. In many cases of adoption loss, the pregnancy was hidden and so silence was inevitable. In other cases, people knew about the baby, but it seemed as if the whole of society was part of a conspiracy of silence, with everyone pretending that it had not happened. The fact that adopted children were issued with a second birth certificate which denied the existence of their original mothers only added to the communal denial of their experience. Mothers often joined this conspiracy of silence

because they interpreted this community silence as disapproval. They did not feel that it would be safe to express their grief. They felt betrayed; betrayed by a society which told them to be unselfish and give their children away for their own good and then made them feel ashamed of it afterwards.

Mothers who have lost children through adoption were never given permission to grieve. It is not surprising then that so many of them come to feel that they have never quite regained their equilibrium. I believe that all of this explains why mothers tend, in the main, to report that their sadness and anger have increased with time. Taking into account everything that we know about grief, that is to be expected. They have been denied every opportunity to perform grief work because their grief has been disenfranchised by society.

What are the outcomes of this for mothers who have lost children through adoption? They experience the same outcomes as other people whose grief is disenfranchised and suppressed. They become depressed, they have low self-esteem, they develop emotional disturbances and sometimes physical illnesses. Sometimes they withdraw from society or succumb to substance abuse. Sometimes they have difficulty forming healthy relationships. Their grieving often becomes chronic. They usually have difficulty dealing with subsequent losses, because they did not learn how to grieve productively in what for most of them was the first major loss in their lives and so they simply do not know how to do it. This means that when they experience other losses in their lives, they tend to repeat the pattern of behaviour that they learned at the time of the loss of their children and suppress their grief again.

While silence and secrecy are probably less significant for mothers of younger children who were adopted in more recent times, for them the stigma associated with having allowed their children to be adopted is more of an issue than the stigma associated with having become pregnant while unmarried. Because they lost their children in a social climate which is so much more tolerant of single parenthood, they tend to be held largely responsible by society for allowing the adoption to take place and so as well as feeling guilty and socially alienated for that reason, they also feel that they are not entitled to grieve. Because others usually consider them to be responsible for the separation from their child, they are not expected to grieve and so their grief also is often not openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported. As with the mothers of older children, their grief is invalidated if they are told that they have done the right thing.

For adopted people, adoption has usually been presented as an event for which they should be grateful and it is difficult for many people to acknowledge that losses are experienced by a child who is adopted. Because the child may have no memory of the separation from his or her family of origin, this does not necessarily mean that the child has not suffered as a result. Many parents and children who have been separated by adoption are still suffering because they have endured a grievous loss in their lives which has not been acknowledged. Often they also feel guilty and inadequate because they have not resolved their grief. The central issue in dealing with disenfranchised grief is to validate the loss. Family members who have been separated by adoption need their loss to be validated and their grief to be acknowledged.

#### Access to adoption information

There is no justification for preventing those who have been affected by an adoption from receiving the relevant information regarding their family members. An adoption is a legal arrangement. It does not change the actual relationships between people, only the legal rights and responsibilities. If a couple marry and have a child, for example and then divorce, the legal arrangement of the marriage no longer exists but, regardless of that, each party to the marriage is still a parent to the child. Likewise, when an adoption takes place, the legal rights and responsibilities are transferred from one set of parents to another but the actual relationships between the parents and the child cannot be altered. Natural parents lost the right to raise their children to adulthood; they did not lose the right to know their children, to love their children and to offer their children the priceless gift that absolutely no one else can offer them - the gift of knowing the people who gave them life.

Not allowing those affected by adoption to obtain information which will assist them to heal goes against my ethics and values as a social worker. Such legislation perpetuates the shame and secrecy which have clung to adoption over the years and supports on-going denial of the truth and suppression of emotions. As a social worker, I realise that such suppression and denial cannot possibly be in anyone's best interests. Legislation which supports people to avoid reality and prevents healing is, for me, ethically insupportable. It is my view that a reunion is always beneficial to both mother and child, as it allows them to confront the reality of their loss and is a very important step towards addressing their grief.

