

The Silencing of Adoptees

The views expressed in this essay are based on many years of listening to adopted people.

The emotional side of adoption is an assortment of very complicated and deep feelings on the part of all members of the adoption triangle. In recent years some natural mothers have been relatively assertive about articulating the impact of losing a child to adoption. And, this assertiveness has resulted in a community that is better informed about the issue from the natural mother's perspective. In contrast, adopted people have remained relatively silent about the negative impact of adoption on them.

Indeed, it appears that most members of the general community as well as other members of the adoption triangle remain quite ignorant regarding the negative impact adoption can have on adopted people. Part of the reason for this ignorance is that many adopted people do not feel confident in expressing their views, in particular their most deeply held views.

Put simply, being adopted is like being separated from everyone else by a picket fence. You can see people, talk, laugh and cry with them, but no matter how much you want to be on the same side of the picket fence with them, something stops that from happening. Adopted people are relegated to walk on the other side of the picket fence on your own. As one adoptee once stated, **"being adopted can be one of the loneliest experiences on earth."**

The loneliness can stem from:

- The sense of being alone in the world;
- The evoked feelings of being given away;
- The lack of understanding from those not adopted;
- The incorrect assumption that being adopted is a positive thing;
- The constant reminders of your lack of biological identity;
- Knowing that your adoptive family is not your biological family;
- Knowing and feeling that you are different from most others, etc.

Why do most of us remain silent? From an adopted person's point of view, if you express your true feelings, you run the risk of hurting and angering the people you simply do not want to hurt or anger. The fear of rejection at a conscious and unconscious level also contributes to keeping the adopted person silent. Additionally, a further impediment is having your views dismissed because they do not fit in with the community's positive perception of adoption. Finally, there is the strongly voiced agenda of those who think they know what is best for children. All these impediments contribute to the adopted person's reluctance and lack of confidence to speak out about the negative side of adoption.

It is wrong that adopted people should feel silenced because of the above risks. When you consider the research regarding the impact adoption can have on adopted people our silence becomes very misplaced. For example, overseas research indicates that the rate of adopted people attempting suicide and/or suiciding is four times higher than the non-adopted population rate. A higher

proportion of adopted people experience mental health issues and drug and alcohol problems, all of which can lead to other issues such as homelessness and incarceration within the justice system. Given these issues, there does come a time when adopted people have to consider being more open about their adoption experiences, and particularly about the feelings that the adoption experience so often invokes for adopted people. Adopted people need to do this not only for themselves, but to enable the broader community to develop a more informed understanding that adoption is not as positive an experience for adopted people as some people would have you believe. It may also assist in educating natural mothers and adoptive parents about the feeling side of adoption from the perspective of the adopted person. Additionally, being more open may help reduce the distress of adopted people and the sense of isolation and aloneness that many feel. More broadly, ensuring that health professionals and the general community are well informed about the effects of adoption on adopted people will hopefully result in a more informed community, which can in turn transpose to respectful adoption and IVF legislation and practices that genuinely put the child first and prevent repetitions of past mistakes.

In 2012 and 2013, Australian and State governments apologised to both natural mothers and adopted people for past adoption practices. While adopted people were mentioned in the apology(s), it was clear for most adopted people that the apology(s) were largely for the natural mothers.

In speaking with other adopted people following the apology, many of us felt unsettled and angry, but unable to clearly articulate what it is was that was so upsetting. It may have had something to do with the point that part of the apology voiced the fact that the natural mother had lost a child. In “tossing around” with other adopted people why we felt so unsettled and angry, we concluded that while clearly deeply painful for the mothers, as adopted people we lost our biological mother, father, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents and the right to really feel we belong anywhere. With the exception of those who are adopted, no one seems to understand this and how deeply it can impact the lives of adopted people. But again, to express this view runs the risk of minimising the pain of natural mothers and adoptive parents and hurting the people you simply do not want to hurt. Most adopted people love members of both their adoptive family and their biological family, and to express these feelings of loss can lead to misunderstandings, hurt and possible rejection. So, most adopted people remain silent until they are only in a room with other adopted people.

