

# Branching Out



Welcome to the Autumn edition of Branching Out, the first for 2010! It seems as though this year is moving by at such a rapid rate, it is hard to believe we have already entered April. Since our last Branching Out release at Christmas time 09, much has been progressing here at PARC.

As stated in the December issue, we welcomed two new members of staff to PARC, Fiona and Sabina who have hit the ground running and quickly become integral cogs in our machine! It is wonderful to have them on board and to feel the benefit of a full team.

So far this year we remain busy at PARC, with the majority of focus placed in our counselling and intermediary work. The first Adoption Connections meeting of 2010 was held on site here in Bondi in February, welcoming large numbers to listen and participate in the experience. A big thank you to all who attended and particularly to our courageous speakers for telling their stories, how privileged we are to have you share with us.

In some rather significant news, that some readers will have already been privy to, plans are in place for PARC to move office location from Bondi to a Benevolent Society premises in Hurstville, further south-west. The date for this move has not been confirmed, however we anticipate it taking place after mid-year 2010. Whilst feeling sad to leave our historic beach-side quarters, it is exciting to be moving to a newly renovated and resourced site which we hope will service our clients in the best way possible. We acknowledge here as a team, that this change may feel disruptive or challenging for some clients, however we hope that this move marks the beginning of a new and progressive chapter for our service. Further updates will be posted on our website:

<http://www.bensoc.org.au/postadoption>

In this issue of Branching Out, the focus is on 'fathers' affected by adoption, whether birth fathers, adoptive fathers or adoptees becoming fathers. This topic was first inspired by stories from fathers encountered here at PARC and the awareness that there are many fathers' stories that remain unheard. In particular, the birth father perspective was neglected in past practice, and their



Continued on page 2

## Contents

PAGE 2 Adoptee as Parent: - A personal account

PAGE 4 — *Birthfathers* by Sandra Martin

PAGE 8 — Book review by Gary Coles

PAGE 10— Theatre review of *The Fence*

PAGE 11— *Why Birth Fathers Matter* by Gary Coles

PAGE 14— *The Australian Journal of Adoption*

PAGE 15— New books at PARC

voices often excluded. It is a wonder to consider the perspective of an adoptive father or an adoptee becoming a father and their connection with the birth father figure in the picture.

We have attempted to gather various perspectives to include in this issue, which reflect different experiences and connections. Among the perspectives is that of a birth mother, in advocacy of the birth father voice. There is also a relevant journal article and book review written by birth father and manager of Vanish in Victoria, Gary Coles. Also in the issue, a review of *The Fence*, a Sydney Festival hi-light.

I hope you enjoy the Autumn edition of Branching Out, many thanks to all who bravely contributed, who make the publication such a worthwhile and valuable read.

Lizzie Gray

### Adoptee as Parent - a Personal Account



My little girl, just two weeks' old today, cannot yet hold my gaze.

She wriggles and stretches as she slumbers on my chest. She then smiles at me, but I can't take any credit for that as it's all about the wind in her tummy, not some startlingly silly face that's got her approval.

And yet I know she feels safe with me in her newborn drowsiness, contentedly tucking her legs up into my chest. She only gives a muffled appealing cry from her basinet when she's ready for her next feed, and then full to the brim she happily drifts off to sleep again.

Not unlike any other parent I'm awestruck that I somehow had a part to play a part in her arrival in this world. That feeling was perhaps even more overwhelming when my first child, now a funny, sweet exuberant boy just a few days from turning four, was born.

I love them both like I never knew you could love anybody until I became a dad, yet I cannot help feeling a slight sadness that I was not so gently loved when I was two weeks' old.

For my first six weeks I lay in a crib in a city hospital, no doubt having all my other physical needs attended to but – as my adoptive mum quite fairly says – not getting that most basic of needs of having someone take the time to hold me close.

But when I think of that baby back in 1968 I don't feel sorry for myself. I almost don't even see that baby as myself, but simply a child who shouldn't have missed out in the way he did. I can't shake the sadness when I think of that baby boy.

What it might have been like for me in my first six weeks takes nothing away from the happiness of my upbringing.

My Mum says my feeding problems soon disappeared after she and Dad brought me home to their loving country town home. As a small boy I never had to worry about feeling wanted, and I and my older brother and sister, also adopted, were seen no differently to anyone else in our wider family. It was no secret to anyone who knew us that we were adopted. We

## Adoptee as Parent - a Personal Account

grew up, with the sibling squabbles that any family has, and just got on with our lives.

But we were also never encouraged to talk about being adopted, something that I only in more recent years feel more uncomfortable and a little annoyed about, mainly because it probably contributed to my later shaky conviction that I had to hide this part of me away forever.

That's not a criticism of my parents. Their approach was no doubt a product of what they would have been told by the adoption agency they were dealing with in the 1960s; that this new babe they were taking home was theirs, would be brought up as their child and that they need not worry about any intrusions from the past. Australian society and the legal system of those times had ensured this would be wiped clear away, in much the same way as my birth mother felt she had no choice but to give me away.

It is now almost four years since I first gave any thought to finding out about my past. It surprises me a little now that I took so long, but I guess I had become so expert in saying to myself and others that this other past didn't really matter that I had convinced myself that was how I really felt. My wife says now that she never quite believed my resolute opposition to finding my birth mother. To her, my stance never rang true.