I find it very disappointing that in countries outside of Australia, I hear so little of any achievements in gaining access to adoption information for natural parents. I find that very difficult to understand. After all, the woman who is the mother of the child who is adopted will always be that child's mother, regardless of whether or not she assumes the legal rights and responsibilities of a parent and actually raises the child. Likewise the father of the child will always be the father of the child, regardless of whether or not he is able or willing to acknowledge that fact. Parental rights and responsibilities end when a child becomes an adult. Not allowing parents like me access to information about our adult, adopted children is patronising and insulting. It implies that we are not to be trusted with such information and are not morally entitled to it. In no other area of life is such basic information withheld from adults who are innocent of any crime. It is a punitive and outrageous state of affairs and unnecessarily intrusive. We were considered to be sensible and responsible enough to sign an adoption consent and relinquish all legal rights and responsibilities towards our children. At that time, many of us were young and inexperienced. Two decades later, when our children have reached adulthood and we are more mature and experienced, we deserve to be allowed to make our own choices about our relationships with our adult children. Adopted adults and their original parents should have the right to make choices and decisions regarding their relationships in exactly the same way that the rest of the population does.

I live in South Australia which has a population of about two million people. South Australia is the only state in Australia which was established by free settlers and not by convict labour. South Australia was the first state in Australia to grant women the vote and, in 1988, the first state in Australia to grant adopted adults and their natural parents equal access to adoption information. Adoption legislation in Australia is different in each state, but the various Adoption Acts are very similar. Every other state except one has followed South Australia's lead in allowing equal access to adoption records to adopted adults and their natural parents. As our current legislation has been in operation now for thirteen years, I think we are safe in saying that overall it has been a very positive move. When these changes were being considered, however, there was some scaremongering and suggestions that mothers would be deterred from consenting to adoption if they could not be assured lifelong confidentiality and that instead of agreeing to adoption, they would simply abandon their babies. Of course, this has not happened. Whatever other fears some people had when the legislation was changed have also not been realised.

In South Australia, when adopted children reach the age of 18 years, they are able to access all documents pertaining to their adoption, including the names and addresses of their original parents at the time of the adoption and the name that they were originally given. At the same time, natural parents are allowed to obtain all documents pertaining to the adoption of their children, including the new name given to their child after the adoption and the names and address of the adoptive parents when the adoption took place. For most people, I believe, it is self-evident that both adopted adults and their natural parents are morally entitled to access to their adoption information. The nature of current adoption legislation in South Australia indicates that there is a general acceptance in the community that it is an expected outcome of an adoption that there may eventually be a reunion between the separated parties. Regardless of whether or not legal access to information exists, however, family members who have been separated by adoption are frequently being reunited with each other.

### Grief and reunion



As a social work student, I studied various models of grief counselling. Worden's book, "Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy" is a fairly representative example. Worden says that grieving is necessary in order to re-establish equilibrium. The necessary components of grief work, according to Worden, are a series of tasks. The first is to accept the reality of the loss, the second is to experience the pain of grief, the third to adjust to the environment from which the lost person is missing and the fourth to withdraw emotional energy and reinvest it in another relationship. According to Worden, grief becomes repressed or delayed when there are no opportunities to perform these tasks. It is my view that this is exactly what has happened in adoption separations. The grief has been repressed because there has been no opportunity to perform the necessary grief work. Reunion provides that opportunity. Reunion is vitally important in assisting mothers and adopted adults to deal with their grief.

Mothers separated from their children by adoption have been unable to perform Worden's first task, to accept the reality of their loss, because they have no concrete focus for their grief. Many of them never saw their child, never held their child, never named their child; they received no birth certificate to prove that their child had really been born. In cases of stillbirth and neo-natal death, bonding is now actively encouraged, in order to facilitate the grieving process. In many cases where a child was to be adopted, however, deliberate efforts were made to prevent bonding. Even in cases where the mother has had contact with the child, the loss that she experiences is the loss of an unknown and undefined future relationship with her child. For a mother who has lost a child through adoption, there is also no finality to her loss. As far as she is aware, her child is still alive. Her loss is shrouded in uncertainty and ignorance. There is a clear similarity between women who have lost children through adoption and relatives of those missing in action during wartime. In both cases the lack of finality can cause disabling chronic grief reactions. Although reunion is hopefully the start of an on-going relationship, it also provides a particular type of finality. Meeting the lost child again is concrete evidence that the child does exist and puts an end to the fear and ignorance.

