

ADOPTION CIRCLES

CANADA'S POST-ADOPTION QUARTERLY ON REUNION & REFORM

ISSUE 5 WINTER 1993

CANADA'S FIRST REUNION CONFERENCE

February 6 & 7, 1993

Vancouver, British Columbia

THE CABBAGE PATCH MYTH

by Ray Ensminger, M.S.W.

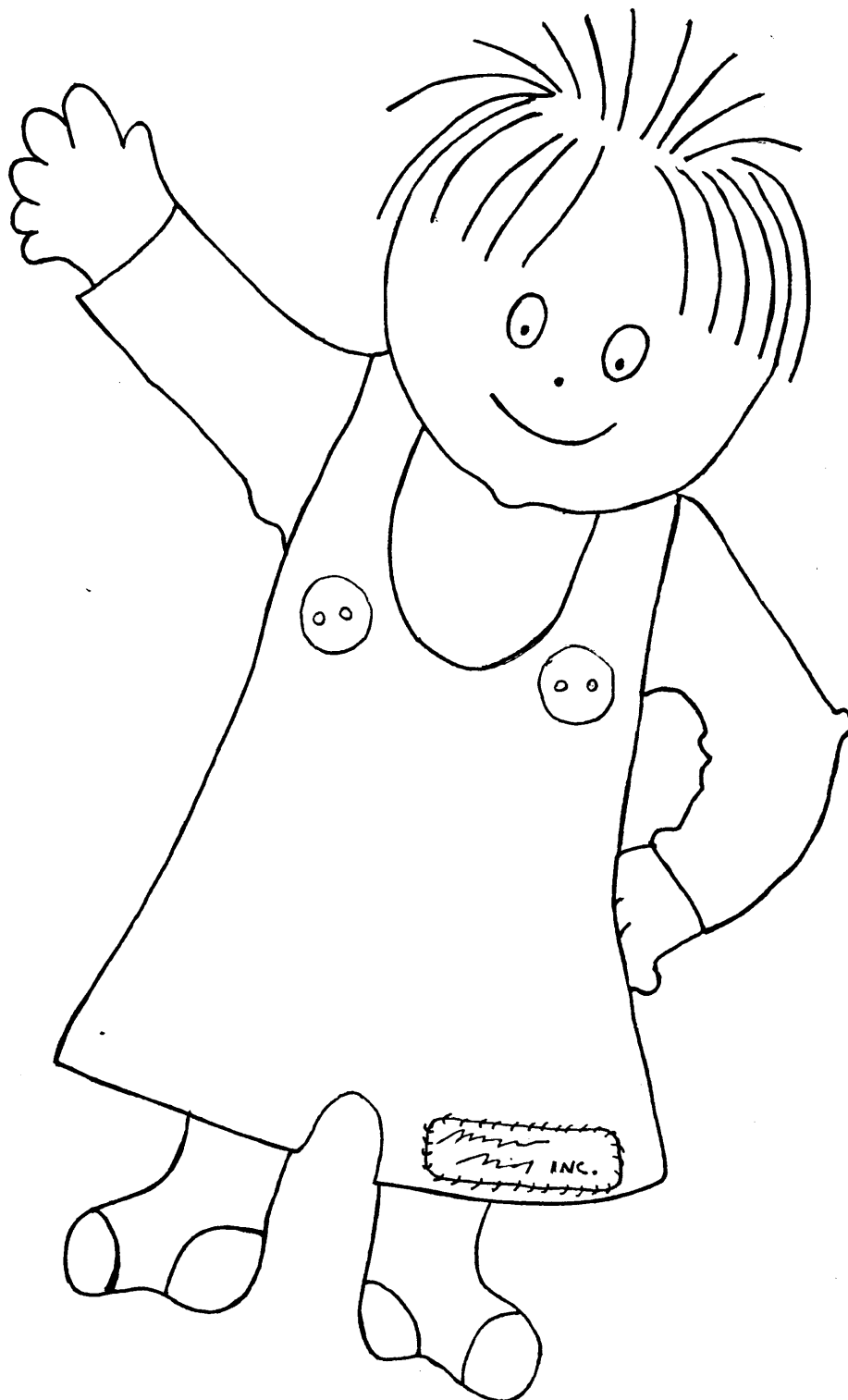
The role of social workers in
adoption myth and reunion

