

To Whom It May Concern:

I was 18 and unmarried when I got pregnant, a brainy but naive college freshman with big dreams and a very deep longing for love. My Catholic parents, with the help of priests and nuns and social workers, whisked me away to home for unwed mothers on the northern edge of Boston where I was hidden until my son was born. I relinquished him in order to be allowed back home and become part of my family again.

This happened in 1967, a year when about 80,000 other unmarried girls in the United States relinquished their newborns to closed adoption. During the half century after that, I never stopped grieving for my son or longing for a reunion with him.

That seemed impossible because closed newborn adoption was shrouded in silence. The baby's birth certificate was immediately 'amended' to the name of his new family. His original birth certificate – my son's bore the name I'd given him, Angus MacDonnell, for my beloved paternal grandfather – was sealed by the courts, locked away forever. Neither my son nor I had any legal access to crucial identifying information about each other.

Lies, secrecy and silence have been integral to closed newborn adoptions no matter how damaging this has proven to be to those impacted. Once I returned to the family home, my experience as a birth mother was never to be spoken of again. And it wasn't. All those years, I carried my sorrow inside myself. Sometimes it was a scorching flame; other times, an icy shard, but it was always there and always painful.

My silence, the 'secret' that I'd given up an infant lost any possible purpose or meaning ages ago. After all, the mother and father who'd shipped me off, hidden me away, shamed me, and refused to acknowledge either my child or my sorrow, passed on years ago.

As for me, I completed my education, married, had three more children and a reasonably successful career as a journalist, novelist, and professor of literary writing. But the grief never left me. I struggled through bouts of depression and anxiety (and two of breast cancer) but years of therapy never alleviated the shame and sorrow.

For many years I tried to find my son, blocked by sealed court records. I didn't have the resources to keep going. When I pushed too hard, I'd fall into a pit of despair and, with responsibility for the wellbeing of my family, I couldn't afford to go there. On the advice of a therapist, I began to treat the loss of my son as a death.

Soon after that, the laws in Massachusetts changed. Adults adoptees could get access to their original birth certificates. And my son found me!

With my name, and his birth name, Angus MacDonnell, a 15-minute Google search was all it took. We have been in reunion now for five years.

It's crucial that adoptees to have access to their original birth certificates, which give them access to their genetic heritage. That information strikes me as a birth right. It is a first vital step in enabling offspring and birth mothers to find one another. Whatever the outcome of that knowledge, and those reunions, happy or tentative, the toxic silence has been broken, great mysteries have been solved, and abiding sorrow has been eased.. The value of this has been proven countless times in recent years. I wish this outcome for every adopted child and birth mother who desires it.

Sincerely

Julia MacDonnell Chang