It is almost three years since I learnt of my birth name, and that of my birth mother, and it took another 14 months to find her and make that initial contact. We are taking things slowly. I have always been cautious about letting people get to know me and vice versa. I probably would have run for the hills if in those early days she had greeted me at my door with a

hug proclaiming "My son, I love you, you've returned!"

I appreciate the openness of her letters and believe she has been exceedingly brave for doing so. The profound hurt I know she feels about those times would have made it easy to provide me with a "thanks, but no thanks", and yet she has let me into her life with her letters and some photographs of her family.

My birth mother has explained why she had to give up her baby, and I completely understand her reasoning. I don't judge her in any way. And yet when I'm with my boy, with all his love and joy for life – and the tantrums – and cradle my baby girl in my arms I'm hit with the question of "how could anyone give away their child?" It's a contradiction, but at this early stage I can't see it being any other way.

All I can do, and want to do, in the meantime is get on with the everyday, with its mixture of the seemingly mundane and the wonderful. I feel extremely fortunate. I really don't know how much being adopted has shaped me and the way I help raise my children; if the way I am now is just the way it was meant to be or whether it has truly changed me without my knowing.

It is a delight though to see the family resemblances. And one day I might even meet my birth mother and her family. But being a loving and supporting partner to my wife and a great dad to my kids is still the strongest part of my life right now. It is a comfort though that the contact I have made with my birth mother will help my children form a part of their identity.

*Anonymous , 31 March 2010*

# BIRTHFATHERS

At a recent PARC evening the speakers, a birth mother, adoptee and adoptive mother all spoke eloquently and openly about their journey of reunion. At question time a gentleman in the audience posed the question: why has there been no birthfathers speaking and, addressing the audience, how many of the (perhaps 8 males) present are birthfathers? Where are they? Why are they not represented? He did not reveal his position in the adoption arena, and what pre-empted his comment. Maybe he was a birth father seeking support. Our group is frequently referred to as the Adoption Triangle. At the very least it is the Adoption Quadrangle or Pentagon. The ripple effect of adoption goes far beyond even that and to fairly examine the psychological impact of adoption we must include siblings in both birth and adopted families, the subsequent partners of all parties and the list goes on.

But to get back to birthfathers, if we began referring to our group as The Adoption Quadrangle to include birthfathers into the inner circle we may provide a safe environment for more of them to come forward and be reunited with their lost children. It would open yet another wound for birth mothers in particular but surely a healthy way to heal the grieving and repair lives splintered by adoption.

I recently read Gary Coles *Ever After: Fathers and the Impact of Adoption*, which refreshed memories of my adopted sons' father and his dedication and struggle to be a responsible male. I now realize these men are often forgotten or overlooked. They too feel the enormous silent guilt of losing their child. Feeling a failure as both parent and partner protector. Failure as a man. Men were far more supportive of partners in these pregnancies than commonly believed. Or at least many wanted to be. Today just as then it is commonly assumed that the fathers cowardly disappeared, without care or concern for their pregnant partners dilemma, to resume life in false innocence. In reality very often the pregnant girls family refused him contact. His family encouraged denying involvement and abandonment to preserve their family name thus reconfirming the girls' promiscuity and sole guilt. It was often the obvious option for him to deny fatherhood. In the absence of DNA testing at that time paternal identification was entirely the mother's word. This was combined with the resounding reassurance that once the baby was delivered and adopted the whole nasty business would be forgotten by everyone, the baby would be much better off and life would go on as if nothing happened, to the benefit of all concerned. It hardly required a decision despite that ever present maternal/paternal instinct "It's my child". Opinions of friends and family were unanimous and undisputed. Less than half the girls I have spoken to had anyone, friend or family member, who encouraged keeping the child, but it was rarely more than one and whilst they urged there was usually no clear plan on how to successfully achieve keeping the child short of marriage. The resounding majority preached the same solution and the well-trodden path was clearly laid. Religious orders provided accommodation for the wayward girl and welfare/adoption agencies clamoured to fulfil the growing number of requests for newborns. Girls went "away", the confused fathers usually denied both information and access to her, were not included in the picture at all and disappeared into denial. The less fuss the better. 30 years later we know they were wrong. The pain never went away and nobody forgot.

I would like to tell the story of my sons' birthfather in support of birth Dads.

I was 16, he was 17, my first love. We had been going out for about 6 months and the night our son was conceived was the first time for both of us. When we discovered I was pregnant he vowed his dedicated support. We decided to get married before the baby was born despite our youth. Our love would prevail and we wanted nothing more than to be together forever with our baby. Our innocence imagined fairytale bliss. Realistically we were both strong independent thinkers and his family promised full support and any assistance possible. To marry under 18 years of age required parental approval and whilst his family gave their blessing my family would hear nothing of it. They did not approve of him. "We don't want his type in

## BIRTHFATHERS

our family, we will not give our approval for you to marry, the child must be adopted!" The fighting was loud and long. At 16 years of age, living at home and in the workforce just a few months I was still a dependent child, my life skills were few and I had little to draw upon in this serious life altering debate. I had no autonomy, especially since I had bought this shame upon the family reputation.

