

The Importance of the Western Australian Apology to Mothers and Fathers brutally separated from their infants

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I first met David Templeman MP at a mental health information weekend about two years ago. What struck me about this gentleman, and he is a gentleman in every sense of the word, was the way that he talked about his little boy and the expected arrival of his baby twins later that year. His countenance softened as he gently spoke of his children. Tears brimmed in the corners of his eyes. They came straight from his heart and my own tears gathered, as my heart responded to his obvious love for his children. I felt the missing and the love for my first born daughter Sharon and my twin grand daughters, Chloe and Jade. Little did I know that day, David and I would share a journey spanning nearly two years. This incredible journey would involve us being instrumental in an historical apology in the WA Parliament. It would be the first apology in Australia to mothers, fathers and children who were separated by forced adoption.

The phone rang several weeks later on a beautiful Autumnal day. It was a lady from the Adoption Research Council in WA. Apparently, the Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital had issued a formal apology to Queensland Mothers for the barbaric and unlawful way they had treated unmarried mothers who gave birth in their hospital. Chris Cole from an organization called the Apology Alliance, had contacted Channel Seven in the Eastern States, who then contacted their Australia-wide Seven network. They were looking for mothers from other States, who had their face covered whilst giving birth and had their children unlawfully taken from them immediately. The Council knew that this happened to me in 1968 and asked if I would be interviewed along with another mum who experienced this in 1982. We both agreed, interviewed for hours, telling our stories which were then edited to six minutes for the evening news bulletin. It's amazing what you can say in such a short period of time and how emotional and overwhelming the loss still affects us today. We called upon the Government to apologize for the hurt and suffering caused to so many.

The WA Minister for Health, Dr. Kim Hames was interviewed for a response and he said that women who were victims of these practices deserved an apology. During this period, I had joined a support group for mothers and their children in Perth. Two of those mothers stormed King Edward Memorial Hospital and Mercy Care, formerly Saint Anne's Maternity Hospital, demanding an apology. Mercy Care, on behalf of the Sisters of Mercy, who attended unmarried mothers in those decades, sent Margaret van Kepple to interview these mothers. The support group I attended was eventually contacted by King Edward Memorial Hospital and a consultation process began concerning an apology. After the initial consultation, the whole matter went deathly quiet and we heard nothing further for months. Mercy Care, however, issued personal apologies to our two mothers while King Edward remained silent.

Whilst attending the group, I heard of the tragic suicide of one of the mothers, who was involved in litigation with the Catholic Church over these practices and whose reunion with her taken child was devastatingly unsuccessful. The stress, pressure and pain were too much. She ended her life and her two further children were left without a mother.

All the old feelings of grief, frustration, betrayal and anger consumed me for several days. I knew I had to do something to bring this out into the open. I could not live with the shame of past adoptions any longer, knowing that at any moment around Australia, one of these Mums or one of their children would take that fatal step to end their pain. A burning sense of injustice and a promise to my daughter years ago to write our personal story, sent me with a fierce determination to the keyboard of my computer. Several hours and many tears later I finished the story. I picked up the phone and made an appointment with David Templeman. Instinctively, I knew that he possessed the compassion, emotional wisdom and a heart that would listen and care.

I will never forget that day in his office. There I was, feeling so vulnerable and exposed. The shame still hung heavily on my shoulders as I told him my story. As I shared the moment in the story, when they violently severed my child from my body and took her away, I broke down and sobbed. Slowly I gathered myself together and I realized that he was crying too. Two hearts joined together at that moment and we began a journey to fight for justice, public acknowledgement and recognition of a great and terrible wrong.

Over this time I had become acquainted with Christine Cole, convener of the Apology Alliance. I describe Chris as a spiritual human being with a true, kind and generous heart. I am honoured to call her my friend. She also happens to be a walking encyclopaedia on the subject of historical adoption. Chris selflessly and endlessly supplied research, sharing her knowledge with David and myself. As David and I became more informed on the subject, via the spirit and knowledge of this wonderful woman, two hearts became three hearts and in so doing, connected us to the collective heart of many brave and beautiful mothers around the country.

