

Mothering

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ADOPTION: A Circle of Love

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Today, more than ever, families are made in many ways — through birth, through step-families and through adoption. Rather than join in a futile debate over whether it is nature or nurture that makes one truly a "parent," I would prefer to think it is both. Just as it takes two people to make a baby — a father to plant a seed and a mother to sow it — so, too, sometimes there are additional people involved in the parenting of that child, each providing that child with their gifts.

Adoption today is quite different from what it was years ago. No longer does adoption mean matching parents with adorable, healthy infants who can be molded from the beginning and whose heritage can be ignored. Today, social workers and psychologists recommend an early and honest approach to revealing to the child his adoptive status, and are advising prospective adoptive parents to embrace an understanding of the child's ancestry.

Likewise, it is becoming increasingly common to read about adoptees in search. Adopted children see others searching for their roots and long to do the same. All of this has placed a heavy burden on the adoptive family.

In addition, many states are currently considering legislation which would open adoption records to adoptees when they reach the age of majority. In the past these records have been sealed. What will such legislation mean? Will it mean an end to the sanctity and anonymity we have come to expect for adoptive parents. Does revealing the name of the original parents of birth to the adoptee set a precedent? How will the original parents feel? How will it effect the role of the adoptive parents? And what of the adoptee caught in the middle?

Three Parties

These three parties — adoptee, adoptive parents, and birthparents (or original parents) — have come to be known collectively as the "adoption triangle." With all of the current pressures, unsure future, and constantly changing mores, recent newspaper headlines and letters to the editors have revealed growing animosity and fear between some of the members of the triangle. Unlike three sides in a geometry book, one or more of the angles involved in the living triangle may hope never to meet at all.

This would be fine for adoptive parents and birthparents if it weren't for the fact that there is an innocent third party caught right in the middle — the one child that both sets of parents share a concern for. How unfair for this adopted person to experience the tension and fear that one set of parents has for the other. An adopted child who grows up feeling that his adoptive parents dislike or mistrust those who gave him birth will risk decreased feelings of self worth. When TV hype perpetuates myths about birthparents who are "bad" women or who are socially prominent and don't want to be found, this too, adds to the adoptee's natural feelings of rejection.

It is therefore imperative that all three parties try to understand each other. They need not like each other, but it is important for each to listen to what the other is saying. It is estimated that 5% of the population is adopted, and every adoptee has two adoptive parents and two original or birthparents. Therefore quite a large number of people are directly affected by the proposed new legislation.

Those Who Were Adopted

How do the adoptees feel? Surely each has her own feelings. Clearly, not all desire to search. It is a very personal decision and *not* one based on the amount of love or closeness in the adoptive home. It is *not* a rejection of the love of one's parents that makes an adoptee curious about his heritage, or that necessitates his obtaining vital medical information that only his original parents can provide. Although it is not uncommon for adoptees who love the parents who raised them to desire to search, many are plagued with feelings of guilt and the fear of appearing disloyal or ungrateful. Under the present sealed adoption system, the fact that adoptee search is not legally sanctioned adds to these pressures.

Adoptees generally suffer basic feelings of rejection, no matter how much they are loved and told that they are "special" and "chosen." Even those adoptees who have been told that the woman who bore them loved them enough to give them a good life, cannot help but wonder, "If she *really* loved me, why did she give me away?" Many times this feeling inhibits adoptees from initiating the search for fear of ultimate

rejection. However, it is ultimately a question they want answered directly from the only person who can answer it. As long as there are some adoptees who require this vital information for medical or emotional needs, it should be their right to obtain it. For those who do not wish to avail themselves of that right, they simply do not have to.

Those Who Surrendered

What of the original parents? Are they all married now and living in fear that their child will return and "ruin" their lives with embarrassment? Not so. Studies have shown that 80% of all birthparents, whether they institute a search or not, would not reject their child, should she or he return. National search groups such as ALMA* have even higher favorable statistics. Of their members who search, over 90% have successful reunions.

There are many myths surrounding birthmothers. Adoptees are often warned not to open the "Pandora's Box" for fear that what they find inside will be more painful than they could bear. Sorosky, Baron and Pannor* have proven in their studies, however, that the majority of adoptees agreed that knowing, even knowing the worst (ie: finding their natural mother in prison or a mental hospital) was better than not knowing anything at all. Our fantasies are usually our worst enemies.

While there are surely instances where searches have turned up some "horrible" facts, they are not the norm. Most women who surrender children to adoption are not evil, bad, or loose women. Experienced women are more knowledgeable in birth control and abortion. Statistics weigh heavily on the number of women who get pregnant on their first sexual encounter. The majority of birthmothers are not promiscuous women but rather young girls who are very much in love with one young fellow.

