

Subject: Birthmother Support for Access to Original Birth Records

To legislators and concerned others:

I am a birthmother who was forced to surrender my firstborn son in 1965, the height of what is now known as the “baby scoop era.” I have never asked for or wanted “protection” from the son I surrendered. For many years, the trauma remained unspeakable. My grief—unacknowledged by anyone—was too intense. I couldn’t even say the word “adoption” for fear of breaking down. My letters to Children’s Home Society to try and find out if my son was OK were unanswered except to say that my letters would be put in my file should he or his family ever inquire. With extreme difficulty I was able to find my son when he became an adult. At that point I learned the many lies given to the adoptive parents and to me. I also learned that nothing from me was put in the files and that the social worker had said that I saw my baby and then requested adoption! I was never allowed to see my baby and I NEVER requested adoption. The social worker came to my hospital room within an hour of his birth and told me that unless I could pay the medical bill, I had to sign the relinquishment. She knew I had not even a dime. They had put me in a doctor’s home doing housework and looking after four children—for only room and board. So, no, this was not an “adoption plan” that was made freely and with careful consideration. Even the term “adoption plan” is an insult.

When I returned to graduate school in 1991, I did my master’s degree research on a cross-cultural analysis of adoption practices. Ours is a unique and profit-driven system, with no acknowledgement that closed adoptions provide cover for unethical and illegal practices and that to forbid one group of people access to their original birth certificate is a human rights abuse. It is a basic human need to know your origins, to know where you came from and to know your biological inheritance. This need is recognized by people in other cultures and by the International agreement on the rights of children. It can also be a matter of life and death to know your birth family’s medical history.

When I did my doctoral research, I gathered life histories from 56 mothers who had relinquished a child in previous decades. (By the way, none of them had asked for confidentiality or been “promised protection.” in fact, most participants expressed great relief at being able to tell someone their experiences who could listen without judgement. The contradictions imposed on us were insurmountable: “If you really love your baby you will give him/her up to parents who can provide everything that you cannot.” Our own love had no value. The social workers and lawyers had remarkably consistent narratives—such as “Do you want your child to be called a bastard on the playground?” Yet, the so-called generous and redeeming act of surrender was turned upside down should we have the temerity to speak about our loss and grief: “What?! You gave up your own flesh and blood?”

I think for most of us, the choice to remain silent has much more to do with stigma and shame, and with fear of losing our mental stability by having the trauma revisited. One of the birthmothers who had originally contacted me for search help responded in this way to my invitation for her to participate in my birthmother research. She said “Your daughter. . . gave me information over a year ago. . . I couldn’t even read through it until this week. I’m not ready to contribute anything [to the research], but I am ready to thank you sincerely for your work with

adoption issues. I hope to have the courage to get past my grief enough to help other people that are going through (or have gone through) this living hell."

"Thank you," she said, for having the courage to do what you are doing. It is so important to break the silence and change the dynamics of adoption. . . . Right now my heart and tongue are too broken. . . ."

I am tired of hearing opponents of the right to access one's own birth certificate claim that they are protecting those of us who lost our children. And yes, DNA has helped some of us to find biological family—but many cannot succeed in their search through that avenue. Everyone should have the right to their true birth certificate—not the official lie of the amended birth certificate. I was so angry, so diminished, so devastated to finally see my son's amended birth certificate and see some man and woman I had never even met, claim to have given birth to him. How can that be done?

Yes—EVERYONE should have the right to the truth. And most of us mothers who had to surrender in those decades would so love to have the peace and resolution of knowing the fate of our lost children.

Thank you for listening.

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