

**International Conference on Child Rights
Bucharest, Romania
February 2006**

Evelyn Robinson, MA, Dip Ed, BSW

Adoption Separation – Healing through Understanding

Introduction

My work is based on both my personal and my professional experience of adoption. My personal experience of adoption occurred in Scotland, where I was born and raised. My son, Stephen, was born and adopted in Scotland in 1970. Stephen and I were reunited in Australia in 1991 and continue to enjoy a close relationship. I have lived in South Australia since 1982 and have been involved in post-adoption services there since 1989. In 1996 I completed a post-graduate degree in social work and have been employed professionally in post-adoption work with adults since that time. Since I published my first book in 2000, I have travelled extensively and consulted with many other professionals in the post-adoption field, as well as those with a personal experience of adoption separation.

The sections of this paper on adoption grief are extracted from my first book *Adoption and Loss – The Hidden Grief*, while the sections on recovery are extracted from my second book *Adoption and Recovery – Solving the mystery of reunion*.

History of adoption practice

a) in Scotland:

Formal legal adoptions began in Scotland with the passing of the *Adoption Act 1930*. Adopted people in Scotland have always had access to their original birth certificates as this was enshrined in that act. Mothers who have lost children to adoption in Scotland, however, have never had access to identifying information about their adult adopted children. The replacement birth certificate which is issued in Scotland after the adoption takes place contains the child's new name and the 'names of the adopters'. In Scotland, therefore, an untrue birth certificate, stating that the adopted child is, in fact, the child of the adopters, has never been issued.

The number of adoptions taking place in Scotland continues to be high, in comparison to Australia and, tragically, it is not unusual for adoptions to take place without the consent of the parents. This often occurs when children are removed from their parents' care as a result of concerns for their safety and well-being.

b) in Australia:

Each state and territory in Australia has its own adoption legislation. However, they have all followed a similar pattern over the years. Formal legal adoptions in South Australia commenced with the passing of the *Adoption Act 1927*. The peak period for adoptions in Australia was from the mid 1960s to the mid 1970s. Numbers of adoptions have reduced steadily since that time.

In 1982 in Adelaide, South Australia, a conference was organised by the National Council for the Single Mother and her Child. Many mothers who had lost children through adoption attended this conference and subsequently formed support organisations for themselves. As a result of pressure from these support groups, adopted people in Australia first gained access to their original birth certificates in the state of Victoria in 1984.

With the passing of the *Adoption Act 1988*, South Australia became the first state in Australia to grant equal rights to access identifying information to adopted adults and their mothers (and, in certain circumstances, other family members). All other states and territories have

since followed the example of South Australia, except Victoria, where the *Adoption Act 1984* is still in effect.

After the passing of the *Adoption Act 1988* in South Australia, it gradually became clear to the government that the long term impact on family members who had been separated by adoption could not be ignored and so steps were taken to provide post-adoption services. Steps were also taken to re-examine whether or not adoption was an appropriate outcome for families in difficulties. With the passing of the *Children's Protection Act 1993*, the South Australian government made it clear that they were willing to put resources into family preservation and into creating alternative options for children at risk, which would be genuinely child-centred. Since that time, numbers of adoptions in South Australia have reduced steadily.

In 1972, in the whole of Australia (the population at that time was close to 12,000,000 people), there were approximately 10,000 adoptions. The bulk of those were adoptions of locally-born children by non-relatives ie people who were previously unknown to the child. Such adoptions are now known as 'local adoptions'. In 2005 (by which time the population had increased to almost 20,000,000 people) there were only 65 local adoptions in Australia.

In the state of South Australia (population approximately 2,000,000 people) there were almost 1,000 local adoptions in 1972. By 1993, when the *Children's Protection Act* was passed, this figure had dropped to only 22 and this has reduced to only 2 local adoptions in 2005. It is likely that in the near future there will no longer be any adoptions of Australian-born children in South Australia. This trend is evident in all states and territories of Australia.

Children in Australia who are removed from their families under child protection legislation are cared for under guardianship or permanent care orders. Unlike adoption, these are not based on deceit and fabrication and do not involve a permanent legal separation of a child from his or her family.

