

I am writing to outline the practises that were in place in regard to adoption in the early 1980s, to which I and my son were subjected and which resulted in his loss to another family and for which I have suffered grievously and continue to do so 29 years later.

In 1982 at age of 18 years I fell pregnant to my then boyfriend whom I had been going out with for two years. I was working as a student nurse at that time. Initially though shocked at the news we planned to marry. However several months into the pregnancy he changed his mind and left me. I was devastated, frightened and unsure what to do - whether to raise my child alone which was still thought of as a dubious option in the strict Catholic background from which I came, or adoption.

My uncle who is a Marist Brother suggested to my parents that I be sent to St Anthony's Home for Unmarried Mothers at Croydon, Sydney to see out my pregnancy and my parents agreed to this. So in late 1982 I arrived at St Anthony's for my last trimester. My feelings toward my family about this I will not discuss here as it is not really relevant to the enquiry. Needless to say I had already been judged and stigmatized by society before arriving at St Anthony's where this process was justified and intensified.

Though expected to assist with cleaning commercial sized bathrooms and kitchen which was difficult in late pregnancy, the nuns and helpers were kind enough to us, though of course viewed us as 'immoral'. Notably the social worker from the Catholic Adoption Agency was our only regular 'counsellor' whilst in there. My issues with the practises there are as follows:

Only girls considering adoption were allowed into St Anthony's at that time and I have learnt recently that this was a deliberate strategy to try to prevent influence on us to consider other options such as keeping the baby.

We were given absolutely no information re options other than adoption for our babies such as Government help available to us or options such as fostering. My understanding is that this was illegal as we were supposed to be given information re options as part of counselling in regard to adoption. Bear in mind this was pre internet days and as a socially isolated, stigmatised and vulnerable group of young women we were very reliant on those in a position of power over us, which was largely those charged with our care at St Anthony's as most of us had few visitors.

We were given absolutely no information about the long term effects on ourselves or our children post adoption. We were told we would go on to lead normal lives and that our children would have wonderful upbringings. These were lies and they knew it. This appears to have been a deliberate course of action by the Catholic Adoption Agency and I can categorically state if I had been made aware of any detrimental outcomes for my baby then the adoption would not have gone ahead. So whose purposes were they serving? Not mine or my baby's. We appear to have been just a part of a process to supply babies to morally 'correct' married couples. It is particularly hurtful to me that this stance was chosen as it views the terrible life long grief and pain of the birth mothers as nothing more than an unfortunate necessity in the process, let alone the potential risks to our children. Information on the life long

mental health issues for both birth mothers and babies was well documented by 1982 yet they deliberately withheld this information. This was both immoral and illegal.

Concurrent to receiving no information about other options and long term outcomes of adoptions as outlined above, we were also subjected to continuous and insidious brainwashing, so effective that I am still trying to come to terms with the reality of the situation now. We were presented with 'sparkly' families to consider giving our children to that had all the elements which we did not, such as a father, a marriage, a nice house, a stable environment. We were to compare these families to ourselves ie. We had nothing to offer our children as we were amoral, poor, largely alone. The message was if we cared for our children we would do the best thing for them which was to give them up and if we kept the baby we would be putting our child at risk and were being selfish. As an isolated and very guilty group of young women already, this constant manipulation was very effective.

St Anthony's should have been called a 'Pre Adoption Centre' as no preparation for motherhood at all was given. We were given no information or encouragement to learn anything at all about motherhood or childcare. And this is how we spent our final months before birth. I was actually encouraged to learn the guitar. How totally unprepared in our minds we were for even considering motherhood. This appeared to suit St Anthony's and the Adoption Agency's purposes I am sure.

On the January 1983 I gave birth to my son, after a long labour. He was born at RNS Hospital, Sydney as I could not go to St Margaret's which St Anthony's girls usually did, as I had worked as a student nurse there shortly before and so knew some of the staff. The hospital staff treated me quite well during labour but without my permission chose to put my son on another floor to me which was difficult to reach. Nevertheless once the epidural had worn off I set off and found him and picked him up and held him for the first time. I was not allowed to be involved in any of his care or to have him with me and as I was already grieving his impending loss and feeling powerless and alone I did not persist in asking. All this took place even though I was legal guardian in every way at that stage. And so even in hospital my experience of what it was to be a mother was restricted by others.