IT DOESN'T MEAN YOU FAILED

by Clare Marcus

Preparing adoptive parents
for their adult children's reunions

POST-ADOPTION AND REUNION BOOKS AVAILABLE



ADOPTION CIRCLES

ISSUE #5 WINTER 1993

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Adoption Circles is back with a new publisher, Forget Me Not Family Society. The former publisher, Missing Pieces Thru Adoption, continues to be active in the community by operating six reunion support groups in the Lower Mainland (Vancouver, Canada). Forget Me Not Family Society is a post-adoption non-profit organization. Forget Me Not is tackling the great need for education both to people affected by adoption and to adoption professionals. The first conference is planned for February 6 & 7, 1993 in Surrey, British Columbia. It is the first of its kind in Canada and features many prominent professionals and authors from the US and Canada. The feature speaker is Annette Baran, MSW, international authority on child welfare and adoption. Baran is co-author of *The Adoption Triangle* and *Lethal Secrets*.

Kathryn Vea, president of Forget Me Not Family Society, says, "This conference will provide the opportunity for more dialogue between all members of the adoption circle. It will be very beneficial to adoptive parents, adoptees, birth mothers, birth fathers and families, as well as, concerned professionals." The theme of the conference is "Let's Talk

About Reunions." There will be 35 workshops, panels and small discussion groups. Topics include native issues, adoptive parents issues, the impact of reunion on families and adoptees in relationships. One of the workshops Baran will facilitate is titled, Post-Reunion Survival: How to put the brakes on. She will also address adoption professionals: Search, Sealed Records and Social Workers. Other speakers include: Liz Hall, United Native Nations, Vancouver on Rights and Benefits of Native Adoptees; Nancy Verrier, M.A., author of the soon to be published *Primal Wound* will discuss her preliminary investigation into the effects of separation from the mother and healing the primal wound; and Peter Raeside, a Vancouver journalist and birth father will facilitate a panel on the male perspective on adoption. See enclosed flyer for details or call Forget Me Not Family Society at (604) 530-2160.

This issue of *Adoption Circles* presents two views on the difficulties people face when searching for birth relatives. Ray Ensminger, M.S.W. writes about the need for professionals to come
continued on next page

BITS & PIECES

Books By Mail.

To order the following books make
cheques payable to:
Adoption Triangle Resources
P.O. Box 61526
Brookwood Post Office
Langley, BC, Canada V3A 8C8.

Birthbond

by Judith Gediman and Linda P. Brown;
New Horizon Press, New Jersey, 1991.
\$18.95 plus \$1.00 shipping per book.
This book deals with reunions and what
happens after.

Lost & Found

by Betty Jean Lifton;
Harper & Row, New York, 1979.
\$15.00 plus \$1.00 shipping per book.
The author is an adoptee who provides a
critical look at adoption and reunion.

Birth Mother Trauma

by Heather Carlini.
This is a new book to assist birth
mothers through grief. It is available
from the publisher.

To order send \$15.95 plus \$1.50
postage to: Morning Side Publishing
P.O. Box 21071, Saanichton, R.P.O.
Saanichton, B.C. V0S 1P0
or phone (604) 652-6248.

Back issues of *Adoption Circles* are
available: Send \$3 and a self-addressed
stamped envelope to Forget Me Not
Family Society (address on back).
ISSUE #4: Tribute to Clare Marcus,
Canada's adoption reform pioneer /
Interview with Ken Derby of BC's
Active Reunion Registry.
ISSUE #3: New Democratic Party's
pre-election promise for open adoption
records / A Catholic birth mother talks
to her priest / Politicians talk about
open adoption records.
ISSUE #2: An interview with Joan
Smallwood prior to the BC election /
A review of *Birth Mother: America's
First Legal Surrogate Mother* by
Elizabeth Kane.
ISSUE #1: Interview with Barrie
A. Clark, author of *My Search for
Catherine Anne*.

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out of the dark ages and take a serious
look at current adoption practice and
legislation. Only a history of adoption
fiction could produce such a popular
product, *The Cabbage Patch doll*. The
doll is sold with adoption papers for the
new mom or dad. However, in real life,
adoptees have another set of parents, and
often another set of siblings and other
relatives. The Berlin Wall that separated
adoptees from their birth families is
tumbling apart. It was built on a weak
foundation of myth and the distorted
assurance to adoptive parents that the
child was the same as if born to them.
As a result, often adoptive parents feel
threatened when their adopted child asks
questions about their roots. Adoptees
quickly learn to repress the desire to
know about their birth families. Some
adoptive parents fear losing their
adult children when adoptees begin to
search for their birth families. Clare
Marcus, an adoptee and journalist who
died early in 1992 from cancer,
addresses adoptive parents in her article,
"It Doesn't Mean You Failed."

