

Adoption and Recovery

Solving the Mystery of Reunion

Introduction

Who am I?

My interest in the long term impact of adoption separation stems from the fact that I am the original mother of a son, who was born in Scotland in 1970 and adopted into another family. I called him Adam, his adoptive parents called him Stephen and he has recently officially named himself Ferg (although I have his permission to continue to call him Stephen). I am very grateful that he has made his own powerful and moving contribution to this book.

When he was nineteen years old, I joined a post-adoption support organisation for mothers separated from their children by adoption and was involved with that organisation for fifteen years. During that time I spoke with many people who had experienced separation from a family member through adoption and with many others working in the post-adoption field.

Because of the experience I had gained, both in my life and through my voluntary work with the support organisation, I decided to return to study in 1995 and completed a post-graduate degree in social work. Throughout my professional studies, I explored grief and loss issues and how these applied to adoption. I was then employed as Counsellor/Co-ordinator for four years by the support organisation in which I had worked for many years as a volunteer. My principal client group consisted of mothers who had been separated from their children through adoption, although I also counselled others affected by adoption separation. I later provided my counselling services privately.

In my first book, *Adoption and Loss - The Hidden Grief*, I told of my experience of becoming pregnant, of being separated from my son by adoption and of my reunion with Stephen when he was twenty-one years old. I also explored the on-going impact which the separation from my son had had on my life. From a professional perspective, I explored the meaning of adoption separation and the grief which follows that separation.

I should like to express my appreciation to all of those who felt moved, after reading my first book, to share their thoughts and experiences with me.

My travels in 2001

At the end of March, 2001 I left my home in Australia and travelled for three months, speaking at conferences and public meetings in New Zealand, the United States, Canada, England, the Republic of Ireland, Scotland and Northern Ireland. During these three months, I covered more than thirty thousand miles and fulfilled twenty-one speaking engagements. I addressed audiences totalling more than one thousand people. Approximately half of that number were professionals who were providing post-adoption services for adults who had been involved in adoption separations.

I talked with some very knowledgeable and understanding professionals on my travels. Sadly, however, many of those working with adults in the post-adoption area seemed to have little understanding of grief and loss issues for those affected by adoption separation and offered little support for those who wished to contact adult family members from whom they had been separated. Others were aware of the issues, but unfortunately constrained by resource limitations and legislative restrictions.

I have wonderful memories of people and places and I thoroughly enjoyed every moment of my trip, which took me literally around the world. It was very interesting and informative for me to hear the views and attitudes of those providing post-adoption services in other countries, as well as listening to those with a personal experience of adoption.

I know, because many of those whom I met on my travels have told me, that my presentations have had an impact and that changes are taking place in many locations. In every country that I visited, I met welcoming, generous people who were interested in what I had to say. The trip was a

wonderful experience and I should like to thank all of those who shared not only their homes and their time with me on my travels, but also their views and their experiences. I am also grateful to the many people who heard me speak and contacted me after I had returned to Australia.

During my trip, I asked questions, I answered questions, I talked and I listened. This book grew out of those discussions. I was asked at the end of one of my presentations, if I had ever been asked a question which I could not answer. I replied, that I had always been able to provide *an* answer to any question, but that I could not guarantee that I was able to provide *the* answer to every question.

One question I was asked frequently was how people could help themselves, when there was no appropriate professional assistance available. I have written this book in the hope that it will assist those who prefer to address their issues without seeking professional support and those who are unable to access appropriate services. In addition, I believe that it presents a valuable complement to any professional counselling which is undertaken. I know that this book will also be of great value to professionals working in a therapeutic setting with adult family members who have been separated by adoption.

Since 2001, I have continued to travel and share my views on adoption loss and recovery, in my own time and at my own expense. I have never charged a fee for speaking. The interactions which I have had in recent years with members of the adoption community around the world and with interested professionals have reinforced my beliefs in the ways in which healing can be achieved through understanding and experiencing adoption loss.

About *Adoption and Recovery*

The title *Adoption and Recovery* refers to two types of recovery from the separation created by adoption. Firstly, 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 adoption separation. The connection between the physical body and the emotional self is complex. 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.*

Secondly, 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.*

The title of this book, therefore, refers to the dual meaning of the word *recovery* and includes both personal and interpersonal recovery. I have been privileged to witness the transformation which recovery in both senses of the word brings to people's lives. I should like to express my admiration for all of those who have shown the courage to attempt to achieve both personal and interpersonal recovery. For those who have not yet done so, I hope that this book will encourage them along that pathway.

In Part I of this book, I describe the journey from adoption separation, through the experience of mourning that separation towards a place of personal recovery. In Part II of this book, I describe the journey from adoption reunion, through managing the grief which often accompanies reunion, towards a place of interpersonal recovery.