David made an appointment with Senator Louise Pratt and took me to see her in Perth. I supplied her with all the information that Chris had passed on and also a copy of Chris's book she co wrote and co edited - *Releasing the Past (Mothers Stories of their Stolen Babies)*. This book came about as a result of the NSW Inquiry into Past Adoption Practices and was funded by that States Department of Community Services. Louise offered her support.

The silence remained deafening from the Government and King Edward. David raised the subject in Question Time in the Parliament – again, there was little response. By this time, the year was nearly over and David became a proud, new father of twins. It was a busy time for him, Parliament for the year drew to a close and would not resume until February. David contacted me in the New Year saying that he had an opportunity to speak on any subject with the opening of Parliament and asked if he could encompass my story in a speech to the house concerning our issue. Something inside me knew this was meant to be, I knew I had to agree, as I told my daughter long ago, I would one day write our story. Our story would not end up a best seller or gathering dust on a book shelf or tucked away in a bottom draw. Our story would forever, be placed on the public record in the Parliament's Hansard. Our story would become the catalyst leading to an historical and deeply significant moment in our State's evolution. The first apology to the mothers, fathers and the children separated by barbaric, cruel and unlawful past adoption practices. I can think of no other place more powerful or more permanent to serve as a reminder of the pain and suffering of mothers, fathers and their children.

A Life Changing Day – David takes my story before the Parliament (Wednesday 24th February 2010 – Western Australian Parliament Hansard record available)

I awoke this day from a shocking nights sleep with the same gut wrenching feelings of terror and loss that I experienced the day that my mother took me on a bus up Hay Street, Perth to face the Welfare Department.

Today, I was to travel on a bus, up that same street, to go to Parliament House and present my story through David Templeman MP to the Parliament of Western Australia. The panic was rising, I couldn't breathe, swallow, my mouth was bone dry and I felt faint and sick. The body remembers and never forgets the impact of trauma. I fell to the kitchen floor as I allowed these emotions their full expression and I sobbed to the point of dry reaching. I allowed full expression with loving attention to the emotions of the young, terrified 16 year old girl who has been a part of me for 41 years. Back then she was silenced, humiliated, abused and shamed, today she was given permission to speak. David was to give her that voice.

As I walked up the steps, I didn't think that my knees would support me and the hole in my gut reminded me of that past time, when I got on a bus to travel up Hay Street. My gut was empty and aching that day too, for the week before, my beautiful baby had been taken away as soon as she was born, earmarked without my permission for adoption.

The smiling face and warm hug of Carmel from ARMS gave me a much needed injection of courage. A camera man was there to take footage outside the House. Other mothers arrived. Brave and beautiful women who have for nearly thirty years, tirelessly supported and fought for the truth to be told.

The media filmed us walking together up the steps and holding the banner that was hand stitched by members of ARMS Western Australia. The faces of young teenage mothers stared out from the banner (the fallen) together with the much fought for photos of their lost and treasured babies. A profound moment of acknowledgement washed through me as I felt the emotions beneath every stitch, devotedly put in place by now aged but loving hands. I could imagine the tenderness as the women sowed, years of pent up tenderness for their children aching for expression working its way painstakingly through the banner.

There was a delay in the House as a motion from question time had to be debated then David escorted us into the House. As we listened to the banter that seemed never to end, I was aware of my body tightening. By the time that the vote was carried and David stood up my body was frozen rigid and Stewart and Carmel took my shaking hands.

I was conscious of Members leaving the House after the debate and I thought - nobody is even going to listen. David commenced and the Members were busy, involving themselves in background conversations and looking at papers - not paying much attention at all.

Within minutes everything came to a stand still. You could hear a pin drop as David spoke for us and with us. David broke down at one particular point in my statement and the members turned to face him. They were glued to every word. Several Members were starting to display emotional responses. David finished my statement and delivered a very powerful, heartfelt and inspiring speech to the House. It was so far reaching in its affect, that Members of the Government crossed the floor to shake his

hand, as well as Members of the Labor Party. I finally relaxed my grip which had put poor Carmel's hand to sleep. But she did not flinch. She endured this discomfort until I let go.