Disenfranchised grief

Most societies recognise the needs of those grieving a bereavement and rituals, such as funerals, are designed to support those who are mourning a death. There are other losses in our lives, however, which are not so commonly acknowledged in our communities and for which no accepted rituals have been created. Grief is said to be *disenfranchised* when it is connected to a loss which is not openly acknowledged, socially supported or publicly mourned. The grief associated with adoption separation fits these criteria very well. When grief is disenfranchised, the lack of recognition and understanding of the benefits of performing productive grieving work mean that it is difficult for appropriate grieving to occur. When there are limited opportunities to perform grief work, grief is often repressed or delayed.

A mother and child are united prior to birth. After the birth they become two individuals, but those two individuals then constitute a family unit, which may also include the father of the child. The family breakdown caused by adoption creates a situation of loss. If that loss is not recognised, however, there will be no understanding of the appropriateness of grieving that loss. People do not generally associate loss with adoption, but, in fact, adoption is firmly grounded in loss. I believe that all of those whose children are adopted by others have experienced this separation with a degree of anguish. For those who are adopted, no amount of caring and concern can erase the knowledge that, for whatever reason, they have been raised apart from the families into which they were born.

When a child is adopted, the parents lose their child and the child loses two families. Not only the parents, but also other family members, such as grandparents, may feel the loss of that child to the family. Because adoption has for so long been promoted as a positive outcome, there has traditionally been no support for those who grieve an adoption separation. For parents and children who are separated by adoption, however, there is a suffering that comes from living with the physical and emotional distance created by the adoption. Because of the separation, both parents and their children exist in a life situation, from which a very

important person is missing. No amount of occupational success or material comfort can compensate for that missing relationship.

Parents who were separated from a child through adoption often buried their pain and hurt for many years, in part because of their shame. They had usually been told by others that adoption would be the best outcome for their child. This suggested to them that mourning the separation would be selfish. Many of those parents, however, after the adoption had taken place, began to feel a deep sense of shame at having allowed themselves to be separated from their children. Because of this shame, they often chose not to reveal the details of their experience. As a result of the secrecy surrounding their loss, they were not in a position to grieve publicly.

In many cases, grieving the loss was impeded for the mother by those who thought that they were making the experience easier for her by not talking about it. This denial, although often well-meant, was actually counter-productive, as it prevented the mother and others from confronting reality.

For the children who were removed from their families to be adopted, their experience of the separation and the loss was quite different. Although many believe that babies taken from their mothers do exhibit signs of mourning and are aware on an emotional level of what has occurred, for adopted people, an intellectual understanding of the implications of that separation does not occur until they are much older. In many adoptive families, there has been no recognition of the losses experienced by the adopted children and so there has traditionally been no support for the grieving needs of adopted people. They also may have felt that mourning the losses created by their adoption separation would be selfish, as they were often encouraged to believe that being adopted was to their advantage.

While grieving following a death generally assists the bereaved to come to terms with their loss, the lack of opportunity to grieve can have serious on-going consequences for those who have been separated from family members by adoption. Anecdotal evidence suggests that parents who have lost children through adoption and also adopted people are over-represented as clients in mental health care. I believe that this has occurred because their loss and grief experiences have not been recognised or addressed. Grief itself is not a mental health issue. Grieving is an appropriate and useful response to a loss. I believe that too often the lack of understanding of the need to grieve adoption losses has led to inappropriate responses to what is, in fact, grieving behaviour.

Grief experienced by mothers who have lost children through adoption

Grief is the emotional reaction to a loss. It is also a productive and positive response to a loss. Moving through the experience of grieving allows us to accommodate our losses into our lives.

When we experience a bereavement, there are certain grieving responses which are socially expected and supported. There are losses other than death which give rise to grief reactions, however. It is now obvious that a serious loss is experienced by many mothers who have been separated from their children by adoption. The grief of the woman who has lost a child through adoption is a unique experience and differs in fundamental ways from other grief experiences. Although the fathers of children lost through adoption often grieve also, as do the grandparents, siblings and other members of the extended families, their grief has its own qualities and is not the same as that of the woman who has physically carried her child and given birth. Unfortunately, there is a remarkable degree of ignorance in the community and among those in the helping professions of the lifelong effects of separating a mother from her child by adoption.