Both sets of parents met and his parents tried to persuade mine to have a more open mind to the situation, to view it as adults and visualize the potential long-term outcome. They urged we be given the opportunity we wanted to accept the responsibility of our actions and work together as a family with their assistance and bring up their grandchild. My parents still refused. My mother took control. David's love, support and stubborn determination to stand by me and our baby was the one strength that got me through those days. The fighting and screaming between my mother and I went into the night and I now think of how my 11 year old brother suffered by my parents' lack of concern for him and how he was coping. They beat me with their fists and I sobbed and sobbed. I cried uncontrollably and my mother threw me fully clothed into a bath of cold water to try and shock me into silence. I lay huddled in the freezing bath weeping unable to stop. (My mother) rang the doctor as my crying and trembling continued for hours. The doctor assured them I was in shock and warned them against further violence. They tried to coerce him into arranging an illegal abortion. In reply he offered counselling. During the subsequent meeting between him, David and myself he encouraged us to follow our hearts and that it was our baby and our decision but to know that to keep the baby and marry was a very difficult path at our age and statistics showed the chance of success was slim. His empathy was a welcome relief.

I was forbidden to see David, forced to resign my job and 3 months into my pregnancy I was driven 500 miles to a Catholic Unmarried Mothers Home my mother had located for me to stay and the baby adopted at birth. David promised to follow but we had been forbidden contact prior to my departure so I sat fearful of the lonely months ahead. Driving on a long straight road with sandy embankments, suddenly my father burst out "That bastard". Imagine my joy when I saw huge letters written in the sandy hill as we passed "Sandra I'm(?) coming see you there " How wonderful that was, my heart sung, I was loved. Months before he had tattooed my name on his arm as testimony and he was beside me in this horrific life journey. I felt safe with his support. I was not alone.

The Unmarried Mothers Home were sorry to advise that they did not accept girls until they were 6 months pregnant. They assured us they had an appropriate place for me to stay. So there we were together, (David and I) alone, 500 miles from parental control. Heaven. I recall feeling incredibly happy. My pregnancy didn't show so we spent two wonderful weeks together staying at my uncles' house, their first child had arrived in similar circumstances so they were welcoming and non judgmental.

The Unmarried Mothers Home had arranged accommodation in return for work at the home of a local School Teacher. She had 4 children, the eldest girl about my age and the youngest a newborn 3 month old was to be in my care so she could return to work. The nuns had decided it would be hands on experience for me since we were thinking of keeping our child. I slept in the enclosed veranda (with) the baby. I was required to feed him during the night and change his nappy and put him back to sleep. I had absolutely no experience with babies. I was afraid to even pick him up. I lay awake at night on constant alert, terrified , sleep deprived and pregnant.

They decided that as my pregnancy wouldn't show for several months David and I would work in a nearby shoe factory and pay weekly board to them. There seemed no option to us but to follow their instructions. At least we were together, although David had to sleep on the couch and we had no private time. For the

# BIRTHFATHERS

first time we were able to think clearly, free of influence and pressure to adopt our baby.

So, I was woken several times a night to feed their baby and then we left for work at 7.30am. In the evening on returning from work I was required to cook and serve the family dinner. The work in the shoe factory was demanding, hot and dirty. Each day was a misery then each evening to return to our temporary "home" heavy with rules and punishment.

I suffered morning sickness at work and before long speculation became gossip then open confrontation by a group in the ladies toilets, "you're pregnant aren't you?" . David and I left. David was forced to use all his earnings to pay an invoice to the school teacher for his couch accommodation and food. The invoice also included "Counselling .... Free." We were confused but they thought it was funny.

We didn't even tell the nuns, we just got into the car and drove home. Now the secret was really out. I was 6 months pregnant, clear for all to see. We didn't care we were in love and were determined to get married. The remaining 3 months were miserable but easy compared to our previous experience. The rules were laid down. 1. I was not to go outside the family yard. 2. 10 minutes telephone conversation every second day only. 3. Once per week supervised visitation allowed by David on Sunday from 2 – 3pm. 4. David was to pay for my board and keep and buy all maternity and baby clothes. My parents would give marriage consent after the baby was born based on good behaviour and compliance with the rules plus David must sell his car to prove his sincerity and buy a 'family' car. His Ford Belair was an 18 year old boys dream and it broke his heart to sell it but not his spirit.

There were more dramas before the birth. I ran away from home and stayed with David's married sister to escape my mothers' tyranny. She pressed legal charges against me. I was arrested and charged with "not being under proper control" (the law stated under 18 year olds must be under parental or legal guardian control) . David arranged a lawyer for me and my case of mistreatment was considered and I returned home under court specified conditions. The Welfare conducted regular inspections on my condition so my parents eased up on the emotional abuse. They were instructed to provide private accommodation and allow David access to visit . I lived in the two-room granny flat at the back of our property and this new arrangement was made as difficult as possible by my mother. David was now entirely responsible for my support and welfare thus pay rent for the granny flat and purchase and deliver my food. The situation was impossible. David was 18 years of age and living at home 45 minutes drive away with minimal income. His mother would bake food and send it and I would sneak into the locked house through the firewood box during the day and steal food.

We married three weeks after Andrew was born. David wanted to be part of everything, to share the pregnancy and the birth. Fathers were not permitted to be present at the birth of their children in those days, but we did it. We first had to find a doctor who would allow it. A young female doctor agreed. The next problem was harder. The local public hospital banned non-medical personnel from births without exception. David then went to every private hospital in the area and finally I gave birth, with him by my side in a house converted into private hospital run by 2 midwives. The birth was very easy, only 4 hours labour. David drove me to the hospital and was beside me every second until his son was born. I recall for years he kept his surgical facemask as a trophy. He may still have it. All medical expenses were paid by his family.