Regarding the government’s apology to natural mothers, there is no doubt that many natural mothers were not treated well by the health care system or adoption agencies, and for many natural mothers, the adoption of their son or daughter may not have been legal. It is however the view of many adopted people that the majority of natural mothers knew that their child was going to be placed for adoption by the time they were due to deliver their baby. Put simply, the decision to place their child for adoption was made prior to the mother being admitted to hospital. It may be that the mother would have preferred (desperately) to keep her child, but she would have been well aware that her personal circumstances were going to prevent this. Having listened to many natural mothers, the stories may differ, but the themes are very similar. They

were young (often teenagers), single, the child's father was unsupportive as were her parents and there was no single mother's pension (there was a sickness benefits scheme but was only available for a short period of time) that would allow her to raise her child independent of family support. Alternatively, in some cases, the father of the child did want to provide support to the natural mother, but was kept away from the natural mother by their parents. We also know now that some mothers were heavily coerced to the point that some were told their baby had died at birth.

Additional to this, the community view of the day (and still today, in the minds of many people) was that children are better off being raised in an environment that includes a mother and a father. Many natural mothers were told their child would be better off. While there can be no denying that many natural mothers endured dreadful pressures, were these pressures only the fault of government, or was the government of the day just mirroring the view of the community?

Another issue from the natural mother's point of view is their age at the time of the birth of their child. Given the "age of majority" was 21 up until 1972, it could be argued that many natural mothers were too young to be making such an important decision. They were certainly legally too young to be signing adoption papers. Many natural mothers may have an argument that the adoption of their child was not legal according to the law of the day as to what constituted the legal age to be able to sign contracts including adoption papers.

Because every person's experience is an individual one, no one deserves to be placed into a category; however, it is important for the purposes of this piece of writing to be honest about the range of experiences people have had. Clearly, there were some natural mothers who did not want their child. They relinquished their child at birth, and made it clear when their son or daughter sought a reunion that their position had not changed. The realisation of this for the adoptee seeking reunification with their natural mother is overwhelmingly painful. There are also those natural mothers who did want their child and fought for the right to keep and raise them. These natural mothers often had the support of the father of the child and/or their parents. Some also seemed to have a strong sense of self and were therefore more confident in their decision-making. The third group is the natural mothers who wanted to keep their child, but signed the adoption papers because of the pressure(s) from their parents, friends, church, or others. Succumbing to pressure is always a risk when one feels hopeless and helpless and the sense of self is not strong. Many of these natural mothers are the ones who now appear to be stuck in an unresolved form of dreadfully painful grief and regret. However, from an adopted person's point of view, we know that if our mothers had not signed the adoption papers, (anecdotally some mothers have indicated they did not sign the adoption papers) the adoption would not have happened.

Often the "elephant in the room" for the adopted person is that the natural mothers and others more often than not talk about the loss of their child and the impact of this on them. Rarely do you hear people talk about **the loss for the child** or for adopted people in general. Indeed, when adopted people do try to articulate their feelings on the subject, they are often interrupted mid-sentence with comments like "There was no choice," "We were told you would be better

off, " "But you are clearly loved by your adoptive family," etc. These interruptions often leave adopted people with the impression that there is much less interest in our feelings and the consequences on our lives and far more interest in what the mothers experienced. Sadly, this sort of behaviour helps to enforce the view of some adopted people that we were not and still are not a priority. Those adopted people who refuse to be silenced and persist in articulating their views often experience rationalisations that conclude that we hate natural mothers, that we are taking out on natural mothers generally what we can't take out on our own mothers, that we have not had a positive reunion, or that we had an unhappy adoption and are just angry about that. These rationalisations, while false and very hurtful, also contribute to the silencing of adopted people. A message is sent that the views of adopted people only hold worth so long as they are acceptable to others within the adoption triangle and the general community. It also needs to be stated that our hurt and grief is not related in any way to our relationships and love for our adoptive family.

As indicated previously, adopted people often feel unable to express their deeply held views and feelings for fear of hurting others, in particular natural mothers and adoptive parents. While most adopted people accept the expressions of natural mothers that they had no choice, there was no single mother's pension, their parents and the father of their child were unsupportive, etc., these articulations rarely impact on the **feeling side** of adoption for the adopted person. For most adopted people, the feeling side of adoption more often than not was developed during childhood, when our ability to think things through was severely hampered by our age and by the lack of proactive conversations with adults who were in a position to correct the views of the child. As a consequence, by the time the adopted person reaches adulthood, their feelings about their adoption are usually firmly entrenched and difficult to change, even with more informed explanations. While the feeling side of adoption can shift, it takes time and lots of empathetic conversation, including conversations that other members of the triangle commonly try to avoid because of their own unresolved issues of grief.

Another issue that prevents adopted people from speaking out is the fear of rejection. This is very commonly a paramount consideration for adopted people. While the research suggests that adopted people feel rejection more deeply than others, it's also fair to say that many adopted people are very cautious about placing themselves in positions where they will be rejected. The implications of this on adopted people's relationships with others throughout their lives can be severe.