Grief work is often described as occurring through a series of tasks. The first task is accepting the reality of the loss. For mothers, fathers and other family members, it is often impossible for them to accept the reality of their loss in an adoption situation, because they have no way of knowing exactly what they have lost when the child is relocated away from the family. There is also often a sense of unreality about the events surrounding the birth and adoption, especially for those who do not directly participate. Mothers who have lost children to

adoption do not have a concrete focus for their grief, because what they have lost is intangible. They have lost the opportunity to raise their children.

The denial practised by society in general of their experience and their existence also lends an air of unreality to the event. The fact that, in many cases, their child is issued with a new, false birth certificate, which ignores the existence of the original parents, is an example of this communal denial. Those who grieve a death must accept the irreversibility of the loss, but mothers often dream that their child will return to them and so there is a lack of finality to their loss. It is therefore difficult for them to accept the reality of their loss, because they have no way of knowing whether or not it is completely irreversible.

The second task is that of experiencing the pain of grief. Mothers are usually advised not to dwell on the loss of the child to adoption and so there is no community support for them to work through the pain of their grief. If this pain is avoided or suppressed then the course of mourning can be prolonged. Avoidance of conscious grieving can also lead to depression. Because the grief of mothers whose children are adopted is not socially recognised and supported, they are not given permission to mourn at the time of their loss and so their grieving is usually postponed. Many mothers, who are finally allowed to express their grief many years after the event, are surprised at the depth of their pain.

The third task is that of adjusting to the changed environment. In adoption situations, this adjustment is difficult because the loss is that of a potential family. The expectant mother is physically and emotionally prepared to take up the role of motherhood and to the mother whose child is adopted by someone else, this role is denied. Mothers try to adjust to this fact in different ways. Many of them have another child, or other children, to try to fill the gap created by the lost child. Many mothers who have lost children to adoption, however, perhaps as many as 40%, do not have any further children. They sometimes fear that another emotional attachment may also result in loss. Some feel that having not raised one child, it would be disrespectful and disloyal to that first child to go on to raise another child. Some respond to their loss by distancing themselves from babies and young children, while others take every opportunity to spend time with other people's babies.

These women live with the contradiction that they are mothers but not mothers. They know that they have had a child but they are expected to go on with their lives as if that child had not been born.

The fourth task is that of emotionally relocating the lost person and 'moving on with life'. For many mothers, this task is not achieved, as their lost child is often in their thoughts throughout the period of separation. Life may go on, but the past is not left behind.

Grief experienced by adopted people

Until recently, very little attention was paid to the grief experienced by adopted people. Some references have been made to adoptions which had unhappy outcomes for the adopted children, for example where the adoption was terminated by the adopters and the child returned to care, or where the child was abused in the adoptive family. These unhappy situations are more common than many people would like to admit, as adopters were rarely given adequate preparation or support for the issues which may arise while raising someone else's child.

In many cases, however, the painful consequences of being adopted are less obvious. Only in recent years has come the realisation that many adopted people, regardless of how apparently problem-free their adoptions have been, experience a deep and painful sense of loss because they have been separated from their mothers. Their grief resulting from this loss is not always obvious because it has usually been suppressed and is often exhibited indirectly in the behaviour of adopted people, especially in the adolescent years. Performing the grieving tasks has been, in many situations, as difficult for adopted people as it has been for their mothers.

In terms of accepting the reality of the loss, adopted adults generally have no conscious memory of the separation from their families and so their birth and the subsequent events which led to that separation also have a sense of unreality for them. This means that they, also, lack a concrete focus for their grief, as what they have lost in terms of a possible life can

only be guessed at, not measured. Like their mothers, adopted people are aware that their lost families exist somewhere and so their loss, like that of their mothers, is not necessarily final. They know that they have other families somewhere and that they will always, in some way, be a part of those families.

Traditionally, adopted children have been raised to believe that their adoption was a positive event in their lives and therefore not a matter for grieving (eg being told that they are 'special' because they had been 'chosen'). Because of this, there has been little community support for their need to grieve the loss of their families. Society has generally admired those who adopt for doing what appeared to be a community service, by adopting children who were thought to be without families. In fact, these children did have families and they suffered from having spent their lives separated from them.