Within hours of the birth a man and woman from The Child Welfare Dept came to my bedside and insisted I sign documents. Their content not explained, I was told I HAD to sign them otherwise I would be in trouble. I came so close to signing but David's words echoed in my brain. He had anticipated this. "Don't sign

# BIRTHFATHERS

anything” “Tell them you have to speak to me before you sign anything. Don’t listen to anything they say”. The woman was very cross. I was 16 and had given birth hours before, I was vulnerable and insecure, abandoned by my family, tired and emotional. I was terrified I had done the wrong thing and would be punished.

Andrew’s Dad fought to be a fully participating and protective partner and father.

The next part is the sad part where it didn’t work and that’s a whole separate story. I wanted to write the details so everyone could know that he was an exceptional person and I loved him. We were two kids having a baby and did the best we could. What we did need was a great deal of outside assistance. Less than a year later we were no longer together, I was unable to earn enough to support my baby without help. The government did not provide financial assistance to single parents at that time. When we first split I ate humble pie and rang my mother asking if I could come home but was refused. For 6 months I managed but I could not earn enough money at 16 to single-handedly support myself and a child. Finally in desperation I went to my parents and said I had no alternative but to leave Andrew with them while I tried to form another relationship and provide a home for my baby. It all failed and he was adopted at 16 months old.

Over the following 20 years I spoke to or met up with David 3 or 4 times. Each time he wanted us to get back together and go and get Andrew back. But of course it was a fantasy. In 1988 I wrote to the Welfare Agency and within a week I was speaking to my 22 year old son. His father had tried to contact him but Andrew had vetoed contact with “That bastard who abandoned my mother’ (he wasn’t to know). His father tried a second time when Andrew was 21 and received the same response. He had stipulated the only contact permitted was by his mother. I rang David after speaking to Andrew that first night. The excitement of contact and the history we shared was alive and real. I was remarried with a 3 year old daughter. He had married and divorced 3 times since me and had several more children. “You know David, I think we could have made it if my mother had worked as hard to make it succeed as she did to make it fail”. “ No I don’t agree” he said “What do you mean, ?” “It would have worked if she had done nothing”.

Andrew contacted David then too. They arranged to meet, Andrew was excited but it was awkward. When meeting me we enjoyed an easy flow of conversation with amazement in similarities between us. His father didn’t say much, didn’t seem to know what to say. Perhaps the emotion was difficult to express in a manly way so he said nothing. They met several times, once by accident in the pub where they both had friends present. David walked by and Andrew said ‘Hi’ and was disappointed by his fathers’ simple “Hi” and retreat. I know that it didn’t mean he didn’t care but Andrew didn’t and it hurt.

I believe the inherent difference between men and women is a significant contributor to the lack of attendance by birthfathers at adoption events and less attempts to locate their adopted children. The nurturing instinct and curious easy communication natural to women together with the actual birth and pregnancy experience fuels the instinct to pursue reunion with their child.

Men sometimes didn’t know they fathered a child and many (adoptees), as in the case of my son, assume the father to be the villain who failed as a protector of him and his mother. I don’t excuse men who did abandon pregnant girls. I feel however that right from conception they also carried a burden of guilt. Assumed by society as the perpetrator and not supported or encouraged equivalently to mothers in the reunion journey, nor often welcomed so heartily by the child.

As you see in my story, Andrew’s Dad was a strong male supporter who did everything possible to participate equally in his sons’ birth. He has suffered at least as much as I have and perhaps more because he

## BIRTHFATHERS

is not accepted in the family reunion and sadly does not have an ongoing relationship with his son.

In the 1950's and 60's unmarried fathers had no parental rights in the decision to keep or adopt their children. Their signature (or identity) was not even required on any birth or adoption documents. The sole responsibility for the future of these children was, by law, without dispute, the mothers'. In most cases she was not legally mature enough to vote, drink alcohol, drive, marry or in my case, live without a guardian, yet she was legally obliged to accept the sole burden of responsibility for the decision and signing of documents agreeing to give up her child for adoption. A significant, life determining document that would influence the entire future of her child, herself and the child's father.

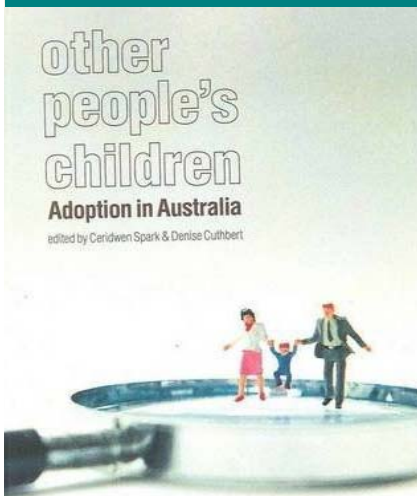
It is staggering to comprehend a legal system that forced young unmarried mothers to carry this huge burden of responsibility, alone..... for life.

Sandra Martin,

Sydney 2009.

Names have been changed to respect the privacy of my son and his father.

