

# Adoption May Not Be The Best Option

by Marsha Riben

You've just discovered that your daughter—or perhaps yourself—is pregnant. Marriage is not in the foreseeable future and, for whatever reason—religious belief, too late—abortion is out of the question. You want to do what's best. Is adoption the optimal choice for you, your child, and/or your grandchild?

First, let's consider the advantages you have heard about adoption.

- Children have a "better" life with married couples who can afford to give them every advantage while single women, even with their families' help, would have a difficult life raising their children alone.
- Youth should not be interrupted by the responsibilities of parenting. Child rearing can and should come later, preferably after marriage.
- There are so many couples desperate to adopt and so few babies available because of birth control and abortion.
- Education and perhaps a career should be completed, not interrupted.

Your positive thinking has been reinforced by the fact that we are living under a current administration which is pro-life and pro-adoption. The Adolescent Family Life Act (Title XX of the Public Health Service Act) states that "adoption is a positive option for unmarried pregnant adolescents" and allocates \$14.7 million to teach teens not to be sexually active, while urging surrender of their children if they are. Why should adoption need to be "promoted" and is it necessarily the "best" choice for your family?

Fewer women today are faced with unplanned full term pregnancies due to advances in birth control and the availability of abortion, while at the same time infertility is reaching epidemic proportions. Because of the lopsided supply and demand situation that this creates, the pressure on these few women to surrender is as strong, if not stronger, today as it has been for the past several decades, if perhaps more sophisticated.

There are new vocabularies to sugar coat the pill and presumably make it more palatable. Social workers are advised to use polite euphemisms such as "make an adoption plan" rather than "give up" or "surrender" a child to adoption. Anonymity and confidentiality were believed to be of great concern to the surrendering parents of a decade or two ago and so this was what was promised

to them. A young woman could go to a home for unwed mothers under an assumed name, and rest assured that "no one would ever know."

Today's young mothers are less concerned with concealing their identity. Many are choosing privately arranged adoptions (through attorneys) rather than dealing with traditional private, public or religious adoption agencies because they believe that they will have more input into selecting the adoptive parents and more opportunity to keep the channels of communication open after the placement. (Opponents, however, warn that many of these private arrangements border on grey and black market and offer little protection for the rights of the birth-mother.) "Open Adoption" which is available through some progressive agencies as well, allows for varying degrees of continued relationships between birth and adoptive families. This can be anything from selecting prospective parents based on bios and photos to actually meeting them before hand; from obtaining regularly scheduled photographs and/or letters to visits.

Whether open or closed, however, placing a child for adoption is an irrevocable decision which affects the lives of the child, its birth and adoptive parents, extended families, and siblings forever and should therefore not be entered into lightly. If one would take the time to read a consumer guide before purchasing a major appliance, or ask other car owners before selecting a vehicle, it is advisable to do the same before drawing any conclusions about adoption. Women who have surrendered children to adoption have a great deal of hindsight to offer on the subject.

Mary Anne Cohen, co-founder of ORIGINS, a New Jersey-based national self-help group for women who have lost children to adoption is concerned that open adoption is being promoted as a way to have the best of both worlds—to be a Sunday parent. "One can have the peace of knowing their child, obtaining photos, perhaps even visit in rare instances, without the daily 'chore,' responsibilities...or the rewards of parenting," says Cohen. "Women who surrendered in the 60's and were promised that they would 'forget' and have 'new lives,' often did not. Will pictures replace the loss of the parenting (and grandparenting) experience" which has now been docu-

mented to be the major cause of the birth-mother's ongoing grief? Cohen is further concerned as to who will guarantee the continuance of such private agreements, since our judicial system currently has difficulty upholding child support laws. Cohen concludes, "You either are a parent or you're not. A picture or a letter doesn't change that. A surrendering parent has less rights than a non-custodial parent in a divorce situation."

Gail Davenport, MSW and facilitator of The Birthparent Support Network, counsels women who have surrendered children to adoption. She is also concerned about promises of openness. "Couples who are desperate to adopt will often promise anything," she has found. "Often they make promises that they discover later they are unable or unwilling to fulfill."

In helping to make this permanent decision, here are some facts about adoption that your social worker, attorney, family physician or clergy might not be aware of:

- Many psychologists now recognize that women who surrender children to adoption do not forget, but suffer unresolvable grief. (1) Many suffer "flash-backs" not unlike those suffered by Viet Nam vets.
- According to one study women who surrender their firstborn to adoption suffer secondary infertility at significantly higher—177% higher—rate than that of the general populace. (2) One cannot assume "you can always have another."
- Adoptions are terminated—fail—at a rate of 15%. Adoptive parents die and divorce, often returning children to "the system" with no notification to the original family.
- Surrendering parents are seldom notified if the child they've placed for adoption dies, even if the death is a result of a genetic disease which could endanger the lives of the birthmother's subsequent children.
- Adoptees are overrepresented in therapy. While only 2% of the population is adopted, 25% of those in therapy are adopted. This figure represents not those who have been through multiple placements and foster homes, but those placed in infancy.
- While there are perhaps 40 perspective adoptors vying for each available white, healthy newborn, there are currently 36,000 children who are free and clear for adoption who remain in foster and/or group homes because they are too old, sibling groups, non-white or handicapped.

