

CELEBRATION MOTHERHOOD

COPING WITH THE HEARTBREAK OF LOSING A CHILD TO ADOPTION

Marsha Riben

Carole B. of Bloomfield, New Jersey, is an attorney. Kathy McC. of Van Buren, Arkansas, is a wife and mother of three active youngsters. Glenda D. of Muskegon, Michigan, is a social worker and single parent of two teenage boys. Diane W. of Costa Mesa, California, is a legal secretary and a divorcee with one foreign adopted child.

These four women, like millions of other women in this country, share a secret. Until recently, each of them has suffered alone and in silence.

Each felt as if she were "the only one." Fear of being misunderstood or ridiculed kept them prisoners of their secrets, never sharing their pain with family or friends. Even Kathy's husband did not know until recently, when she, like Carole and Diane and Glenda, found the comfort of a self-help group.

Diane and Carole and Kathy and Glenda are just four. Four of an estimated two to five million women who have lost children to adoption and have come to be known as birthmothers. Each has been affected in her own unique way by the good intentions of parents and professionals who believed that they could erase the "mistake."

In the sixties, the sexual revolution swept this nation faster than the pharmaceutical revolution could catch up with it. For many young women, ambivalence about "planned" sex and fear that they would be reported to their parents prevented them from seeking or using birth control. Abortion was illegal at the time, and while legal now, it is not an acceptable option for all women.

Diane can clearly recall the night she finally told her parents she was "in trouble." Four small words that seemed so simple yet so hard to say. Four small words that started a riot of screaming and crying words like, "Where did we go wrong?"

Kathy's father threatened to shoot her fiance who now refused to marry her. Her mother was only concerned that everything be "taken care of" quietly so no one would know, not even Kathy's sister.

Diane's boyfriend offered to marry her, but her parents and his refused to allow "one mistake" to ruin their lives, and insisted on adoption instead.

Kathy and Diane were shipped far from home to a home for unwed mothers, Kathy under an assumed name to "protect" her future.

Glenda was away at college and never told her parents.

Carole stayed at home, not allowed to go outside the last three months and confined to her room when company visited.

Well meaning doctors, lawyers, social workers, priests, nuns, ministers and rabbis assured these young women that their only chance for future happiness was to "put the past behind them and start a new life," "to forget" and never tell anyone (in some cases) even the men planning to marry them. Believing that what they were doing was "right" and "best" for themselves and their babies, these young women gave up not only their babies, but the ability to be honest for the rest of their lives. Over the years many survived by repressing a good deal of their emotions.

Kathy says now that the hardest part was pretending all the time. "I never told Jim, even when we got married. Then when I got pregnant with Timmy, everyone kept telling me all these old wives tales about first babies coming late. I never said a

word. But each time I lied, I felt I was betraying the tiny baby girl I left in the hospital 16 years ago."

For Glenda, becoming a social worker and making adoption placements was a way of constantly reaffirming that her decision had been a correct one. She recently said: "My whole life was spent proving that adoption was the right decision. It was just too painful to face the fact that I hated myself for not having the courage to take my own baby and run. I suppose that's why I had two boys alone. Just to prove to the world that I could."

Diane's pain became rooted in her secondary infertility, which occurs at a significantly higher rate for women who have surrendered their first-born to adoption,¹ according to Concerned United Birthparents, a national support group. "They told me, 'You're young. You'll have others.' We tried for ten years. All I had were two miscarriages, though the doctors could find nothing medically wrong with my ex-husband or myself. We finally adopted, but he was never able to accept the idea of not having 'his own'."

Carole has buried herself in her career and has "chosen" to remain childless. "I just couldn't go through it again."

Kathy, too, believed the well-meaning advice that she would have other children, and in fact has three others. "But no amount of other children can ever replace her," she says of her surrendered daughter, now sixteen.

For the first time, these women can now discuss their pasts, their pain, their guilt, their grief, their loss, their longings. "When I got back from the 'home,' I was told to 'act as if nothing happened' and go back to school," recalls Kathy. "Sometimes it's hard to believe any of it really happened," says Carole, "especially when

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everyone around you, even your parents who KNOW, never even speak of 'it.'"

Each of these women was simply told what was "best." The birth was not celebrated, as are most such occasions, nor was there ever a grave to mourn, though each left the hospital with empty arms. The child, the birth, the hours of labor, the months of pregnancy, the love that preceded it — all were to be erased from memory, or at the very least silenced from lips. At what cost?