## BOOK REVIEW



### ***Other People's Children: Adoption in Australia***

Edited by Ceridwen Spark and Denise Cuthbert

Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2009

On the first page of the Introduction, adoption is defined as “an action on the part of adoptive parents (which may be enshrined in law, culture or custom) whereby the child or children of others are taken into the adoptive family and raised as if they were the blood offspring of that family.” This quotation is significant, for not only does it provide the book's title, but also a key theme, which emerges from the chapters that follow.

*Other People's Children* is divided into four sections, all written by persons who are active in research on Australian adoption. The main adoption issues in this country are discussed in the first section. It is in the third essay that the theme is developed of domestic (historical) and intercountry (current) adoption practices being focussed on meeting the needs of adoptive parents. The fundamental question about whose interests are held paramount (notionally and in practice) had been raised in the Introduction: “Does adoption serve the primary purpose of finding families for children ... Or are there grounds to conclude that adoption, including ICA [intercountry adoption] in contemporary Australia, is driven by the desires of childless couples to form families?” There is evidence offered in other chapters that the interests of the child have not been the primary consideration, both in the past and today. We read of the boarding-out system, whereby children were adopted by families, who exploited them for the cheap labour they provided. Another contributor writes of doctors undertaking to find babies for adoptive parents, to heal the wounds caused by the discovery that they were unable to have children of their own. An essay further on, which surveys adoptive parents, notes that celebrity adoptions can be interpreted as acts of child buying.

## BOOK REVIEW

In the second section (essays four to six), social workers have their say about the evolution of social practices in the field of adoption, including the impact of access to identifying information. There is a strong caution issued here that we avoid repeating the mistakes of the past to prevent adoption again being driven by market forces, whereby the interests of the child and the birth parents are marginalised.

In what is possibly the most thought-provoking essay in the collection, which is placed in the third section covering the issues of rights and cultural and sexual differences, Helen Riley discusses the impact on adopted persons and the donor conceived of the late discovery of their birth status. Riley identifies that the lessons from the past are not always absorbed, which is another theme to emerge in the book. The impact of withholding information about their origins from adopted persons, centred on the issues of betrayal of trust, secrecy, denial and the impact on self-esteem has been well documented, yet current donor conceived information access practices condone these very same inhibitors. The remaining three essays in the third section compare customary and legal adoptions amongst Torres Strait Islanders, discuss non-heterosexual adoptions in Australia and address the role of adoption in the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families.

It is appropriate, given 70 per cent of adoptions today are of children from overseas, that the fourth and final section of *Other People's Children* is devoted to intercountry adoption. Beyond the essay about celebrity adoptions, there are chapters about the demographics of ICA, the experiences of adopted persons returning to their countries of origin and the results of a study which compares the well-being and sense of identity of intercountry adopted persons with their non-adopted migrant peers.

My quibbles about the publication are minor. In their Introduction, the editors appear to misconstrue the meaning of the word 'transformation'. They refer to what "is at the heart of legal adoption - the transformation of children from one parentage to another." Given that 'to transform' means 'to alter beyond recognition', I believe that, in this instance, the intended noun is 'transfer', which appropriately does embrace a change in legal status. In the References, there are some consistency issues. For example, Marshall and McDonald's book *The Many-Sided Triangle: Adoption in Australia* is referenced in six essays, but with five variations, including a wrong title. There are instances of specific literature sources being mentioned in an essay, yet the full attribution is missing from the References. In the chapter about celebrity intercountry adoptions, I found the use of the term 'ordinary adoptive parents' awkward, even demeaning. In my view, nobody is ordinary. And I was disappointed, that in 2009, birth fathers continue to be neglected.

Overall, I was impressed with the quality of the essays. Whilst they are research based, the presentation of the material renders them accessible. This book is a valuable contribution to the literature on adoption, particularly the contemporary policies and practices. I note that one of the editors, Denise Cuthbert, is engaged on another project, *The Search for Family: A History of Adoption in Australia*. If a book is an outcome of this study, then it could, based on *Other People's Children*, be a publication well worth buying, reading and keeping.

*Reviewed by Gary Coles*

## THEATRE REVIEW



### ***The Fence***

*“Four friends have just finished dinner. Two are watching the footy, the others are in the kitchen cracking jokes. Their voices drift through the fading light as a shadow enters the backyard, sinks into a garden chair and drops a bag. She’s been gone a long time...”*

In January of this year, several members of the PARC staff went to watch *The Fence*, an Urban Theatre Projects production opening in the Sydney Festival 2010. The production was ‘devised by a team of artists working in consultation with Indigenous and non-Indigenous

community members with related experiences.’

The evening began at the Riverside Theatres in Parramatta, where audience members gathered to then be led on an eerie historic trail where once stood a convent and girls orphanage/school, to the performance space.

The story takes place in the house and back yard of Mel and his partner Joy. They are joined by a friend and neighbour on what seems to be a usual night of laughter, warmth and light-hearted differences of opinion. However, the four are unexpectedly joined by Mel’s estranged sister, found wandering in the garden. This surprise visit sparks a reception of joy, relief, anger and sadness as the audience learns of the history of each character and the deeper issues affecting them.

Having been alerted that the content of this production included themes of growing up in and leaving care in western Sydney, staff at PARC were aware of the relevance of *The Fence* to the work we do with Forgotten Australians and the Stolen Generation and in a broader sense, the ongoing identity, grief and attachment work we do with people affected by adoption.

