

How do you write a Submission about the loss of a child? How do you follow a formula?

This is a personal matter that has impacted on every parent that has lost a child through adoption. It colours every section of your life. You live with unacknowledged grief that impacts on every relationship you have with any other person.

It has taken me several months to decide whether I expose my pain & experience to the view of others. Then I realized the Australia community needs to recognize the implications of past decisions. Decisions made 50, 40, 30 years ago are still having an impact on the lives of Australian citizens. It has been said we are not responsible for decisions made in the past, but I believe that we are responsible for the decisions we make now that impact upon others in the future.

I propose to include in this submission sections of letters written to people in authority over the past few years as I personally sought to find answers why certain decisions were made in the past.

Following is part of a letter I sent to the Minister Jenny Macklin in 23/11/2009 as well as sections of a letter I sent to The Sisters of St Joseph.

The letter to the Minister was about matters relating to a Federal Commonwealth Apology to Natural/Birth Parents (it was a subsequent letter following earlier communication).

Thank for allowing me the opportunity to make you aware of the particular circumstances relating to the adoption of my son & the subsequent impact upon him & myself. As you are no doubt aware, each person's circumstances will differ but there will be a common thread.

I recognise that such an apology to Natural parents has vast implications. To identify only a few stumbling blocks

- Variation in state law
- Lack of counseling & support systems
- Impact on adoptive parents
- Perceptions of adoptees
- Status of reunions
- Lack of fundamental research
- Years of pushing the issue **under the carpet**

*The impact of that relinquishment can be both physical as well as psychological. In fact, the reason I have not written earlier is that I have had two hospital admissions since the beginning of October (2009). It is now being considered that the stress relating to how I did **not** handle the relinquishment over the years has set in train some poor immune responses that have led to a variety of continuing medical issues.*

- *I thought I would attempt a chronological exercise that will give you a picture of my experience, & maybe try to put things in context:*

*I grew up in Sydney, & completed my Nursing Training at St Vincent's Hospital, Darlinghurst in 1965. Thus, I was over 21 and a graduate trained nurse when I became pregnant (**not a teenager**).*

Unfortunately, I came from a noted professional Irish Catholic family in Sydney (that was the description in a letter sent by a social worker to the Catholic Family Bureau in Melbourne at that time)! To escape the subsequent difficulties I took an overdose (luckily survived), was sent to a private psychiatric hospital in Ryde run by nuns, and thence to Melbourne. Members of my extended family were apparently told I had had a nervous breakdown – younger relatives have since told me they couldn't understand why I was being sent to Victoria & not being supported by the family!

At the time, my parents were not in the best of health, so what I have since described as the collective Irish Catholic tribe, made the decision I was to go to Melbourne, and go to an unmarried mother's home or work with a nice Catholic family for the duration of the pregnancy, and then the child would be adopted.

Like the daughters from Italian & Greek families – the ways of the old Country held strong - we had sinned & betrayed our families. I was told by a close relation that the distress I had caused my father had contributed to his death.

Subsequently I stayed at what was then called St Joseph's Home for Foundlings & Unmarried Mothers at Broadmeadows for 5 months - February/June 1967. My son was born at Essendon Hospital on June. I was allowed to hold him once before I left the hospital, then my mind shut down. It was not until I obtained my papers via FOI that I realized I had signed the papers relating to his adoption on 4 July 1967 (a week after his birth) – I didn't know anything about 30 days. My knowledge of any support for single mothers was negligible.

Somewhere along the line it was suggested that I do not come back to live in Sydney – work and accommodation had to be found in Melbourne with no assistance. In retrospect, it scares me that I nursed patients in a state of what can only be called oblivion. I never returned to live in Sydney, leaving Victoria in 2003 to live in Queensland).

The following 18 months could only be described as horrific. My father died in January 1968, & there was another significant death in my very small support network - I was in a maelstrom of depression & grief. I also learnt from the social worker with the Catholic Family Bureau, that my son had not been adopted as he was not well and had to return to hospital as he was not thriving, just like his mother – I tried to see if I could overturn my decision to allow the adoption. Nevertheless, as hard as it may be for people to comprehend now – no assistance was offered in any way. He was not adopted until late December 1967.