It is sometimes difficult for adopted people to comprehend that they had an original name and identity and that they were a member of two families, prior to becoming a member of their adoptive family. Some adopted people are not even aware that they have a birth certificate which verifies that original identity and, in some places, it is impossible for adopted people to access those birth certificates. For many adopted people, the fact that they were not raised by their mothers causes them to feel rejected and abandoned. They suffer from the loss of their relationship with their mothers, the loss of kinship by being separated from their extended families and community and the loss of identity from not knowing exactly who they are. When adopted people do speak up about their losses, however, which more and more of them are now finding the courage to do, they are often unjustly labelled 'ungrateful' and 'disloyal'. Adopted people lack any rituals to facilitate their grieving, as they were usually not intellectually aware at the time that the adoption took place and there is always an element of secrecy about their origins. Even if they are told that they are adopted, many questions and mysteries remain. Like their mothers, they have often not expressed their true feelings of loss and so too often the assumption has been that those feelings did not exist. As their mothers appeared to 'get on with their lives' and often showed no outward signs of their inner turmoil, so adopted people often appear to be content with their lot and show no obvious signs of grieving.

Because there has been little recognition that adopted children have suffered losses through being adopted, they have generally been prevented from experiencing the pain of their grief. If they are eventually able to acknowledge and experience their grief, many adopted adults, like their mothers, find that they are confused and distressed at the depth of their pain.

The task of adjusting to the changed environment is difficult for adopted children, as they have no way of knowing what their life might have been like had the adoption not taken place. They have lost the possibility of being raised with people to whom they are related, but no one can know what that might have meant for them. The very fact that adoption agencies often tried to 'match' adopted children with the physical characteristics of the adopters suggests that the intention was to facilitate a denial of the truth. Presented with a new birth certificate and a new identity, adopted people are generally unable to conceptualise the lost person, the person they would have been. Many adopted children, however, create for themselves, in their fantasies, an alternative potential family environment.

Because the grief resulting from the separation is generally buried, adopted people have often carried it with them throughout their lives. This can prevent them from completing the fourth task of mourning and 'moving on with life' with any sense of having emotionally relocated their missing family members, who are often still present in their consciousness.

Personal Recovery

Grieving a loss is a positive and purposeful experience. The long term impact on family members separated by adoption of being unable to perform any of the tasks of grieving, therefore, can be debilitating in a variety of ways. There are clearly advantages for them in being supported and assisted to understand their loss and to experience their grief.

Adoption separation causes an emotional trauma for those affected and I believe that an emotional recovery will help to heal the pain of the losses associated with this separation. The

connection between the physical body and the emotional self is complex. In my professional career, I have often witnessed how people's physical well-being improves as they begin to address their emotional issues. The two are closely intertwined and in the same way that physical pain indicates that an area of the body needs treatment, so emotional pain indicates that there are issues which require attention, in order that we can recover and feel emotionally well again. I have termed this *personal recovery*. Personal recovery is about addressing the effects of adoption separation on individuals.

Performing personal recovery work can be very valuable for both adopted adults and their parents. It is a way of freeing up the energy that has been tied up in suppressing their grief. After a degree of personal recovery has been achieved, that energy can then be used to move forward with healing.

Personal recovery work can be undertaken at any time after the adoption separation, but parents generally find that their feelings mature as their children mature. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, for parents, a change in attitude to their adoption experience often takes place when their adopted children reach adulthood. This can mean that even if a degree of personal recovery work has been undertaken while the child is still a minor, it can be helpful to revisit that work once the child becomes an adult. Adopted people may have grown up in families where their issues of loss and grief were recognised and acknowledged. However, they too will benefit from taking responsibility for their own personal recovery work and addressing those issues when they reach adulthood.

The purpose of personal recovery work is to explore the experience of adoption separation, to understand it and acknowledge it and to validate one's feelings about it. Personal recovery takes place on two levels. On an intellectual level, the aim is to understand what happened and on an emotional level, the aim is to get in touch with one's feelings about what happened. I believe that for those separated from a family member by adoption, their feelings of sadness and grief are actually the expected outcome of having experienced a loss which has often been unacknowledged or misunderstood. Acknowledging the loss can be the first step towards enjoying a more contented and productive life.