*The Fence* was a thoroughly enjoyable and moving production, without the darkness that some of us had anticipated. Themes of attachment trauma, grief and loss, and identity searching were explored sensitively in the comfort of what had the appearance of a real home in Parramatta. It was a wonderful evening sitting in the open air with the campfire burning on the outdoor set. Even a light touch of rain did not stir the audience who happily sat in ponchos provided by the theatre!

# WHY BIRTH FATHERS MATTER - By Gary Coles

By Gary Coles

*\*Author of Ever After: Fathers and the Impact of Adoption and Transparent: Seeing Through the Legacy of Adoption*

- **No one who has an adoption experience emerges unscathed. It is the degree to which each person admits to and addresses the impact of adoption on their life that makes the difference.**
- **You cannot alter the events that are the foundation of your adoption experience, but you can change the way you think and feel about them.**
- **The key to understanding your adoption experience and incorporating it into your life is the acknowledgment of cause and effect - when people are separated through adoption, they suffer a loss and experience grief.**

For most of us, these statements ring true, yet there is an impression, based on the popular portrayal of the birth father, that he is immune from the effects of adoption. I aim to overturn this perception.

It is a fact that most discussions about adoption centre on the birth mother and the child, as an adopted person. Typically, birth fathers are neglected. When the term birth parent is used, most often the reference is to the birth mother only. The implication here is that either birth fathers do not deserve to be considered or the birth father's experience is identical to that of the birth mother, perhaps, at best, a diminished version.

Five separate studies undertaken in the past two decades have exploded the myths about birth father immunity from the consequences of adoption. Two of these were undertaken in the UK, one in Australia and one in Canada. The latest one, which I initiated in 2008 with Dr Nola Pasmore, was international in scope. In all surveys, the birth fathers volunteered to participate.

There have been some key, common findings:

- Birth fathers do care about the children they fathered. For example, in the 2008 survey, the birth fathers said that the most important motives for searching were those concerned with the child's welfare.
- The legacy of adoption is a permanent scar for birth fathers. They suffer grief, loss of self-esteem, fear of rejection, denial, numbness and bouts of anger, often self-directed.
- Many birth fathers still feel guilty about letting down the birth mother.
- Frequently the adoption terminated a long term relationship between the birth parents. "Most men lost not only their child but also their lover" is a summary statement from Celia Witney's United Kingdom survey of sixty birth fathers.
- Typically, the men defer dealing with their feelings about the adoption until they reach middle age. Some believe that they lost their entitlement to know their child by not being present at the birth. In the eyes of the community, this perceived neglect is reinforced by the common absence of the birth father's name from the birth certificate.

From these themes, qualities that are unique to birth fathers emerge:

- These men can suffer compounded internal guilt, caused by the abandonment of mother and child,

## WHY BIRTH FATHERS MATTER

of consigning two people to their fates. The birth father withdrew his support for the birth mother, whether it be his decision or one made for him. By association, because the birth mother was pregnant, he also relinquished his child. He left both of them susceptible to the legacies of the wounds resulting from the separation of mother and child at birth. The birth father failed the responsibility test, not once, but twice - the repercussions of a single decision. A birth father may relate to the term 'double jeopardy', in the sense that he has charged himself twice for the one act. This responsibility for altering the lives of two other persons is unique to birth fathers, as is their experience of a dual loss. In the case of a birth mother, because of the in-utero bond that she establishes with her child prior to the birth, it is likely that the child will be the focus of her loss and grief.

- There is often a delayed acceptance of responsibility, fuelled by a male reluctance to admit to and express feelings. Typically, mid-life may be when a birth father finally admits to and confronts his own pain, the time when he permits his submerged feelings about the losses to surface. These feelings may include a postponed reaction to the grief he perhaps suppressed at the time of the adoption. When a birth father does decide to confront his adoption experience, he may find that he has significant barriers to overcome, a legacy of both the dual focus of his guilt and the time he has buried his feelings. Even when a birth father has dealt with his issues, he may postpone outreach because of either an unwillingness to intrude upon the lives of the adult child and the birth mother, or negative perceptions about the reception he might receive.
- For the majority of birth fathers who do not see their new-born baby, their conscious connection with the actual events may remain centred on the person whom they knew and let down - the mother. This phenomenon explains why some birth fathers begin their search by seeking reconciliation with the mother of their child.
- A birth father's search and reunion experience may involve, for him, a necessary reconciliation with both the birth mother and their adult child. In other words, for a birth father the search and reunion 'model' may be a triad. The leading players in a birth mother's outreach are typically the dyad of her child and herself. Adopted persons' stories of search and reunion are more often aligned with the 'model' for birth mothers; for adoptees the birth mother is usually the main objective of their search.

The last point, about the participants in an outreach, is worth developing. The family of origin, which comprises a birth mother, a child and a birth father, is a triad. The three members are joined by bonds. Between the mother and child these are genetic, biological and psychological. The father and the child have genetic and psychological bonds. The birth mother and the birth father together conceived the child, and between them there may be a residual affectional bond. I call this overall network the Triple Bond. All three persons played some role in the events surrounding the adoption. Post-adoption, all have roles to play in the exploration and comprehension of the original separation, for all were wounded by the same episode. Individually and collectively, the birth mother, the adopted person and the birth father are the beneficiaries, if they acknowledge the Triple Bond and co-operate to repair the hurt, via the dyads of mother-child, father-child and mother-father. At a physical level, separation breaks the Triple Bond, whilst reunion presents an opportunity for these tripartite links to be repaired, emotionally. It is this inner world that presents the greatest challenge for all members of the family of origin.