Troy Buswell (a real bloke), approached us in the Gallery. With tears in his eyes he stated that his father had died when he was eight and that he had two sons. He could not imagine losing a child and a father almost at the same time. He was astounded that over 200,000 Australian women across the country experienced the same horror as I had experienced. We were excited and empowered. As we walked out of the door, we met Dr. Kim Hames. For the first time in my life, I looked a doctor in the eye, held his gaze, firmly gripped his hand and assertively said "and I am Sue." (I always deal with Doctors awkwardly, through a lens of confusing, painful feelings.)

All manner of invisible forces were set in motion that day. Daniel Emerson, a journalist with the *West Australian* ran the story. He contacted me and after long discussions with Chris Cole and I, armed with the historical facts supplied by Chris, he bravely exposed past adoption practices as unlawful and barbaric in the next edition of the *West Australian*. Dr. Kim Hames went on radio and several mothers did radio interviews. Eric Ripper, Leader of the Opposition called upon the Premier to apologize in the Parliament and the Government, placed in a position of public scrutiny, complied, and agreed to apologize. David kept up pressure, reminding them to consult with the mothers and Daniel was constantly nipping at their heels.

I wrote to Dr. Kim Hames' advisor, introducing myself and commending them on the historical significance and re-enforcing the vital necessity of an apology to begin the healing. I became party to limited consultation over the months that followed and was invited to attend the formal media release on the steps of Parliament House to announce the date of the apology. I was to be present to answer a few questions. The Government's comments in the press had somewhat downplayed the issue with diluted explanations and excuses. I seized the opportunity to speak at the media conference saying I would make a statement. I was told I had to keep it to a few hundred words and I worked for weeks with Chris's help, honing this very important statement. It was designed to shock with the truth and draw attention to one of the darkest periods in our nation's history. I managed to reduce it down to 700 words; 700 words I could now recite like a parrot having edited it so many times. In the end I thought it doesn't matter if it takes more time, this was our one opportunity for Australia to hear the truth.

The day arrived and I was sick with fear but quietly determined. I lost count of the media that were present, there were wall to wall reporters, cameras and microphones occupying a third of the huge entrance to Parliament House. Dr. Kim Hames spoke and I wanted to disappear for what I was about to read, denounced almost everything he said. My turn came and with David Templeman on one side of me, my daughter Kirsty on the other and a band of supporters behind me – I spoke:

In Parliament this year, Mr. Templeman exposed the truth about past adoption practices. He spoke of the horror in our nation's hospitals and of the barbaric, government sanctioned policy and practices – that tore babies from their unwed mothers at birth. The Greens called it "institutionalized baby theft" and other MP's have declared - it was a Nazi-style social cleansing exercise and a blatant abuse of human rights.

Past governments wanted ex-nuptial children adopted. It cut welfare costs and they

believed only married couples were fit to raise children, so Welfare Departments advertised these babies as “unwanted”. The “unwanted baby” story became the central theme of welfare propaganda. Society believed mothers CHOSE to give their babies away. They did not!!!

In reality women were preyed upon, traumatized and denied both their civil and human rights. Single, unsupported mothers were treated like breeders, denigrated, dehumanized and de-babied. Removal of babies was systematic, with government, religious and non-religious organizations colluding, in what has now been labelled the adoption industry. Adoption workers acted with impunity. The Act was treated with contempt.

In the Australian Medical Journal 1960, a leading obstetrician urged his colleagues not to worry about breaking the law, when taking babies from unwed mothers - he stated: “The last thing an obstetrician might concern himself [with] – “is the law in regard to adoption.”

Mothers were emotionally, physically and psychologically, de-humanized and de-railed.

They were isolated from family support and heavily sedated with mind altering drugs. They were demeaned, shamed and threatened. Some were tethered or hand-cuffed to beds and physically assaulted. To prevent eye contact and bonding, their faces were covered as they gave birth. Terrified babies were whisked away and their mothers’ screams for them fell on deaf ears. Some mums were told their babies had died, only to have them turn up decades later and some babies not quite perfect enough for adoption, were left in institutions.

This litany of horror finally stopped in 1982, but it wasn’t out of compassion for mothers, it was out of the fear of reprisal - a Health Commission circular warned hospitals of litigation.

Ten years on, Justice Chisolm of the Law Reform Commission officially exposed these practices as illegal. He later testified to a NSW inquiry using these legal terms:

Duress kidnapping..... false imprisonment.....fraud.....Tort of Deceit.