Many parents are deterred from acknowledging the loss of their child by feelings of guilt and shame. These can be reduced by exploring the historical and social context of the circumstances which led to the adoption. Many adopted adults are deterred from acknowledging the loss of their families by community attitudes, which encourage them to express gratitude for having been adopted. They can learn to see their adoption in a more honest light, by confronting the reality of what it has meant for them to be separated from their families.

It is helpful for those affected by adoption separation to understand 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, it may force its way into their lives, in ways that can be uncomfortable and distressing. I believe that this is often what has happened when a 'nervous breakdown' is said to have occurred. If they do not take an active part in addressing their grief, there is also the danger that it will engulf them and prevent them from enjoying a productive life. This situation has sometimes been diagnosed as chronic depression. Both of these outcomes are disempowering and undesirable.

For those who have been separated from a family member by adoption, it is important to recognise that their grief 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. 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 may succeed, while others may fail. It may be more productive for family members separated by adoption to be supported to respect their experience and acknowledge it as a permanent, but manageable, part of their life. Many people talk about the personal recovery process as a kind of 'thawing out', which allows the grief to come to the surface and be experienced.

Undertaking personal recovery work will help those affected by adoption separation to feel better about themselves. It will help them to gain a deeper understanding of the events of their past and to change how they think about what has happened in their lives. Although no one

can change what has already happened, it is possible to achieve a sense of control in the present and to make more informed choices for the future.

Adoption recovery work is designed to be empowering, to remind those involved that every child born into the world is a gift and to help them to be able to celebrate that fact. Having an adoption separation experience can also help people to have compassion for the tribulations of others and to put life's other challenges into perspective.

Adoption separation creates a loss which is difficult to grieve. When the time comes to address that grief, this personal recovery process can be undertaken alone, with a close friend or family member or with professional support. The recovery process can include attendance at an appropriate support group and reading about the experiences of others. Some people like to talk through their history and others prefer to write it. I originally recounted my story in counselling sessions and then some years later I wrote it in *Adoption and Loss – The Hidden Grief*.

Undergoing a process of personal recovery is a positive, productive act, which indicates an awareness of the need to attend to one's adoption issues in order to move forward. Taking this step is a sign of emotional strength. Telling one's story can lead to healing and understanding, to renewed courage and increased generosity of spirit. If adoption has left us with only bitterness and sorrow, we have failed to grasp the opportunities which life has offered us through our adoption experiences.

The literature on grieving and the experiences of family members who have been separated by adoption support the position that grieving a loss is a healthy, productive activity and that the suppression of grief can lead to unhealthy, negative outcomes. The resolution of the grief created by an adoption loss can be assisted by the provision of a supportive environment within which personal recovery work can take place. Because adoption is a legal construction, the legislative bodies which created it have a responsibility to assist those affected to address the issues which have resulted from it.

Personal recovery will be facilitated when governments take responsibility for the outcomes of the legislation which allowed adoptions to happen.

When they understand why the losses caused by adoption separation have been difficult to mourn, legislators will put in place support systems, which will assist people to perform the tasks of mourning and to achieve a degree of personal recovery. Information can also be provided to educate and inform the community about the realities of living with an adoption separation experience.

Many of those whose lives have been affected by adoption separation have found that rather than being admired for taking the initiative to address their grief and loss issues, they have been blamed and labelled as having made a 'poor adjustment' to their circumstances. For this reason, I believe that governments have a responsibility to provide funding for professional development to increase awareness among those in the helping professions, such as psychologists, social workers and doctors, about how they can provide useful support to those who are seeking to achieve personal recovery. Post-adoption support services, in my opinion, should also be publicly funded so that informed, relevant counselling can be provided at no cost to clients.

Interpersonal recovery

When something is lost and then found, it is often said to have been *recovered*. When an adoption takes place, a child and his or her families of origin are separated from each other. This separation means that losses are experienced. When family members who have been separated from each other by adoption find each other again and are reunited, therefore, they are, in a sense, *recovering* each other. This can be an opportunity to develop the relationships which were interrupted by the adoption. I have termed this *interpersonal recovery*. Interpersonal recovery is about addressing the effects of adoption separation on the relationships between family members.