Mothers who have lost children through adoption are unable to perform Worden's second task, to experience the pain of grief, because they usually have no appropriate opportunities to express their grief safely at the time that the loss occurs. In many cases the pregnancy and birth took place in secret and was hidden from most people. After the event, the mothers were told to put it behind them and not to dwell on it. I have yet to meet a mother who has lost a child through adoption who was offered useful counselling after her child was adopted. Mothers who lost children through adoption were usually not permitted to grieve. Worden says that when the pain of grief is avoided or suppressed then depression often follows. Depression is common in mothers who have lost children through adoption and it sometimes continues for many years. Some mothers, on the other hand, have been able to pretend that they were unaffected by their loss. However, apparent absence of grief can actually be a sign of acute grief, which has been repressed or delayed. Those mothers who are finally given permission to grieve often are surprised at the depth of their pain, even many years after their loss. Reunion confronts mothers with the reality of what they have lost and allows them therefore to experience the pain of their grief, which they may have suppressed for many years. It is a common misunderstanding that reunion causes grief and unhappiness for natural parents and for adopted adults. In fact, reunion brings the existing grief to the surface to allow it to be dealt with, which is healthier and more beneficial than continued suppression.

Mothers who have lost children through adoption are unable to perform Worden's third task, to adjust to the environment from which the lost person is missing, because society never accorded their child a position in the mother's life and the environment itself has changed irrevocably. Many mothers had to leave their employment when they became pregnant and some moved to a new area. For many of them it was the end of their relationship with the child's father. The pregnancy also caused an irreversible change in the relationship between the mother and her parents and so the birth of the child was often coupled with other stressful life events. Having had a child made them feel different from their friends, whom they often resented for being so carefree and hopeful for the future. These mothers felt that they had changed fundamentally and they could not go back to the place they had previously held in society. Expecting a woman who has carried a child for nine months, given birth and then had

her motherhood denied, to carry on as if nothing has happened is cruel and unrealistic. Reunion allows mothers to create a new environment – one which includes their lost child.

It is impossible for mothers who have lost children through adoption to perform Worden's fourth task, to withdraw emotional energy from the relationship and reinvest it in another relationship because the relationship has not ended. The child still exists. Many women, almost half of those who lose children through adoption, are unable to have any further children. They are unable to invest any emotion in another similar relationship. In some cases their physical body refuses to co-operate and in other cases they feel a sense of loyalty to their lost child which prevents them from producing what may be seen by some as a replacement child. Reunion allows them to invest emotional energy in becoming re-acquainted with their lost child.

For adopted people, grieving often begins at the time of reunion, if there has previously been no recognition of the need to grieve. If there has been no preparation and this is unexpected, it can be very confusing. Adopted people sometimes feel that the reunion has made them sad and feel a sense of disappointment. In fact, the reunion has allowed them to experience the grief which they have suppressed since they were originally separated from their families. Reunion allows this grief to surface and be felt. This is a positive experience as it is the end of suppression and denial and should be acknowledged and worked through, not avoided.

Reunion frees up the emotional energy which parents have secretly invested in the relationship with their lost child and which adopted people have secretly invested in their relationship with their missing parents and therefore allows them to relate more honestly and openly with other significant members of their families and social circles.

#### Preparation for mothers considering reunion

I know that, for many mothers, informed, professional counselling, provided in a safe environment, in a non-judgmental manner, preferably prior to reunion, can also be very helpful. My aim in counselling mothers is to support them to explore the experience of losing their child, to understand it and acknowledge it and to validate their feelings about it. I believe that for most women, their feelings of sadness and grief are actually the expected outcome of having experienced a loss, which has, for the most part, been unacknowledged or misunderstood. My view is that they are entitled to grieve. I believe that their grief will always be with them and that it is up to them to choose how to address that fact. If they try to repress and deny their grief, I believe that it will force its way into their lives, in ways that may be uncomfortable and distressing. If they do not take an active part in addressing their grief, I believe that there is also the danger that it will engulf them and prevent them from enjoying a productive life. Both of these outcomes are undesirable, as they are disempowering to the mother. In my work with mothers I encourage them to acknowledge that their grief is legitimate and will always be with them, but to recognise that it can be managed and incorporated into their lives. The feeling of anger and the sense of loss associated with this grief will vary in intensity at different times in the mother's life. I do not believe that it is possible or useful to state that at a particular point in a mother's life, her grief has been resolved. The notion of grief resolution has different meanings for different people and, for me, it is not a useful goal, as it implies that some people have succeeded, while others have failed. In fact, I believe that it is much more productive for mothers to be supported to respect their experience and acknowledge it as a permanent, but manageable, part of their life.