The option for a young girl to continue attending school while pregnant and then to remain at home and keep her baby did not exist until very recently. Ten or more years ago, there was much more shame and stigma placed on a girl who "got in trouble." Many times they were deserted by the men they loved. Other times, their boyfriend wanted very much to marry them, but their parents disallowed the marriage, sending them away instead to

homes for unwed mothers. Their backs against the wall, given no options and told that they cannot return home with their babies, they reluctantly surrendered.

Women such as these, who compose the majority of birthmothers, surrendered their children as an act of love. They do not forget. They may keep silent, never revealing their great "sin" because they are told to remain silent, and because after having done what they were told was "right" and "best" they then discover that the world still looks upon them as "bad" people for having done just what they were told to do.

But they do not forget. Dr. Marshall Schecter, who has spent his entire 35 year career in studying and writing about adoptees, as head of the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Department of the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, said that the idea of women forgetting the babies they had is, "utter nonsense! It is one of those kinds of myths social agencies tried to pretend — attempt to perpetrate. . . it is absolutely incorrect. (They) all suffer, if you will, 'Anniversary Reaction,' know absolutely when that baby was born, what it looked like, and everything else about it. (They) didn't forget at all."

How could a woman such as this turn her back on her child if he returned? Surely there are those who do, but many more are accepting than not.

Who's Rights?

Who then do laws of secrecy protect? Anonymity was something in most cases forced on the birthmother, not something she requested then or necessarily desires now. But what of those who do desire anonymity? They always have the right not to answer a letter, to hang up the phone, or slam the door. Adoptees, by nature, are fragile people and would not pursue or harass someone who rejects them. They will accept "no" for an answer, but sometimes need to hear it themselves. There is no other situation in life where adults receive such protection within the law against personal hurts. As parents, we all would protect our children forever from life's hurts, but this is often impossible. The bottom line must be the rights of the adoptee. They were innocent parties to any and all "contracts" and decisions made regarding their lives.

Some birthparents may feel that their rights are being violated, that they had been promised anonymity. It is an unfortunate truth that this promise, if made, was only made verbally. In

writing, what they signed was a surrender of parental rights, nothing more. It is sad for those who have built their lives on secrecy, believing that they would be protected by the law. But, what if a woman married and never told her husband that she had been married before? If her first husband knocked at her door one day, she could get a restraining order against him if he were a nuisance, but the law could not protect him from finding her. She would have to deal with that lie. Likewise, a birthmother did not have an abortion. She has a living child who should have rights all his own. One citizen should not have the right to override the rights of another.

The same is true of the adoptive parents. Much as we can sympathize with their natural protective instincts, they must learn to let go. Since searching, like prohibition of alcohol, is something that determined people will be compelled to do whether sanctioned by the law or not, perhaps the very sanctioning of it would help many people accept and adjust to the reality of the situation. The time has come to unlock the doors of secrecy.

In an effort to help these parties understand one another, two women, both of whom have been directly effected by adoption in their lives, have joined together to form *Adoption Research and Education Consultants*. It is their goal to work with the three parties of the triad, and their family members, through educational programs, lectures, seminars, and workshops in order to soften the triangle into a circle of love and harmony, the center of their circle, and the center of their concerns being the adoptee.

Adoption Research and Education Consultants was founded by Kathy Basckocky of Kendall Park, New Jersey and Marsha Riben of Old Bridge, New Jersey. Kathy is an adoptee who instituted a search for her biological family in order to obtain medical information for her four children. Marsha is a freelance writer and childbirth educator who, in addition to her three children from her current marriage, has herself surrendered a child for adoption.

Kathy successfully located and reunited with her birthmother last Thanksgiving, and this year had a wonderful reunion with members of her deceased father's family. She has found eleven siblings! She also found much more than the original medical information she sought. Through it all, she has maintained the same close relationship

she always had with her adoptive family.

Marsha was blessed with joy this year, too. She likewise successfully located her surrendered daughter, and although she has made no contact with the child who is only fifteen, she has been in contact with her adoptive parents and has the assurance that her child is very much alive and well. She has made herself available to the parents, should they or her daughter have a need to know anything about her origins.

When they met, Kathy learned first hand of the pain suffered by a woman who surrenders her first born to adoption — a most difficult decision. Through Kathy, Marsha learned what it feels like to be a "chosen child" — the joys and the sorrows this status brings. Their first hand experience, coupled with their vast book knowledge on adoption, have given them the hope that they could share this knowledge with others, and thus turn the often sharp corners of the adoption triangle into a circle of love. □

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REFERENCES

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