For many whose lives have been affected by adoption separation, reunion with family members is the basis for interpersonal recovery. An adoption is a legal arrangement. It does

not change the actual relationships between people, only the legal rights and responsibilities. If two people 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 adoptions take place, the legal rights and responsibilities are transferred from one set of parents to another, but the actual relationships between the parents and their children cannot be altered. Parents who lose children through adoption lose the right to raise their children to adulthood; they do 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.

Adopted adults and their parents are entitled to make choices and decisions regarding their relationships in exactly the same way that the rest of the population does. This is not possible when vital information is withheld or when false or misleading information is provided. They have a moral right to receive full and accurate information relating to their adoption experiences.

Unfortunately, some people erroneously talk of reunions between family members who have been separated by adoption in terms of 'success' and 'failure'. I feel that this is an inappropriate and unhelpful way of looking at this complex situation. There are often family members, who have been part of the same family, who, as adults, choose not to spend time together. No one considers describing their relationships as having 'failed'. We simply accept that we cannot choose our relatives and that we do not always have much in common with them, nor enjoy spending time in their company. As adults we make those choices. Regardless of our choices, however, nothing changes the fact that we are related.

If you are considering contacting a family member from whom you have been separated by adoption, it is important to be aware that the relative with whom you are seeking to be reunited is not responsible for providing you with what you need to recover. Your relative may or may not appreciate your needs and your experience. Regardless of how much or how little they have to offer, however, you can use the experience of reunion to aid your recovery. We are each responsible for our own recovery, regardless of whether or not a reunion takes place or whether or not it meets our expectations.

It is helpful for anyone contemplating a reunion if they have made some effort to know and understand themselves, before attempting to get to know or understand the other person. Personal recovery work will help people to get to know themselves better. It can be a preparation for reunion, but it can also be useful in its own right for those who never have a reunion. Everyone can achieve a degree of personal recovery regardless of their reunion opportunities.

Opportunities for reunion

The separation of mother and child creates a basic emotional loss, from which it is difficult to recover. Being able to obtain information about family members and the events surrounding the separation, which is a major component of the grieving process, is a basic human right. Having the option to reunite with family members is, however, an opportunity which many are denied owing to legislation which prevents them from completing the tasks of mourning by achieving a reunion. Such legislation is based on fear. Fear of the truth is a great barrier to healing and creates a considerable degree of anxiety for those affected. Legislation based on fear is a negative form of governance. It does not promote honesty and health, but instead supports deceit and suffering. Such legislation encourages people to avoid reality and so healing is prevented from occurring. The role of governments is to produce legislation which meets the needs of the community. A government which prevents personal healing and progress is not fulfilling its responsibility to the community.

In recent years there have been changes to the legislation which governs access to adoption information in many Australian states and territories. South Australia led the way in 1988 by being the first Australian state to give mothers who had lost children to adoption and adults who had been adopted as children equal rights to access information about the adoption and

the identities of those involved. This move was consistent with South Australia's long-standing commitment to women's rights. South Australia was the first state to give women the right to vote and the right to stand for Parliament in 1894. As a result of the availability of adoption information, many family members who have been separated by adoption are able to be reunited.

These changes came about at the request of those whose lives had been affected by adoption separation. The changes to the *Adoption Act* reflected a change in community perceptions about adoption. Adoption is no longer viewed as a one-off event which is completed with the court order. There is now more recognition that it is a healthy emotional reaction for adopted people to seek contact with their family members and for parents to wish to know the children from whom they have been separated. There is no reason why adoption information should be any different from other official records. Adoption is a legal arrangement like a marriage; there is no excuse for keeping it a secret.

Most adoption laws were created at the beginning of the 20th century. Our lives and our societies have changed enormously since that time. In the latter half of the 20th century, for example, many Western countries introduced legislation which addressed human rights issues such as equality of opportunity and access to information. In many areas, however, adoption legislation has not kept up with recent knowledge and attitudes and still reflects the limited knowledge and the outdated attitudes of a past century.