It is my view that many adoptions took place because the mother, her parents, or other authority figures, believed that adoption would be the most beneficial outcome. When I am counselling women who have lost children through adoption, I begin by asking them to describe to me the era and the families in which their parents grew up and the situations which led to their marriage. The reason for this beginning is that the values and beliefs which the mother has absorbed growing up usually have been learned from her parents, who, in turn, have learned their values and beliefs from their parents and from their life experiences. We then explore the mother's childhood and her childhood experiences. It is important that the mother understand the meaning of those experiences for her and how she felt as a child. We

explore issues such as communication, or lack of it, in the mother's family, her feelings of self-worth, approval-seeking behaviour, religious and cultural influences, the relationship between her parents, relationships with siblings, gender issues, her sense of security and safety as a child, family expectations and priorities.

We then proceed to the adolescent years and how the changes of puberty were approached in the family, moral standards and expectations during the era in which the mother was a teenager, her role models and her first sexual experiences, if they had not already taken place. Again, the emphasis is on how the mother experienced this period in her life and the impact that it had on her sense of her own value. We explore whether or not the mother feels that she had a need for approval at this period in her life, whose approval was important to her and why this might have been.

Next we proceed to the relationship between the mother and the person who became the father of the child who was lost to adoption. Some mothers were raped, some were taken advantage of by older partners, some had become what was viewed at the time as promiscuous, perhaps as a result of previous sexual abuse and some were involved in loving relationships. We discuss to what extent the mother understood the connection between sexual relationships and pregnancy, the use of contraception and how awareness of the pregnancy occurred. We discuss how news of the pregnancy was disclosed and what the immediate outcomes of that disclosure were.

While the mother describes the experience of being pregnant and the events that surrounded the actual pregnancy, issues of control and power are explored and the disempowerment of the mother is often highlighted. Motives and beliefs are discussed as well as expectations and priorities. It was often during this period that plans for the future were made. These plans were often made by others and the mother's views and feelings were not always considered.

Description of the birth itself can often be traumatic for the mother, especially for those who have never been invited to describe it before. Many mothers are unable to describe the experience of giving birth, however, either because they were not conscious during the event or because they have since lost the memory of it. For many mothers the outcome of the trauma experienced at that time has been loss of memory. For some there are moments which are clear and others which are completely lost to them.

It is often difficult for mothers to recall events which occurred shortly after the birth of their child. Most report a feeling of numbness and a sense of emotional distance from what was happening. Some can recall nothing for some time after the birth. It is useful, however, to explore the on-going impact that the loss of the child has had on the mother's life. For many mothers, secrecy has been a major factor in their lives since the birth of their child and this has had a noticeable impact on their relationships with other people and on how they view themselves. It is also helpful to examine the impact of the loss of the child on how they have dealt with subsequent significant events, especially losses. Once a mother has a deeper understanding of her past, plans can then be made for the future, based on the strengths and strategies which she has already displayed.

At this point in the counselling the issue of reunion is raised. If reunion has not yet occurred, the mother can be supported to take steps towards reunion. After completing this course of counselling, mothers feel much more prepared for the issues which might arise after reunion. Mothers who seek help after they have been reunited with their lost child also benefit from counselling and as a result of the deepening of their understanding of the issues, are often able to re-establish contact where this has broken down or to improve the relationship with their adult child.

