

THE HIGHLIGHT of the
NATIONAL AUSTRALIAN ADOPTION CONFERENCE '94

There are two things I wanted to say. One is that I wanted to very much thank the organisers of this conference for the opportunity to be here, and to say how refreshing it is to be in a country where people are interested in changing and moving towards new forms of practice.

And the second thing I wanted to say was a very personal thing, which I want to read.

I wanted to make a statement as a social worker about something that has troubled me throughout this conference, and that is the issue of the responsibility of social workers and other professionals for actions in the treatment of birthparents. It has left many of them, and they've expressed it very eloquently in this conference, with a burning sense of injustice and a deep sense of outrage at the ways that they've been treated, and I'm well aware that we're talking about a much wider context, but I'm talking as a social worker.

I want to say that as a social worker I joined a profession, and I'm proud to be a member of a profession that is so often reviled because it is still, I hope, in a world where there's not very much compassion, a profession that's sometimes at least, prepared to take a stand. I own my profession. I own that my professional responsibility stretches backward in time, just as it stretches forwards. I believe that, irrespective of whatever I have done, there are in addition many actions that I could have taken and haven't, to redress some of the injustices that we have perpetuated as social workers.

As a social worker I listen to the rage and grief and despair of birthparents and I cannot say that I am o.k., I personally didn't do this, or I personally don't do this now. I want to say, now, to the birthparents here that I am desparately saddened by, and sorry for, the things that I as a social worker have done, as a member of that profession, to them. I apologise as a social worker for my neglect, my acts of coercion, my failures as someone with a moral, ethical, legal, and paid duty to care, who did not always do so.

I believe that all professionals in adoption need to acknowledge their personal and collective responsibility, that they are interwoven and inseparable, because that is what it means to be a profession. And I think that until we do that we continue to limit the possibilities of birthparents to find any measure of healing, and that until we acknowledge the responsibility that is ours, we also continue to diminish ourselves as people and as a profession.

We must say, I must say, "I AM RESPONSIBLE. I AM SORRY" and until we do so, I don't see how any birthparents of today or possible birthparents of tomorrow can face a tomorrow in which they will feel that anything is likely to be any different.

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