In *Adoption and Loss – The Hidden Grief*, I outlined my personal journey through adoption separation, personal recovery and interpersonal recovery. In *Adoption and Recovery – Solving the mystery of reunion*, I have used a selection from the questions which I have been asked over the years, to illustrate the insights which I have gained into adoption separation and the recovery process. In Part III of this book, I have provided an interesting and varied selection of those questions and my responses to them. Any identifying details have been altered or removed. The issues surrounding adoption reunion seem to have puzzled academics and researchers for many years. Hopefully these questions and answers will shed some much-needed light on the subject.

I conclude this book by exploring the implications of my understanding of adoption recovery, both personal and interpersonal, for our governments, for our communities and for us as individuals.

The mystery of reunion

The sub-title of this book, *Solving the mystery of reunion*, refers to the fact that many adults who have been separated from family members by adoption, professionals working with those people, members of the general community and also legislators seem to be, to a large extent, baffled by adoption reunions. They struggle to understand the reasons behind the desire of family members who have been separated by adoption to reunite and also the issues which arise for them when they do. I believe that in explaining the concept of adoption recovery, both on a personal and on an interpersonal level, I have been able to solve both of these 'mysteries'.

It is my view that so many have failed to comprehend the events surrounding adoption reunions, because there has been a vital piece of information which has been missing. That information is, that the reunion experience itself is an important part of the adoption grieving process. Once that missing detail is supplied, many people's reunion experiences make sense and the mystery of reunion is solved.

It has gradually become clear to me over the years that, although reunion often brings great joy into people's lives, many of the experiences of adoption reunion which people have described to me and about which I have read, are remarkably similar to the experiences of those who are grieving a bereavement. If you read reports by those who have been involved in adoption reunions, you will read of much grief. It may not be recognised or identified by the participants as grief, but you will read of tears, anger, numbness, a sense of loss, disorientation, sadness, fear and guilt. All of these are components of grieving.

If you have never considered that the experience of reunion is a grieving experience, then I suggest that you read those accounts again with this in mind and you may be able to identify those reactions as being grieving responses. As a result of giving this matter serious consideration, I have found an explanation for the significance of the reunion experience which satisfies me. Through listening, reading and applying my professional knowledge, I believe that I have come to an understanding of what is happening in the lives of those who have been motivated to seek an adoption reunion and what actually occurs when an adoption reunion takes place.

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. I hope that this book will help to educate the community to recognise and acknowledge adoption loss and grief.

My first book focussed on the losses experienced by those affected by adoption separation and the grief which results from those losses. This book focuses on the experiences of those who are striving to work through that grief towards both personal and interpersonal recovery and the part played in the recovery process by the reunion experience. Many books have been written about adoption reunions, but *Adoption and Recovery – Solving the mystery of reunion* is unique. ***This is the first book to explain the dynamics of adoption reunion within a grief framework.***

Sadly, in many parts of the world, the concept of adoption recovery is not recognised or understood and so post-adoption services for adults who have experienced an adoption separation, *if they exist at all*, have evolved in a social climate characterised by an ignorance of adoption loss and grief. Because of this, those services are unlikely to be appropriate or useful. To illustrate the importance of understanding the true nature of the situation before devising a suitable response, I should like to relate an experience from my youth.

I have always enjoyed Scottish country dancing. When I was fifteen years old, I was participating, one Saturday evening, in a lively eightsome reel, when I fell backwards and landed on my left wrist. My wrist hurt, but I continued to dance for the remainder of the evening as best I could. When I arrived home I told my mother about my accident. My mother studied my swollen wrist, considered the contents of her medicine cabinet and decided that the application of some *Deep Heat* to the affected area would be an appropriate treatment.

I tried to sleep, but the pain kept me awake. I woke my mother during the night complaining of the pain in my wrist. Further applications of *Deep Heat* followed, until the burning from the supposedly soothing balm was actually causing more discomfort to me than the original injury. Sleep was impossible.

The next day I carried on stoically about my business, until finally I felt that I needed a professional diagnosis. I attended the emergency department of the nearest hospital in the afternoon and arrived home that evening with my left arm in plaster. The x-rays had shown that my wrist was broken.

My mother had done her best to treat my pain with the limited skills, equipment and information which were available to her. However, it was only when my problem was presented to someone who had greater skills and more sophisticated equipment and was therefore able to obtain the crucial information which allowed an accurate diagnosis, that my injury was treated in an appropriate manner, which led to healing.

Similarly, post-adoption services for adults who have been separated from family members because of adoption, will not be useful or appropriate until those responsible for such services are aware of the true nature of the underlying issues.

The value of qualitative data

It certainly was not my intention, when, in 1989, I first became involved with post-adoption services, to begin collecting material for a qualitative study on the significance of the adoption reunion experience. Since that time, however, I have informally collected data from many people whose lives have been affected by adoption and from professionals and volunteers working in the post-adoption field.