The purpose of this counselling work is not to apportion blame, not to justify or make excuses, nor is it to explore the events in terms of "rightness" or "wrongness". Its purpose is to assist the mother to make links and connections between her life events and the values, beliefs and motives that give them meaning. For many mothers it is the first time that certain patterns have become obvious and this often leads to empowering moments of clarity and acceptance and to a reduction in feelings of guilt and shame. Considering that many mothers have come to me feeling guilty and ashamed about having become pregnant, about having allowed their babies to be adopted and also about the fact that they were still suffering from their loss, this



is a huge achievement. It is very satisfying to watch mothers grow in confidence and to see their feelings of self-worth increase.

Ideally, adopted people will also have been able to prepare themselves for reunion. In some cases, unfortunately, their adoption has been ignored and denied and their losses unacknowledged. In other cases, adoptive parents who are aware of the losses experienced by their children and their need to grieve have been in a position to help their children to prepare for reunion and to support them through the process and assist in creating a permanent place for the original family in the life of their child.

### Reunion issues

When a person who has been separated from another family member by adoption decides to seek out that family member, this is, in fact, an acknowledgement (albeit sometimes an unconscious one) that there is a recognition of a loss having been experienced. Not everyone who is involved in a reunion has had appropriate preparation, however and this can result in stresses and strains in relationships. If the respective losses have been acknowledged and addressed in the intervening period, this makes the experience of reunion less traumatic and more satisfying for all concerned. The moment that an adoption takes place is the time for preparation for reunion to begin. However, owing to the grief experienced at the time of adoption separation being disenfranchised, for adopted people as well as for natural parents, their grief is often unacknowledged and therefore repressed.

Although reunion between such family members can be very therapeutic because it allows those involved to confront the reality of their loss, in many cases the damage wrought by the adoption in the first place is so great, that those affected have difficulty relating to family members with whom they have become re-acquainted. In fact, in some reunion situations, it is easier for family members to build relationships with those who have joined the family after the adoption eg siblings or grandchildren. It is very important to stress that the difficulties which are sometimes faced after reunions are caused by the initial separation of parent and child and not by their reunion. The impact of loss and grief will not be avoided by avoiding reunion. Reunion is, however, a deeply emotional experience and can be expected to give rise to a variety of strong reactions. On-going support can be very useful for many people.

Each party to an adoption reunion brings to the reunion not only his or her grief, but also his or her personality, values and beliefs, expectations, intentions and life experiences. When you consider all of these factors, it is not surprising that there are sometimes difficulties forming relationships when family members are becoming re-acquainted with each other after being separated by adoption. We are all born with our own personality. There are certain aspects of it that we are probably unable to change. First of all we need to understand and accept ourselves and then try to understand and accept the other party also. We have all absorbed values and beliefs throughout our lives, although these may change as we mature. If we expect our values to be respected then we must be prepared to respect the values and beliefs of the other party, although this will not always be easy. Preparation for reunion should involve exploring our intentions. Those who plan a reunion in order simply to fulfil their own needs perhaps should stop and consider the impact on the other parties involved. Reunion often causes a resurgence of the feelings which the mother experienced at the time of the adoption of her child and this can be very distressing for the mother, especially if she is not prepared for this happening. Mothers often have difficulty relating the adult child to the baby which they lost. Adopted adults often have difficulty with the reality that they are meeting the person who brought them into the world, as they have no memory of this event to call upon.

Many mothers who have lost children through adoption have gone on to marry the father of the child and the loss of the child has often created tensions in the relationship of the couple over the years. In other cases, it is often at the time of reunion that the father of the child re-enters the life of the mother and the child. This has the potential to disrupt current relationships and often the feelings experienced by the two parties at the time of the child's birth, sometimes affection, sometimes anger, return. Again, if this is unexpected, it can cause a great deal of confusion.

Our life experiences and the way we interpret them and respond to them are what can create depth and sensitivity in our characters. Natural parents need to remember that they are the parents and therefore have had more opportunities to foster understanding and empathy. In my view, the most important factor in an adoption reunion is acceptance. It must be remembered that there is no obligation to be in touch. Communication, time, affection - all of these must be given freely and unconditionally, in order to have any value.