The feelings of adopted people, while not always logical, factual or fair and often potentially hurtful to others are very real to the majority of adopted people and very deeply engrained. The feeling side of adoption is often impossible to change, or will take some robust work to move.

The feelings many Adopted people have include:

- My mother gave me away to strangers, did not want me and did not fight for me;
- I must be unlovable;

- I was not good enough to keep;
- Other mothers kept their child, why didn't mine;
- There must have been something wrong with me;
- If my own mother can give me away so too can my adoptive parents;
- That you straddle both families (adoptive and biological), never really feeling like you belong to either;
- A sense that, no matter how hard they (the biological family) try, you are always alert to the potential for rejection and how you are the "odd one out" in the family because you can never "catch up" with what has gone on in the family in your absence;
- Any baby would have done for my adoptive family, I just happened to be available;
- If I don't behave myself, you will give me away again, or reject me;
- You (adoptive family) cannot possibly care about me when I am nothing like you in looks or personality;
- While I want to meet my natural relatives you (adoptive family) may be angry and reject me if I go through with a reunion;
- Everyone knows I am not really yours, as I don't look anything like you (a particular issue for adopted people from a different ethnic background);
- I know you would have preferred to have a child of your own and I was your last choice;
- Children subject to open adoptions can often fear that if they demonstrate enthusiasm to meet or have a relationship with their natural mother, their adoptive parents may be hurt or angry.

Experiences that accentuate the adopted person's fears and hurt include:

- Natural mothers or fathers not including the child given up for adoption in family speeches when talking about their children;
- Not inviting or allowing their natural/adopted child to attend family functions such as Christmas, weddings or birthdays. This is a particular occurrence after the natural or adoptive parent(s) have died;
- Leaving the adopted person off the family tree, sending a powerful message that the adopted person is not accepted as a member of the family;
- Leaving the adopted person off the death certificate of the adoptive parents (all children are listed on death certificates), sending the message that they were not really accepted as a child of the deceased parent or a legitimate member of the broader family;
- Excluding the adopted person from the Will of the adopted parents (reasons as above);
- Introducing the adopted person to others as your adopted child, or letting other members of the family do so, which serves as a continual reminder to the adopted person that they are not accepted as your own;
- If the adopted person makes a mistake, suggesting it's the "bad blood" coming out;
- Referring to the adopted person as a bastard or allowing other family members to do so. The dictionary definition of a bastard is very clear, but society tends to use the term loosely to describe the "rogues" of society

and a child can take the use of the word to believe they are being told they are bad or have bad blood;

- Telling the adoptive child they were chosen, because when they find out they weren't they will be devastated and feel like "any child would have done." It is better (if true) to say to the child, "While you were not chosen, as you have grown, so has my love for you and it is as strong as it can possibly be," or "The first moment I laid eyes on you I wanted you," etc.
- Having the adopted child become a victim of the adoptive parents' own unresolved grief about not being able to have a biological child;
- Telling lies about anything to do with the adoption. Adopted children are completely reliant on others for information and giving misinformation will erode trust and confidence;
- Telling the child that if they seek a reunion with their natural family the adoptive parents will end the relationship, write the child out of the will, etc.
- Sending the child to bed with an unresolved issue with the adoptive parents. Much thinking can go on in bed and a child's fears of rejection can overtake;
- Undervaluing the grief an adopted person feels when an adoptive or natural parent dies with such comments as, "she or he was not really your mother or father," or "they did not raise you, so why are you so upset?"

Below are some ways to assist in reducing the adopted person's fears and hurt.

- Encouraging conversation about adoption, the child's natural mother, etc., asking the child questions about what they think and feel, explaining why you are doing so. The reasons have been articulated above, but the conversations should not be forced;
- Never suggesting to the child that their natural mother did not want them;
- Always being transparent;
- If there is unresolved grief about not being able to become pregnant, the adoptive parent(s) should seek counselling to minimise the grief and the impact on both the adoptive parent(s) and the child;
- Encouraging and supporting the adopted child to have contact with their natural family if access has been agreed to at the time of the adoption. When the child becomes an adult and finds out that their adoptive family interfered with their contact with their natural family, they will feel that the love of the adoptive family was selfish.
- Where a natural or adoptive parent dies, treating the adoptee's grief the same as any other person's grief on losing a parent; that is, with empathy, sending a sympathy card, flowers, etc.