Pat Palmer, co-ordinator of Searchline, a Texas-based search and support group for adoptees and birthparents says that great loss has been suffered to many women in order to spare their women the pain of childlessness. "Infertility," says Palmer, "is a tragic loss which can perhaps be compared to the loss of a limb. Survivors of both such losses suffer depression, anger, grief, confusion, self pity, fear and a very difficult adjustment of life's expectations. But would you consider giving up your arm or leg to an amputee? Suppose a concert violinist lost his or her arm? Would you feel a sense of debt that he could put your arm to better use than you could? No woman 'owes' another her baby simply because one was more careful or sophisticated than the other," she concludes, referring to the fact that 50% of today's infertility is related to sexually transmitted diseases. Other major causes of infertility are: abortion, delaying childbearing and prolonged use of birth control.

Davenport states: "Black women have seldom, until very recently, been encouraged by their families or society to relinquish their children to stranger (out of family) adoption. Having lived through generation of family disruptions, they maintain strong feelings of continuity and family unity. Further, there was not, until recently, a 'market' for black babies. While middle and upper-middle class women have, on the other hand, lost many of their children in order to save their families disgrace."

Today, many of yesteryear's mothers and grandmothers are reconsidering their decisions. Carol Wright (not her real name) regrets terribly that she encouraged her daughter to relinquish her first grandchild eighteen years ago. "I have never stopped thinking about that baby boy who is now grown. Sheryl and I have cried together every year on his birthday. She and Ted wound up getting married anyhow. We were so foolish, his parents and I. We worried what people would think. They whole town knew anyhow! Now Sheryl and Ted have a beautiful home and two other children, and the son they surrendered so he could have a 'better life'...they found him last year. His parents divorced when he was two and he's been raised by a single parent!" Carol is resentful that they were fed false illusion about adoption.

Cohen asks: "Will we allow our daughters to continue to be used as brood stock to provide babies for the wealthy and married? Or should we stand with pride and support our children and grandchildren, regardless of marital status?" Both Davenport and Cohen feel that the time has come to put an end to the marketing of women and babies as commodities being bought and sold on the streets and in the newspapers of our country. Both women feel that more support systems are needed to help unmarried women and their children. "Every adoption," says Cohen, "no matter how good, begins with a tragedy—a family that was not offered the support it needed to remain together. If the strength of our nation begins with the strength of its families, a mother and her baby need to be recognized as a basic family unit and offered every opportunity to remain together." Davenport concludes: "Adoption, like divorce, should be a last resort, to be offered only after all other options have been explored and exhausted."

While adoption can promise children a different life, it cannot promise that that life will be better unless the child is being removed by the courts from an abusive home. With the divorce rate remaining at 50%, children placed for adoption have a 50/50 chance of being raised in a single parent home despite, and in addition to, their adoption placement. Today, the majority of adoptors are two-income families and remain so after adopting. One must ask if children placed in day care so their married mothers can resume their careers are any "better off" than children placed in day care so their single mothers can return to work?

Betty Jean Lifton, adoptee and author of *Lost and Found* and *Twice Born* reports that adoptees are prone to feeling rejected, abandoned, rootless and "as if a piece were missing" regardless of the quantity and quality of love given by their adoptive families. "Adopted Child Syndrome" is the psychiatric term for this condition and was recently used as part of the defense in the murder trial of a 14 year old boy convicted of killing his adoptive parents. While only a small percentage of adoptees are affected to this extent, it should also be noted that an alarmingly disproportionate number of serial murders such as David Berkowitz ("Son of Sam"), Joe Kallinger ("The Shoe-

maker") and Ken Bianchi ("The Hillside Strangler") have all been adopted.

Pregnancy outcome can seldom be considered in terms of a "final" decision, except perhaps, in the case of abortion. Once a baby is born, whether it is kept and raised by a single parent, whether that parent chooses to marry, or whether adopting out is the option chosen, it must be recognized that each decision will effect many people for a lifetime. The long term, psychological effect of surrender on both adoptee and birthparent are currently being investigated by the psychological community for the first time and should have a marked effect on the decision making of the general public.

#### Footnotes

1. Ryncarson, Dr. Edward K., "Relinquishment and Its Maternal Complications: A Preliminary Study," *Am. Jr. of Psychiatry*, 139:3, March 1982.

2. Deykin, Patti, Campbell, "The Postadoption Experience of Surrendering Parents," *Am. Jr. of Orthopsychiatry*, 54 (2)

#### About the Author

Marsha Riben is a freelance writer who has authored articles on parenting and adoption for several national magazines, and is author of the forthcoming book, "shedding light on...The Dark Side of Adoption."

\* The article by Marsha Riben, "Is Adoption The Best Option?" contains a mis-print. Fifty percent of infertility is NOT caused by sexually transmitted diseases. It should have read instead that fifty percent of infertility is preventable.