In many cases, the result is a weakening, if not a destruction, of the self-image. Some can never bear the thought of having another child, the memory is too painful. Some long to and cannot. Some marry the father of the surrendered child. Some were married at the time of surrender. Some had been victims of rape. Most learned to play the repression game well, some even "blocking out" dates and places. For some, repressing takes so much energy that they have little mental energy left for external goals, according to Gail Davenport, ACSW, and facilitator of The Birthparent Support Network. Some feel so worthless they marry and/or live with abusive men. Some never forget and often shed a tear when seeing a child of the same age, or on their child's birthday. Some are depressed at certain times of the year without the conscious realization that it coincides either with the birth or the surrender. Some experience "flashbacks" as a result of delayed grief, not dissimilar to the delayed stress syndrome which plagues many veterans. Some live in fear of being found, and thus found out. Others pray to find their lost child to share pertinent medical information or just to confirm that they are alive and well. Some initiate a search and find their children.

The loss of a child to adoption is unlike any other loss. It has been called a limbo-loss as, unlike a death, there is no finality. Women who surrender children to adoption live forever wondering if their children are alive and well, according to Mary Anne Cohen, co-founder of ORIGINS, an organization for women who have lost children to adoption. What does she look like? Is he happy? Are her parents good to

her? Does he know he's adopted? Does she have sisters? Could he live nearby? Could they find me?

When one mourns the death of a loved one, there are certain stages of grief that one can be expected to go through, not necessarily in this order: shock, denial, anger, guilt, acceptance. Because in adoption there is a live child — somewhere — there can never be resolution. The grief is unresolvable. The birthmother becomes "stuck" at one or another stage or moves back and forth from stage to stage suffering ups and downs, says Davenport.

"The women who surrendered in the sixties are now in their thirties and forties, an age, when one puts all the loose ends of one's life together. . . . the increased acceptability of single-parenting makes it easier for such women to reveal their secret pasts and acknowledge the child who has remained forever in their hearts."

Whether a birthmother chooses to actively search or not, she can find great solace and comfort in joining a group of her peers. Birthparent groups follow some of the well-known self-help concepts of rape and incest victims. Origins and BSN have used these two groups as their closest possible models.

"I have never felt so at peace since coming to the meetings and being able to share what has been bottled up inside of me all of these years." Glenda told me. "It was the first time in twenty years I ever told a living soul." Carole said, "There's such a special feeling of warmth I get just reading my birthmother's newsletter and knowing that I am not the only one." Kathy says she feels "pounds lighter. It's like a great big weight has lifted from my shoulders. Especially now that I've not only told Jim, but the kids, too. Now I have so much love and support. Now they all understand why Mommy cries sometimes." Diane says that she feels "grateful to the women of (her group) who shared of themselves and helped me to find not only my son, but more importantly, myself."

Adoptions were at their peak in the sixties. The "children" adopted then are reaching or have reached adulthood and many are attempting to search for the truth of their origins. The women who surrendered in the sixties are now in their thirties and forties, an age, when according to Ericson, one puts all the loose ends of one's life together. Additionally, the increased acceptability of single-parenting makes it easier for such women to reveal their secret pasts and acknowledge the child who has remained forever in their hearts. For these reasons the birthparent movement, which is still in its infancy, is growing. However, in many areas of the country such organizations are still difficult to locate. If you cannot find any help through your local library or self-help clearing house when seeking a birthparent organization, ask for an adoptees' search group. In many areas of the country the same group will serve both adoptees and birthparents. □

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SUPPORT NETWORKS

For more information, help and support, contact the following organizations:

- Birthparent Support Network, Box 120, No. White Plains, N.Y. 10603.
- *ORIGINS, P.O. Box 444, East Brunswick, N.J. 08857 ☎ 8876
- Searchline, 725 Burnwood, Irving, Texas 75062
- OASIS, Box 53076, Miami Shores, Fla. 33153
- **Concerned United Birthparents, 2000 Walker Street, Des Moines, IA 50317
- Adoptees' Liberty Movement Association, P.O. Box 154, Washington Bridge Station, New York, N.Y. 10033

Each of these groups holds monthly meetings. They are run by birthparents (or adoptees in the case of ALMA). Because they are volunteers, please send a self-addressed, stamped envelope when requesting information, and be patient.

*Bi-monthly newsletter **Monthly newsletter

To obtain the name of a group in your area, you can send a S.A.S.E. to TriadOption Library, 7571 Westminster Avenue #6, Westminster, Ca. 92683.

'Deskin, Campbell and Patti, The Postadoption Experience of Surrendering Parents, American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 54(2), April, 1984, reports that the rate of secondary infertility among women who had surrendered their first-born to adoption was 16.2%, an increase of 170% over the national average of 6%. This rate included only women who had tried unsuccessfully to conceive a subsequent pregnancy, eliminating those who chose not to try.

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