Many the world over show an intense interest in their family histories and access to historical documents assists them to trace family members and compile family trees. Those who were adopted or have lost a child through adoption, however, are prevented in many locations from participating in this type of activity, owing to the fact that they are unable to obtain details about family members, which most people now regard as a basic human right. This represents a discrimination which is not in line with other legislation which is highly valued in our societies, such as legislation ensuring equality of opportunity and access to personal information.

Interpersonal recovery will be facilitated when adopted adults and their parents have access to their adoption information as an inalienable legal right. Family members who are seeking to achieve interpersonal recovery will be assisted when those in the helping professions learn how they can provide them with useful and appropriate support. If post-adoption support agencies were created, which provided search facilities to assist those seeking to locate family members and on-going support through the building of the reunion relationship, then reunion would be easier to achieve and reunion relationships would also be easier to sustain.

Conclusion

Many societies have found it difficult to accept that adoption has caused more problems than it has ever solved and there is still a great deal of resistance in the community to acknowledging the damage caused by adoption. Sadly, in some places, adoption is still viewed by legislators as an attractive way of transferring the financial responsibility for children at risk from the government to adopters. Rather than directing resources towards supporting families to remain intact, or towards providing child-centred alternatives such as permanent care orders for children in need of safe accommodation away from their families, such governments prefer to off-load the responsibility for supporting children in need to adoptive families. This is a very short-sighted, not to say callous approach as children's emotional needs are clearly taking second place to the government's economic policies.

Adoption legislation was enacted in the past in ignorance. At the time that numbers of adoptions were high, there was no evidence available of the long term effects on both parents and their children of adoption separation. The legislation which allowed these adoptions to take place, therefore, was necessarily experimental. It took many years for the long term impact of adoption to be felt and even longer for those affected to feel comfortable speaking out. When this did occur in Australia, however, appropriate steps were taken to support family preservation and to create more child-centred outcomes for children who were unable to live safely with their families.

Now that we are aware of the long term outcomes of adoption, it has become clear that it is not an appropriate outcome for any child. When more and more of those whose lives have been affected by adoption separation have achieved both personal and interpersonal recovery, this will have a significant impact on our communities. Our legislators will learn from the experiences of those who have progressed in this way and they will use that learning to inform future social policy.

Issues which make some families unsafe, such as substance abuse, poverty, unemployment, physical and sexual abuse, homelessness and lack of parenting skills will be addressed, in order that more family homes can become the safe places they should be, in which children can grow and develop to their full potential. Family preservation programmes, which encourage and assist parents to raise their children, will take the place of adoption programmes, which create family breakdown.

Our governments will come to understand that adoption pain is not inevitable, because adoption is not inevitable. Legislation and social policy which apply to the care of children who are unable to be raised safely by their parents will be reviewed in the light of available knowledge about adoption outcomes. The result of this will be that energy and expenditure will be utilised to create a system of placements for children, which will not produce the negative outcomes related to adoption.

Because of the complexities of the issues for these children, it would be appropriate for them to be entrusted to care-givers who had already had experience in raising children and who were receiving on-going professional support. As children living with chronic illness benefit from on-going medical support, so children who have had to be separated from their families will grow up with chronic emotional issues and will benefit from on-going professional support which is appropriate to their needs.

In contrast to adoption situations, which create a sense of insecurity in children by encouraging them to accept the falsehood that their adopters are actually their parents, care arrangements will be created which are safe and secure for children, without issuing a replacement birth certificate. A care arrangement which honours children's identity and history would not foster the unhealthy sense of exclusiveness and ownership in the care-givers, which has developed in many adoption situations. Our societies will demonstrate that they have learned from the mistakes of the past by accepting honest and open care arrangements which are truly designed to meet the needs of children.

I believe that these necessary changes will occur as the result of education. Those who know and understand the outcomes of adoption separation and the pathway to recovery will state their case, persistently and publicly. The result of this will be, that awareness will be increased in the community and changed community attitudes will then drive legislative change. Social action results when people decide to act on issues of which they have experience and by which they feel damaged. These are issues of social justice. The governments which allowed adoptions to take place now have a social responsibility to fund co-ordinated, comprehensive, appropriate post-adoption services, to provide adoption information to those affected by adoption separation and to create alternatives to adoption which are genuinely child-centred.