### Current adoption policy in South Australia

One of the reasons that I am so confident that we will see an end to adoption is that we have gone a long way towards that goal already in South Australia. In South Australia, the recognition of the impact of past adoptions has resulted in changes to current adoption policy, which mean that there are no longer any adoptions of older children, no adoptions by family members (including step-parent adoptions) and no adoptions without consent. In fact, there are very few adoptions at all in South Australia at the present time. There are also no orphanages and no abandoned babies. Over the last thirty years, numbers of adoptions have dropped dramatically and in the last few years there have been only three or four Australian-born children adopted per year in South Australia. Numbers of children adopted from other countries into South Australia have also reduced and are expected to decrease further in future.

If a mother approaches the relevant government department in South Australia and states that she is expecting a child and has concerns that she may not be in a position to raise that child, she will be asked what it is that would prevent her from providing a home for her child. If her need is housing, then housing will be sought. If her need is financial support, then financial support will be sought. If her need is parenting skills, then the teaching of parenting skills will be offered. If there is a problem which is likely to separate a mother and her child, it is that problem that needs to be tackled. The child is not the problem. It is the social situation into which the child is arriving which may pose problems. A mother and child constitute a family. If adoption is even being considered then it means that there is a family in difficulties.

In the rare circumstance where the mother decides to proceed with an adoption, the selection of prospective adoptive parents does not begin until after the baby has been born, after the consent to adoption has been signed and after the revocation period has expired. Only then is an approach made to prospective adopters. This is in recognition of the fact that it is considered unprofessional and unethical to expect a mother to make a decision regarding the future of her child during the pregnancy and also to ensure that the mother's vulnerability is not exploited at any time.

In South Australia there are no private adoptions, there is no money changing hands during adoptions and there are no meetings between expectant mothers and prospective adopters during the pregnancy. I believe that most people in South Australia find these practices unacceptable. In fact, any person who tried to arrange a private adoption, who offered to pay money with regard to an adoption arrangement or who approached an expectant mother with a view to discussing the possibility of adopting her child would, I am sure, as a result of those actions be deemed not a suitable person to be considered as a prospective adopter.

In South Australia, if a child has to be removed from a family for reasons of safety, this never results in an adoption. Other arrangements are made for such children which provide the necessary protection but do not dissolve their family relationships. This means that we have no children who are "waiting to be adopted". While children no doubt suffer by being separated from their families, without adoption they do not have the added trauma of loss of identity and denial of reality. Our energies are directed towards providing support and assistance in problem areas. We understand now that whatever the problem, adoption is not the solution. If there are difficulties in a family, adoption will add to those difficulties, not resolve them.

I believe that social workers have a moral duty not to support the denial which is inherent in adoption and to take steps to ensure that their clients recognise the reality of their situations. In my view it is not appropriate for a social worker to support a mother in believing that she

can relinquish her parental responsibilities and will then be "free" of them. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth and such pretence is certainly not in the mother's best interests. Unfortunately, in many countries, parents who find themselves in a variety of difficult circumstances are still being punished by having their children taken from them and adopted by others. What are their crimes? Their crimes are poverty, youth, inexperience, lack of parenting skills and lack of social support. What is their sentence? Their sentence is a lifetime of loss and grief after their children are taken from them. Sadly, adoption is still being used as a permanent solution to what are, for the most part, temporary situations. After all, most parents are young, inexperienced and poor when they have their first children. Generally, however, only the unmarried ones are invited to consider adoption as a solution to these "problems".

Adoption can also be seen as a punishment to the child. Adoption is a terrible insult to children who must leave their families of birth. What we are saying to these children is that who they are is not important. Their heritage, their reality, their identity, their history, their life's experiences up to that point - none of those things matters and to prove that they do not matter they will be blotted out completely as if those children never existed before that time. It must be very confusing and distressing for a child to try to understand the denial involved in adoption. How could we expect an abused or neglected child not to be further damaged by being treated in such a way? If children are having problems, adoption will add to those problems, not solve them.

In one sense, every adoption is a tragedy, as it means that a child has been separated from his or her parents and family. However, because adoption has for so long been presented as a positive event, this has added to the confusion and guilt which have made productive grieving so difficult, for natural parents as well as for adopted people. Because of this, there are many still living with ignorance, denial and unresolved grief.