Finally, I wish to consider some practical aspects of birth parent involvement.

In Victoria, for example, prior to 1984, it was rare for a birth father's name to be recorded on the birth certificate. Often, the mother was discouraged from including the father's name, because it speeded the adoption process.

If the birth father's name is missing from the original birth certificate, it is unwise to assume categorically

## WHY BIRTH FATHERS MATTER

that 1) the mother did not know who the father was, 2) the father did not care enough to ensure that his name appeared on the record or 3) that he does not wish to meet and to know his child.

In the frequent absence of documentation about the identity of the birth father, later the birth mother is faced with playing a pivotal role. However, when asked by their adopted child to talk about the birth father, there are matters that may cause birth mothers distress. The quality of the relationship between the parents before, during and after the conception of the child may have been ambivalent or threatening. In some cases, the birth mother may have been under the age of consent, meaning that the father was liable for prosecution, or the pregnancy may have resulted from rape or incest. Consequently, a birth mother may be reluctant to disclose the nature of the original relationship between the birth parents. If the birth mother has scant information about the birth father, or cannot recall past events, she may feel ashamed and therefore avoid talking about him. In many instances, the birth parents enjoyed a loving relationship, but because of the intervention of others, often the parents of the birth mother, they were kept apart during the pregnancy, the birth and the adoption. In this situation, subsequent enquiries made by the adult child may reactivate the spectre of 'unfinished business' for one or both birth parents. The birth mother may prefer not to revisit the pain of her separation from the birth father. If the birth mother feels insecure in the relationship she has achieved through reunion with her child, she may be reluctant to share knowledge about the identity of the father, for fear of 'losing her child again'. In this circumstance, the birth father may be perceived as a fresh threat, in that the child might establish a closer relationship with him than with the birth mother.

What is typically the primary reunion presents interpersonal challenges to birth mothers and adopted persons. It takes courage and compassion on the part of both people to take the next step and include the birth father.

There are some mothers who at the first asking, may feel disinclined to discuss the father. However, after addressing suppressed memories and/or paying attention to her wounded feelings, a birth mother may be more inclined to provide information about the birth father. The tolerance and patience of adopted persons may give birth mothers the space to process their pain, thus potentially clearing the path to the birth father.

Birth fathers need not maintain play a passive role, *ie* as the second parent sometimes sought. There is abundant evidence of adopted persons welcoming contact initiated by their birth fathers. I know also of birth fathers who have contacted the birth mother to apologise for their role in the events that culminated in the adoption of the child many years earlier. This outreach has been received warmly by the birth mother and enhanced the emotional healing of both birth parents.

As a concerned birth father, I encourage all birth mothers to contemplate the possibility that even the most neglectful of birth fathers has, with the passage of time and maturity, come to acknowledge that he feels remorseful and troubled about his part in those long ago events.

Fundamentally, as in all matters adoption, it is the interests of the child which need to be held paramount. Every adopted person has the right to know the identity of both of his or her birth parents. A child inherits genes, traits and medical history from their female and male antecedents. A birth mother's generosity can help the child to find their birth father, as well as an essential part of his or her identity.

In my opinion, reunion is partial and compromised if not all members of the family of origin are involved. The willing participation of three persons provides opportunities to explore the circumstances that led to the adoption, to answer questions and to celebrate the passing of genetic characteristics from parent to child. These matters make vital contributions to identity settlement and so promote personal healing.

*\* This article appeared in The Australian Journal Of Adoption Vol 1, No. 2, 2009*

# AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF ADOPTION

*The Australian Journal of Adoption* is a new online journal solely focused on the subject of adoption in Australia.

It aims to provide quality research findings and information about adoption as past and current adoption practices continue to have a profound affect on the people involved. Journal content is intended to facilitate understanding about adoption and its associated issues to improve policies, encourage better practices, foster healing and provide support for those working in the field or affected by adoption.

The journal is hosted by the National Library of Australia and is accessible 24/7 provided you have a computer and broadband connection. Content is freely available with no charge or subscription fee to view material. Viewers are encouraged to register as readers or authors and can be done online once you have opened the journal.

The journal welcomes multi- or interdisciplinary submissions on adoption, written in English, as well as general papers, media reviews and announcements. Material in the following categories: original papers, case studies and policy/program evaluations are peer reviewed. The reviewers are experienced adoption practitioners at Australian universities, government agencies, in private practice and/or relevant non-profit organisations. Authors can choose to have an open or closed review process.

New material is published as soon as the peer review and online administration processes are completed with a much quicker turnaround than paper based publications. On occasion papers may be published collectively, as part of a special theme or as a group of conference or workshop papers.

The first three editions of the journal are now available online and easily accessible, simply type *Australian Journal of Adoption* into Google and click on the appropriate box once it appears. Alternatively the journal can be accessed at the following hyperlink:

<http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/aja>

New material is welcome. All enquiries can be directed to Thomas Graham, Journal Manager at [thomasandrewgraham@gmail.com](mailto:thomasandrewgraham@gmail.com)

Please note the journal is not a search facility for finding birth records or other information to trace individuals affected by adoption. These matters are dealt with by the relevant states and territories.