In testimony to the same Inquiry (psychiatrist) Dr. Geoff Rickarby said:

It was a well oiled system ... there was organization and conspiracy at every turn... They were drugged and traumatized then made to sign consents. Young women were in an incredibly powerless position, dealing with a linked series of people, who had marked them out in what was, frankly – conspir-a-torial activity to abduct their babies....

All of the things—the separation from their families, the baby being taken, their faces covered - the power difference was built up over months..... the young woman was put into a powerless, shamed position.... then the drugs were added on top ...

All this was done to the sole legal guardian of the baby, BEFORE the Adoption Act could [come into effect].... [BEFORE] the consent was signed.

At a 1994 adoption conference, Mothers openly wept when a social worker said:

....I apologize for my neglect, my acts of coercion, and my failure as someone with a moral, ethical, legal and paid duty to care.....

Another worker wrote:

I was... part of a profession that obviously failed so many women and their children both by acts of commission and omission failing to challenge a system that inflicted so much pain.

Law Reform Commission lawyer, Cathleen Sherry wrote:

.....their experiences revealed systemic violations of human rights. The treatment..... from doctors, social workers, charitable organizations and government departments violated their right to be free from cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, free from discrimination, free from arbitrary interference with the family, as well as their right to be entitled to special protection as mothers.

The Australian Government admitted in 2005 that past adoption practices had led to another stolen generation.

Our Government is the first Government in Australia to publicly acknowledge the injustice of these practices and we are deeply grateful for their desire to reconcile a great wrong.

To other Governments in Australia and their stakeholders – HANG YOUR HEADS IN SHAME!

We have lived our lives, feeling our maternities were medically butchered. We feel this violation and the loss of our children - in every cell of our being. The trauma is so deep, so complex, that over 40% of us never had another child. Children have suffered, believing their own mothers callously gave them away. Hearts have been shattered; lives have been taken - isn't it time you all publicly apologized for the actions of your predecessors and cleaned up the mess they left behind.

Shaking in my boots, I gathered myself together and answered a few questions. The media release concluded. I had fought my fear for weeks, fear of exposure, ridicule and being judged. These fears invaded my daily thoughts and intruded on my sleep. The nightmares had returned with a vengeance. However, the flame of injustice still burned fiercely, it stared down and confronted my fears. The desire to fight and expose the injustice perpetrated against thousands of long suffering, silenced women and the love for my daughter, carried me over the line that day. It was worth it, we hit the news big time – locally, nationally and internationally. The eyes of the world were upon us.

The six weeks between the press release and the actual apology on the 19th October, are a bit blurred. They were filled with last minute consultations and media interviews. Chris and I became a formidable team, taking part in a lot of productive media interviews before the apology and post apology, to help promote the need for national recognition.

The week of the apology, I was filmed for an episode of ABC's *Can We Help You*, which goes to air on the 26th of November 2010. As part of the filming, the crew actually took

me to parliament on apology day. David and I were concerned about the motion for the apology for I knew that it would be well scrutinized and worded within a legal framework. However, I had taken the government's suggestion to frame the apology within a bi-partisan format, which would involve all Members of the Parliament.

As the Premier read the motion and opened it up for discussion, I felt the atmospheric disappointment as he spoke his guarded words. However, this disappointment was short lived. As each Member rose to speak, many speaking from their own personal tragedy through past adoption practices, the apology blossomed and the healing began. It unfurled like the petals of a beautiful flower. The rain of truth of the members bi-partisan words encouraged it to grow and it reached its true beauty and potential. As the depth of the words started accurately to reflect the depth of the pain, the depth of the cruelty, the depth of the injustice and the depth of the suffering you could hear the tears and the sobbing. The mothers, their children and their families were hearing the words of acknowledgement and validation they have needed to hear for so long. Words they have deserved to hear but have been despicably denied just as they were despicably denied the right to stay together as a family.

Sometimes in life, souls come together to achieve a common purpose, as we all did on that day. In these moments we meet and touch one another at a profound and deep level. There are no words to describe this type of human experience when we set out to achieve and then actualize and satisfy a desperate, long denied need.

SORRY is such a powerful, healing word when genuinely felt and honestly conveyed.