For an adopted person, grief following the loss of an adoptive family member or natural relatives, in particular the natural mother or father can be somewhat difficult. The adopted person often not only has to deal with the loss, but the attitudes that some members of their family, friends or work colleagues can have that minimise their grief. For example, if an adoptee's adoptive mother or father dies such comments as, "well she or he was not really your mother or father" can be extremely hurtful and distressing. Likewise, if an adopted person's natural

mother or father dies, they may be subject to such comments as, “well it’s not as if she/he raised you.” These statements suggest that the adopted person’s grief is somehow less, and therefore less valid, than that of others. The attitudes can lead to solitude and silence in grief for the adopted person, and a reinforcement of the belief that they are on their own in the world. The experience can certainly leave the adopted person wondering when their grief will be recognised as normal and no different than non-adopted people who experience the loss of a loved one.

Another experience that reinforces the adopted person’s feelings of not really belonging is the need of some members of an adoptive family to introduce the child as the adopted child, rather than “this is my son or daughter.” The media also frequently contributes to this differentiation of the adopted child by consistently referring to a famous person’s adopted children in this way. Adopted people are acutely aware of their adoption; they do not need to be reminded.

Non-adopted people often refer to some adoptions as “successful adoptions.” One assumes this means that the adoptive parents loved the adopted person. While most adopted people are loved by their adoptive parents, successful adoption is not a term that should be encouraged. From an adopted person’s point of view, it is saying that being given away at birth was a successful process. I believe that if you asked every adopted person if they would have preferred to not be adopted 100 per cent would agree. It may be that many would choose their adoptive parents as their parents, but they would all prefer not to have been adopted. Removing a person from their biological roots should never be seen as successful as there has been too much loss for the adopted person. To stress this point, the only people who undervalue the importance of biological roots are those that have always had them.

The articulation of why an adopted person seeks out their natural mother is a difficult one, but it is definitely **not** a rejection of the adoptive parents or other members of the adopting family. It also has nothing to do with whether the adopted person feels loved or unloved by their adoptive family. Some members of the non-adopted community will say that it is only natural for the adopted person to be curious. But again, this statement grossly underestimates the emotions that drive adopted people to seek a reunion with their natural mother or biological relatives. Adopted people will often talk about this feeling they have that just sits there. A feeling that is unsettling, a feeling that something is missing, something is not quite right; a feeling of emptiness. At other times this feeling is much stronger, to the point of being overwhelming. Our whole society is based on genes. Family conversation is often about who takes after who, who looks like who. You cannot go to the doctor without being asked if there is a family history of a health condition. The adopted person is constantly surrounded by people who take their biological identity for granted. But it is much deeper than biological identity. It is a strong, consistent sense that there is something very important missing in your life.

While a large volume of research has outlined the impact adoption can have on adopted people, it is disappointing that this research has not been transposed into decision making when it comes to adults seeking to adopt. Currently,

overseas adoptions and IVF continue with little consideration of the opinions or feelings of adopted people or the research that has demonstrated the real harm caused. To be blunt, the need of adults to be able to raise a child at the expense of the needs of the child continues. While there should be no issue with heterosexual or homosexual couples using IVF in order to have children, we do have a major issue when the identity and/or contact with the biological parent/s is denied to the child. It sends a very clear message that the child's needs are a secondary consideration. To labour the point, I firmly believe that legislation should exist that makes it compulsory that the identity of both the biological mother and father (where known) has to exist on all birth certificates. No child should have to be a victim of identity bewilderment due to their parents' insecurities or selfishness.

Given the recent push to introduce changes to legislation to make it much easier for people to adopt, one has to ask, when will children **genuinely** become the priority? Very few children are unwanted, and to use this as an argument to change legislation not only creates a false premise, but is overtly cruel to the affected children. Circumstances sometimes make it very difficult for mothers to raise their children. If we are genuine in our desire to put children first, then the biological mother ought to be provided with the assistance necessary to keep and raise her child.

Finally, one has to ask, at what point will the research on the impact of adoption on adopted people be respected and used to develop informed conversation, policy, and legislation? While the grief for those families who are unable to conceive a child of their own must be dreadful, removing a child from its family of origin in order to relieve the grief of another adult is not and should never be seen as the solution. Arguing that the children being adopted are not wanted is not only taking us back to the "bad old days" of rationalising the need for adoption, it is also causing deep hurt to the children who are supposedly the priority. Adoption levels need to be reduced, not increased, if we genuinely care about the children.

Adopted person