I still can only remember bits & pieces of those events, in fact I did not realize how much memory I had lost for at least 20 years, when for the first time I had counseling following listing of my name for contact following the change in Victorian Adoption law in the mid-eighties. I think that may indicate the depth of the pain & distress.

Luckily, in the early 1990s I discovered ARMS (Vic) & met women like myself. Try and imagine that from 1967 to 1993 I told only four or five people that I had had a child & that he had been adopted. I did not even tell medical practitioners unless the question was specifically asked. I had no other children – so I lied & dissembled all those years. In one of the more bizarre circumstances I encountered, I was a member of the ALP (Vic) Health & Welfare Policy Committee in the 1980s when we were discussing changes to adoption law change in Victoria – I told no one on the committee about my situation.

Can you imagine the internal stress that I and others were experiencing? I felt that I cried nearly every night from 1967 until my reunion with my son. I would joke with my husband that he should claim for a *rusted* shoulder. ***One of the strictures verbally imposed after adoption was to go away, forget & get on with your life!***

Thus you somehow compartmentalised your working & academic life. What pressure that need for secrecy imposed on our health & well-being can only be imagined.

I had no other children. The irony of it all was that I was diagnosed with endometriosis!

I learnt to & I still do hold my emotions in control, the façade remains intact!!

This became very apparent for me when the beatification & proposal of sainthood for Mary McKillop was being discussed at length in the media in 2009 and 2010. I was compelled to wonder if this would be the time that relinquishing mothers like me would receive recognition, an apology or some type of consideration after many years of pain & distress.

I took the opportunity to write to the Sisters of St Joseph to express my current (2009) concerns:

"The five months at St Joseph's in Broadmeadows in 1967 profoundly altered my life forever. The discussion about the canonisation has ensured that I am now having continual "flashbacks" and a continual sense of nausea. I have no idea how many other women are feeling like me but I would guess quite a number are experiencing similar reactions. Forty years and the entire issue is still ignored & we still keep silent in our grief.

My pain has been such that I have never again been a practising Catholic. Individual sisters in your order have attempted to reach out, but there never appears to have been steps taken by the order in general to acknowledge the physical and emotional damage caused.

I am attaching an adapted short piece I wrote for a liaison officer in Federal Minister, Jenny Macklin's office supporting the desire for a national apology to birth mothers. It has frequently been said to me that this is just how society was at the time – I just see it as lack of support and compassion, and ongoing punishment.

I could write at length but I think the two attachments spell out my particular continued distress.

I never achieved the success I might have because I was fearful of embarrassing my family. I undertook roles that carefully kept me below the public radar.

Did anyone think of the impact of your actions as a community? Are you aware how many birth mothers had no other children? So many questions but no answers from those that caused the pain."

Was it a good adoption experience for my son? Yes & no. His adoptive mother died when he was eleven, he was then sent to boarding school – *it will be good for him!* He ran away as soon as legal to various parts of Australia, had experiences, good & bad. He has met a partner, who has the wit to understand him. But he fears to trust, and his sense of self-worth is very badly damaged.

Do we need help ? Yes.

I have at last found a psychologist who is helping me peel back the layers of self-protection – but it's a continued financial cost. I don't think I should have to keep paying because Society decided I was a 'bad & worthless woman' so long ago & that my son should not have to bear the burden of a "choice" I was forced to make so long ago.

As the terms of Reference for the Committee ask for a consideration of

(b) the potential role of the Commonwealth in developing a national framework to assist states and territories to address the consequences for the mothers, their families and children who were subject to forced adoption policies.

I say:

We have been hidden in the shadows for so long; please allow us to come into the light.

For those of us lucky enough to have reunited with our children

Let us have some real joy in those reunions so healing of ourselves & our children can begin.

For the parents not reunited with their children at least give a balm to their hearts & souls, & Allow them to grieve with support of a caring community.