Thomas Graham

Journal Manager

Australian Journal of Adoption

## NEW BOOKS AT PARC



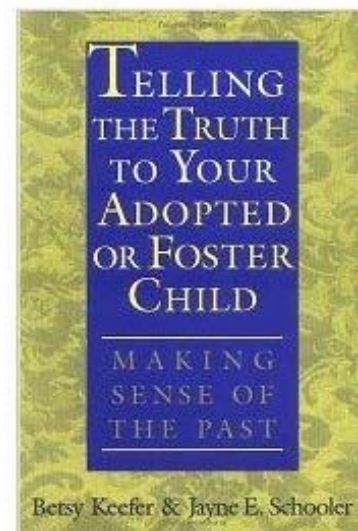
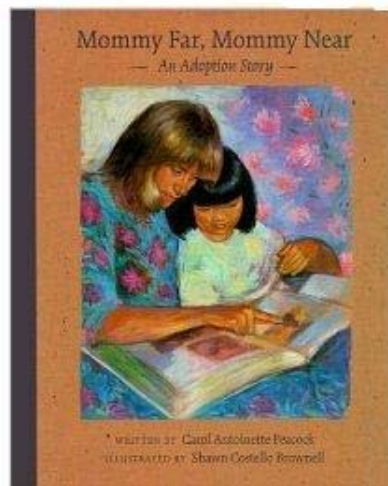
The PARC Resource Library has been growing recently and we are very excited about the quality of new literature that will be available to clients. Library membership costs \$25 per year or \$15 concession. Below is the list of recent additions to the library collection:

AUTHOR	TITLE
Dyregrov	Grief in Children: a handbook for adults
Archer & Gorden	New Families, old scripts: trauma and attachment in adoptive families
Hieb, Marianne	Inner Journeying through art-journaling
Foster, Celia	Big Steps for little people: parenting your adopted child
Luxmoore, Nick	Working with Anger and Young People
di Ciacco, Janis A	The Colors of Grief: understanding a child's loss, birth to adulthood
Ramsey & Sweet	A Creative Guide to Exploring your life: self reflection though art, writing
Parkinson, Rob	Transforming Tales: how stories can change people
Golding, Kim	Nurturing attachments: supporting children who are fostered or adopted
Deroo & Deroo	What's Right with me: celebrate strengths, build self esteem
Schofield & Beek	Attachment Handbook for foster care and adoption
Hughes, Dan	Attachment - focused parenting
Harvey & Penzo	Parenting a child who has intense emotions
Van Gulden, Holly	Real Parents, real children: parenting the adopted child
Schooler, Jayne	The Whole Life Adoption Book: realistic advice for building healthy ad fam
Schooler, Jayne	Telling the Truth to your adopted or foster child: making sense of the past
Lifton, Betty Jean	Lost and Found: the adoption experience 2009 edition
Wrobel & Neal	International Advances in adoption research for practice
Briggs & Marre	International adoption: global inequalities and the circulation of children
Siegal & Hartzell	Parenting from the inside out
Fessler, Ann	The Girls who went away: hidden history of women who surrendered children
Kabat-Zinn, Jon	Mindfulness for Beginners - audio cd
Kabat-Zinn, Jon	Coming to Our Senses

## NEW BOOKS AT PARC

The following list includes titles selected for children. Some of the new books for adopted children have been kindly donated by an adoptive family.

AUTHOR:	TITLE
Friedrich, Molly	You're not my real mother!
Cole, Joanna	How I was adopted
McNamara, Joan	Borya and the Burps: an Eastern European Adoption Story
Peacock, Carol Antoinette	Mommy far, Mommy Near: an adoption story
Curtis, Jamie Lee	Tell me Again about the Night I was Born
Daddo & Bentley	Check on Me
Hicks, Randall B.	Adoption Stories for Young Children



### ARE YOU INTERESTED IN REVIEWING A NEW BOOK?

If you would like to read and review one of the new books for the next issue of *Branching Out*, please let us know on (02) 9365 344 or by email to [parc@bensoc.org.au](mailto:parc@bensoc.org.au)

## The Post Adoption Resource Centre invites you to a **Workshop: Adoptees Becoming Parents.**

A unique opportunity for adoptees who are parents, or are about to become parents, to explore their experience and issues.

When	Thursday 22 <sup>nd</sup> April 2010, 10.30am – 1.00pm
Where	Scarba House, 24a Ocean Street, Bondi
RSVP	Booking essential. Call PARC on 9365 3444 to register or for more information.
Cost	\$20 (\$10 concession).

*Child minding is available – please confirm when booking*

Being adopted may shape the way you parent. Starting a family and having a child of your own may change the way you think about your own adoption story. Some issues that can arise are:

- Triggering of your own childhood experiences and memories
- Beginning a genetic connection
- Anxiety around attachment and separation with your own child
- Heightened empathy of self, birthparents and adopted parents
- Complexity around roles within the family
- Feelings of inadequacy regarding parenting
- Depression and anxiety
- Experience of Pregnancy – ‘What was it like for my birthmother?’
- Bonding with your child

*“When my son was born I felt sure that someone would come and say ‘thank you very much for your help, you can go now.’ I did not think my child was mine until I got him home.”*

*“In the days after her birth, I realised how hard it must have been for my birthmother... how she couldn’t have just walked away”*