The social worker from the Catholic Adoption Agency came to visit me 3 1/2 days after my son was born to sign the papers. I understand the legal requirement was 5 days. I was miserable with the 'baby blues' and alone and the social worker reiterated to me the wonderful couple waiting for him and followed this with my shortcomings. I was made to feel I was in no way good enough to care for my own child and he would have a much better life without me. I had made a mistake and this is how I should make up for it. No other representatives were present to support me – just the social worker and I. The biggest regret of my life is that she bullied and brain washed me into signing that paper. 29 years later and I still cannot fully take in how it happened.

The worst moment of my life came the following day when I was discharged and left the hospital without . I remember kissing him on his little bald head and cuddling him before putting him in his crib and leaving the room sobbing. I tried to console myself with it was just my pain and I was doing the 'right thing' for my son

but it went against everything I felt as his mother to leave him unprotected. But what right had I to get in the way of what was 'best' for my son?

So was it a voluntary adoption? The manipulation, social isolation, coercion, withholding of information and outright brainwashing I was subjected to suggest otherwise. We were judged and used. It was my first time through a system which they had had decades to 'perfect' – what chance did I really have of keeping my son? Why did they not put the same amount of thought and energy into assisting Matthew and I to stay together such as would be done now? I am both jealous of and grateful that single mothers are allowed to exist in our society today without the threat of adoption over their heads.

And so I went home to wait out the 30 day period following signing of the adoption papers. I was deeply distressed and confused. I loved my child but how could I keep him? As stated I had received no information at St Anthony's so I attempted to find out what was available to me with very limited success. I had conditional support only offered by my parents and the messages in my head that my care was substandard and not to be selfish. And so I lost my son.

I have a little diary written at the time showing my thoughts in the decision making process and it reads as a very frightened young woman with the ideas as outlined above in her head and no idea of what the emotional fallout would be, nor the options open to me, evidenced by thinking I had to work full time and look after as well.

The fall out from the adoption has been a never ending struggle for me that continues to the present in various forms. I was initially very depressed and at times suicidal for a period of about 3 years after I lost . No counselling was offered post adoption by the Catholic Adoption Agency. We were left to try to manage our grief by ourselves. It was as if we had no real feelings for our children. Did they think we were from Mars and our feelings were any different toward our children than anyone else's for theirs?

I sought help by myself via a counsellor attached to the hospital I was working at and she was ultimately helpful but unfortunately had an adopted child herself so invalidated much of the grief I felt, suggesting what a wonderful gift I had given another family. Unmarried mothers' babies' were obviously the solution for childless families.

When I came home after his birth, I had to keep asking for information about through the Catholic Adoption Agency. Initially I got some lovely letters and photos. Each letter hurt terribly as I could see clearly what I was missing out on. I resented having to "beg" for information about my child but was aware that I was at their mercy as I had no rights. I gave up trying to get information after several requests were ignored and after my new husband rang to ask for information on my behalf the social worker sent along a letter which was sent by the adoptive parents ONE YEAR EARLIER with a cheery little note about how it "must not have been sent". I was devastated and felt manipulated and like a nothing, "in the way" of this new family forming. I gave up for my own mental health. The adoptive family and

later probably think I didn't care – I was just being manipulated by the Agency. I was of no consequence to them.

Like many birth mothers I was grieving and depressed and not as careful with my care as I should have been. I felt the loss of _____ terribly. Two years after birth I fell pregnant again unmarried to my now husband. This time the baby and I were apparently 'safe' from the pressure of adoption as my husband stayed right by my side (and has ever since). We got married, and I cried when I got to bring my daughter home from the hospital as I hadn't been able to bring _____ home. I still used to look at my baby and imagine what _____ would have done at each stage. I also looked at children his age and imagined him doing what they did. I was so envious of these other mothers able to have their child with them. Even now I look at men _____ age and wonder what he is doing, what he looks like, is he even alive.

It took me 10 years to learn to live with _____ loss at all. But even now 29 years later I feel that loss as an empty space inside me every day. Along the way I have successfully raised four more children during which time we have had many challenges as a family including serious health issues and serious 'teenage' issues. I have held down a responsible job in nursing and have a very close marriage and nuclear family. I know now that they were wrong in saying my care would not have been good enough for _____ – I have spent my life caring for others. I was vulnerable to those awful manipulative messages, that pressure, the brainwashing.