In this book, I have documented the conclusions which I have reached after considering those data and reflecting on them. Those conclusions are informed by my personal experience of adoption separation and reunion and underpinned by my extensive professional knowledge and experience as a social worker and counsellor. I appreciate all of those who have shared their feelings and experiences with me, in whatever form that sharing has occurred. They have all helped to enlighten me.

Although I have not included a literature review in this book, as I did in *Adoption and Loss – The Hidden Grief*, I acknowledge that my conclusions about adoption separation and reunion have also been influenced by many of the books and articles which I have read over the last fifteen years.

I know that there are many people who experience the emotions which I have described. I am aware that they exist in great numbers and, for that reason, their experiences deserve to be considered. My intention in writing this book is to speak *to* all of those who have been separated from family members by adoption. I do not claim to speak *for* all of those who have found themselves in that position.

I should like to express my appreciation to everyone who contributed to this book in any way; to those who have shared their experiences and emotions with me and to those who have encouraged and assisted me to offer my views to the community in the form of writing and publishing this book.

Explanation of terms

When a person who was adopted as a child meets his or her mother, a reunion takes place. Whether or not the mother ever saw or held the child, they were intimately connected before their separation. When those who have been adopted meet other family members, such as fathers, siblings and grandparents, this may be a reunion, if there was an original meeting, or it may be that they are meeting for the first time. In order to avoid repeating this fact, I have, on occasion, used the word *reunion* in this book to refer to the meetings between those who have been adopted and their family members, whether or not those meetings were actually reunions in the technical sense.

The reunions referred to in this book are meetings which occur after the adopted person has reached adulthood. A reunion is an actual meeting, although this may be preceded by contact by telephone, letter or exchange of information through an intermediary.

To avoid confusion, I have chosen in this book to refer to the parents who physically created the children who were subsequently adopted, as the *parents*, or as the *mothers* and *fathers* of the children. I refer to those who adopted the children as the *adopters*, or as the *adoptive mothers* and *adoptive fathers*. *Adopters* is the term which appears on the legal birth certificate of my son, Stephen.

I use the term *relatives* to refer to those who are related by blood and not to those who are related by law. I have described those who are adopted as *adopted persons*. However, to avoid the unwieldy *adult adopted persons*, I have, on occasion, used the term *adopted adults* to refer to those who were adopted as children and are now adults. When a child is born, he or she becomes a member of two families, the family of the mother and the family of the father. I refer in this book, therefore, to the adopted person's original *families*.

In matters of addressing grief, I have referred to books by two authors who are recognised as authorities on grief and grief counselling. They are: *Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy*, by J. William Worden (Revised Edition, 1991) and *The Anatomy of Bereavement*, by Beverley Raphael (1983).

Adoption in our lives

In the families into which they are born, many children have grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and siblings. Family membership has several aspects. There are legal relationships in a family, but there are also physical and emotional relationships. Adoption dissolves the legal relationships between the child and the members of the families of origin, but not the physical relationships.

For many parents, it also does not dissolve the emotional relationships. Because adopted people usually have no conscious memory of their original families, however, they may not be aware of an emotional relationship, until they have the opportunity to develop this as adults. Sometimes, therefore, when reunion occurs, they are surprised by the depth of their emotions.

Statistics for Australia, New Zealand, the United States of America, Canada, the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland show that adopted people make up approximately two per cent of the population. Based on these figures, it is likely that approximately one quarter of the population has had a close relationship with an adopted person. Books such as this, therefore, are of interest to a great many people.

Many fascinating accounts of family reunions have already been published, which are evidence that just because family members are separated from each other, this does not mean that they do not continue to care about and be interested in each other. Many of the issues faced by family members separated by adoption are also faced by family members separated for other reasons. I am confident that this book will be valuable, not only to those who have experienced family separation, but also to professionals who are working with them.

I have no doubt that those who have experienced an adoption separation will eventually succeed, with the support of professionals, in making governments around the world aware of their responsibilities. I believe that legislation allowing equal rights to access identifying information to adopted adults and their mothers (as well as other family members, where appropriate) will be passed in the near future in many places. I also believe that the provision of appropriate counselling, searching and information services will accompany such legislation. This is an issue of social justice, which urgently needs to be addressed.

Many people have asked my advice about their personal situations, especially in relation to reunions. What I am hoping is that this book will give people a better understanding of why they feel the way that they do about the presence of adoption in their lives and why certain issues have arisen for them during adoption reunions. I believe that it will then be easier for them to be in touch with their own feelings around adoption and also to empathise with the other parties involved.

My aim in writing this book is not to provide universal solutions to the outcomes experienced by those who have been separated by adoption, but to help them to understand their experiences, so that they can then discover and implement their own solutions.