I foresee that there will be an end to adoption in the very near future and I believe that openness and education are the most effective ways to produce this change.

~~~~~

## **This is a rough outline of what I actually said on the day**

I'd like to thank the conference organisers for inviting me to be here to speak today. I told someone last night that this is my first visit to Romania, but I was told that I have been here in spirit for the last five years, as my work has been used to guide policy and practice here. Allow me to introduce myself. My heritage is from Scotland, although my home is in Australia. I consider myself an adopted Australian. My people moved from the north-east of Scotland to the central west.

*... they were a proud people with a great sense of family bred into them through the centuries of living in a kin-based society. They were keen to succeed in the world and instilled into their children a fierce motivation for learning and the scholar in their society held pride of place.*

Those are the people to whom I am genetically linked. I was not adopted and so they are also the people among whom I was raised. Since 1982 however, I have lived among Australians and made Australia my home.

Like an adopted person, both parts of my identity have contributed to make me who I am now. I wear my tartan scarf to represent my Scottish heritage and my South Australian opal to represent my Australian home. They each represent different aspects of my identity. There is no conflict between them; they complement each other. They blend together and I honour both of them. Legally I am an Australian, yet I have no Australian blood. Australian history is not the history of my ancestors. Although I am happy living in my Australian home, there are undoubtedly losses associated with emigration. Immigrants are often expected to be grateful for having relocated and improved their circumstances and if they try to give equal status to their origins they may be accused of being disloyal. There are similar losses associated with adoption.

My journey here from Adelaide, Australia lasted 35 hours. However my journey here today in another sense has lasted 35 years. I have a son, Stephen, who is 35 years old. I was separated from Stephen by adoption because I was young, uninformed and vulnerable. When I became mature, educated and empowered, I became a social worker. I bring to adoption issues the dual perspective of my personal and my professional experience. I have been involved in post-adoption services for many years, because I have a personal and a professional commitment to social justice.

Bringing about an end to adoption is an issue of social justice. Treating children in need with respect and honouring their identity and heritage are matters of equity and entitlement. This conference is about the rights of the child. I believe that all children have the right to have their identity honoured and respected so that it remains unaltered and unalterable. *{then followed a brief summary of the presentation I had prepared}*

I have been delighted to hear of the progress that has been made in Romania with regard to honouring the rights of children. We have all been given a copy of a set of recommendations which arose out of a previous conference. I am proposing that two important recommendations be added to this list. The first is that Romania put in place plans to phase out adoption completely, because it is not in the best interests of children. I believe that more child-centred outcomes for children in need have to be created. The second is that plans be undertaken to create appropriate and useful post-adoption services for adults who have been separated from family members by adoption. There are many Romanian children who have already been taken from their families to be adopted. The Romanian government allowed those adoptions to happen and so I believe that they have a responsibility to those whose lives have been affected by those separations. Many Romanian children have been adopted into other countries. Hopefully they will return to Romania to seek information and to reconnect with their families and their heritage. I believe that the Romanian government has a responsibility to provide services for those people which will assist them to address their adoption separation issues. There are now many families in Romania who are suffering because they have lost their children. I believe that the Romanian government has a responsibility to those families also to provide them with services which will assist them to deal with their adoption separation issues and to locate their lost children. I look forward to hearing that progress is taking place in both of those areas. Thank you for listening.

© Evelyn Robinson, 2006

This article is protected by copyright. It may be reproduced for non-profit, educational purposes, providing that it is reproduced in its entirety, without alteration.

Evelyn Robinson, who is a counsellor, educator and author of

***Adoption and Loss – The Hidden Grief***

***Adoption and Recovery – Solving the mystery of reunion***

***Adoption Reunion – Ecstasy or Agony?***

***Adoption Separation – Then and now***

welcomes contact from interested readers.

Postal address: Clova Publications  
PO Box 328  
Christies Beach  
South Australia 5165

E-mail: [erobinson@clovapublications.com](mailto:erobinson@clovapublications.com)

For further information about Evelyn and her work, please visit her web site:

Web site: [www.clovapublications.com](http://www.clovapublications.com)