The pain of adoption grief has been caused by the legislation which allowed adoptions to happen. Legislators, therefore, have a responsibility to provide services to assist people to work towards resolving that pain. There is a community responsibility to fund co-ordinated, comprehensive, appropriate post-adoption services, because they are required now only because of the uninformed policies of the past, which created the suffering in the first place.

### The future

As for the future, everything that I have learned about adoption has led me to believe that it is not an appropriate response to a family in difficulties. I therefore look forward to a future without adoption.

What I am proposing is not "adoption reform" nor is it a "new approach" to adoption. I should like to make it clear that what I am saying is not that I want to see a change in the way adoptions are currently arranged. I am emphatically not saying that we must find a BETTER WAY to conduct adoptions. What I am saying very clearly is that we must find a way to care for children who are unable to remain with their families of origin that is BETTER THAN adoption. What is wrong is not the way that adoptions are managed. There is something wrong with adoption itself. Those opposed to capital punishment, for example, would not be concerned with the competing merits of hanging versus the electric chair. Similarly, I am not concerned with how adoption is managed or whether it is "open" or "closed". I wish to see an end to adoption in any form.

I believe that the end of adoption will come and that it will come as a result of the following process. First of all, there is a need to increase awareness among those whose lives have already been affected by adoption of the fact that adoption is based on loss, that grief is the expected outcome of such a loss and that this grief will have a long term impact on people's lives. Then there is a need to spread that awareness throughout the community in general, which includes professionals in the health and welfare sectors. From there, this knowledge then needs to extend to the politicians who have it in their power to make the necessary legislative changes. When politicians begin to understand the impact of adoption, they will do three things. They will change existing legislation to allow unrestricted access to adoption

information. They will see that they have a responsibility to provide appropriate support services to those whose lives have already been affected by adoption. Finally they will also realise that adoption can no longer be tolerated and that more humane and ethically acceptable arrangements need to be made for children who find themselves in genuine need of alternative care. In short, society will stop punishing people for their misfortunes.

Eventually all of the energy, talents and finances that are currently being expended to arrange adoptions will be harnessed and used instead to create programmes which support family preservation and to provide appropriate support to those whose lives have already been affected by adoption.

Many people simply accept adoption as part of the pattern of our culture, as if it were inevitable, but adoption is, in fact, a social construction, shaped by historical and geographical factors. Adoption has not always existed and it does not exist everywhere. Adoptions occur mostly in affluent, Western societies and as a widespread practice, adoption is a fairly recent historical phenomenon. Attitudes and values in Western society are changing rapidly, however. In just over a hundred years we have seen the fight to end slavery and the struggle towards universal suffrage. More recently, in the 1960s and 1970s, we saw successful demands for equal pay for equal work and the outlawing of discrimination on the grounds of gender, race, sexuality or disability. The reasons these changes have come about is because, first of all, someone drew attention to the situation, then it was examined and found to be unacceptable and finally legislative change followed. I believe that this is what is happening with adoption. I should like to make it clear, however, that I am not criticising those who have been involved in adoptions. After all, I was involved in an adoption. I am evaluating the practice of adoption itself, not the individuals concerned. This is not about blame or responsibility for adoptions which have already taken place, but about whether or not we wish adoption to occupy an on-going place in our social structure. The grief caused by adoption loss is not inevitable because adoption is not inevitable.

I see the end of adoption as a part of the natural progression of increasing social awareness.

I am drawing attention to the fact that adoption is unnecessary and damaging, we are already devising better methods of offering support to children who are unable to live within their families of origin and I believe that South Australia is now on the verge of abolishing adoption. Legislative change comes about as a result of changes in society's values. History shows that politicians do eventually respond to grassroots opinion.

### Conclusion

Adoption has caused a great deal of pain in the past and the losses associated with adoption have led to much grief. We can work to find ways to manage that grief but I believe that we must also learn from the past and plan for a future which does not include further adoption-related losses. It is time for us to show that we value family relationships and that we are committed to recognising and preserving them, instead of destroying them. In my opinion, South Australia is heading in the right direction as far as adoption policy is concerned and I believe that in the near future, there will be an end to adoptions in South Australia. I sincerely hope that the rest of Australia and ultimately the rest of the world will follow our example.

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