Try as I might I have often felt disconnected from life and other people and mistrustful of all, putting on a 'front' to cover the pain underneath. I have learnt this is a common response to the trauma for many birth mothers. I also had difficulty initially bonding with my other children post birth for a short period and I put this down to the trauma of _____ birth which flooded back to me at each subsequent birth.

I often feel birth mothers must be like Vietnam Veterans. You can't "fix" us. We have been through horrors, come back changed forever and been abused by an ignorant public throughout, then ignored. I have flashbacks unexpectedly to things that happened with _____ and beyond and the hurt is right there. So I bury it deeper and more secretly to try to protect myself from more hurt. I feel that physical pain of grief again now like I had so many years ago and wonder how I can deal with this and will it ever end. It makes me feel hopeless and I feel a big gap between me and my husband as I know he does not know how this feels at all even though he cares about me. I feel alone. It is more than 29 years now since I fell pregnant with _____. It feels like a prison sentence for life with grief and guilt and loss as companions.

This year on _____ birthday I became inconsolable with grief, crying most of the day and aware that I could no longer bury my feelings about losing _____ and that I have to look for him. I have become physically ill with weight loss of over 10 kilos and multiple health issues. And so I applied for a Supply Authority.

Immediately following this I suffered a physical and emotional breakdown. I am now experiencing symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome including flashbacks and hyper vigilance. I have been suicidal at times due to wanting to stop the severe emotional pain and wanting to just go to sleep and not wake up. I find it difficult to

leave home for extended periods due to anxiety and the need to feel safe and am having difficulty not distancing myself completely from people including my own children. I have been diagnosed with major depression and have commenced on antidepressants. I am shocked, as is my husband, at the depth of emotions I have managed to bottle up unresolved over all these years when I felt I had been dealing with things as well as I could. We have recently told our four children, now young adults, about [redacted] and they are supportive but very concerned about me particularly when I have been suicidal. I have decided after careful thought to cut off my relationship with my parents and many of the older members of my family due to their involvement in [redacted] adoption such as sending me to St Anthony's and lack of support. Adoption has ramifications for many generations. I have also lost my religion, feeling I can no longer be part of the group that treated me in such a cold and calculated way.

I am currently receiving counselling from PARC (Post Adoption Resource Centre) though I find this difficult as it is not lost on me that some of the people involved in the commencement of PARC were the very people involved as social workers with the Adoption Agencies. How appropriate was this? I am assured these people have moved on now but remain distrustful of these services that screwed me over in the first place with [redacted] adoption. Ahead of me are consultations with a psychologist to assist with the flashbacks etc. and an organized program run by PARC with several other birth mothers to help us to deal with the long buried grief and loss. I believe it will be a difficult but helpful course to help me to finally start to 'heal'. Then there will be the traumas involved in meeting [redacted] and establishing some sort of relationship if I am lucky. It is going to be a lengthy path back to a normal life for me and I am so disappointed at having to start this process again as I feel I have been suffering for many years already and trying very hard to live my life productively. But this is my reality. Adoption has been a disaster for me.

Since beginning the search for [redacted] I have realised that I have not ever been "allowed" to have a copy of my own child's birth certificate – like it never even happened. The legal attitude seemed to be that after the adoption, natural mothers should become conveniently invisible. It has only just occurred to me that I have as much legal right as anyone else does to seek to know my son. I had equated no legal rights with no rights ever to see my son.

My sense of loss has not diminished – it grows over time with the knowledge that I have missed out on more and more of [redacted] life for 29 years now. I know I will never have the bond with him that we should have had and can only hope to forge something good for both of us.

I have yet to find out the consequences of adoption for [redacted] and can only hope to find him well and having had a happy upbringing which I now understand there was no guarantee of, contrary to the fairytale we were spun. I am aware that I will have to explain myself to him (again I feel shame and regret) and hope he understands that indeed he is loved and missed and has a place waiting for him in my family should he decide to be part of it. But I know often reunions don't work out so well and we may all lose out again. The ramifications of adoption never end.

The greatest trauma of my life was preventable. With some initial goodwill and encouragement I need not have lost my son. Single parenting may not be easy but adoption has been so much harder. The damage is done and cannot be fixed. That baby, those years have gone forever and it need not have been this way. My struggle now is how do I live with this? Times may have moved on but the damage is lifelong.

I feel those institutions and agencies, as well as individuals involved in the illegal and immoral adoption practises as outlined above should be held accountable for them.