The poem is by Carrie Etter, a Los
Angeles based poet and writer.

Letters to the editor are welcome.

*Support Adoption Circles by joining
Forget Me Not Family Society.*

*Membership information is on the back
cover.*

The Loss of My Son, Years Later

■ by Carrie Etter

I prop open the shutters, expecting sweet light.

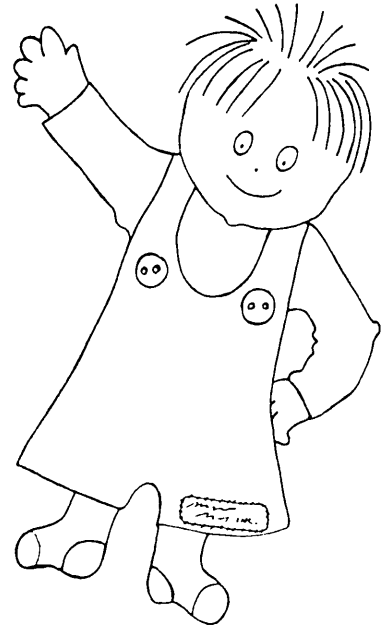
Sprinkling upon my floor like a brisk January rain,
a hundred wiry spiders scurry into

the cracks — the floor boards, the walls,
the very ceiling, their compact arachnid bodies

filling the most minute apertures
until the house seems to tremble with their scrabbling.

Now the foundation of my mustered happiness
requires their sporadic agitation,

the sudden weeping in a simple afternoon,
the pain of his name.



The CABBAGE PATCH MYTH

by Ray Ensminger, M.S.W.

Adoption is a very complex family arrangement — complex because adoptive families are structured out of a series of losses for all participants. Feelings associated with these losses must be addressed at various stages of the adoptive process.

However, society at large, including social workers, views adoption as a nice social welfare program through which children (especially infants) can be transferred with apparent ease from one set of parents to another. This view of adoption is false, distorted and destructive for adoption participants.

Social workers (and other professionals) have been and continue to be parties to perpetuating some of the most destructive myths surrounding the adoption process. The most common myths are that adoption is an event that happened sometime in the past and that having children by adoption is “as if born.” These myths, and their various extensions, have given rise to an elaborate adoption structure/system which mostly misunderstands and/or distorts the most basic of human needs and feelings.

Massive denial has been an integral part of the adoption process.

Since adoption is seen as something that happened in the past, services for those concerned ended with the legal process. But there are many adoption issues following legalization. This article will focus on the need for adoptees to have ongoing, accurate, sensitive information about their birth origins, which often leads to search and subsequent reunion with their birthparents. There is an equally important need for birth parents to have information about relinquished offspring, which again often leads to reunion and reconciliation.

Adoptees ask, “Where did I come from?” One response declares, “According to the legend, you came from a place far away in an enchanted Cabbage Patch where lots of adorable Cabbage Patch Kids are born every year.”

Although I do not attribute malicious intent or motivation to the designers of Cabbage Patch Kids dolls, the marketing technique of linking adoption to the cabbage patch theme fit well with prevailing

attitudes and beliefs about adoption. It seems for a long time society, including social work professionals, has been rather uncomfortable with adoptee's birth origins (i.e. illegitimacy, family shame and identity confusion for adoptees). Perhaps the cabbage patch explanation rescues us from confronting these tough issues, especially the role of birth parents in adoption.

The “head in the sand” approach enshrined in adoption practice via sealed records in adoption practice has not worked very well. Many people, including adoptees, adoptive parents and birth parents, have been hurt by unsound adoption laws and policies. Yet we persist in practising under the illusion that we are protecting and thus helping people by maintaining sealed records.

Is it not a sad commentary on the socialization process of adoptees that many people, including adoptees, adoptive parents, and, God forbid, adoption social workers, declare with sincerity and even somewhat smugly, “I (he/she) am not in-

terested in birth origins"? Is it not sad that in order to reassure one set of parents we have to deny (or at least minimize) the other set? Yes, adoptees do have two sets of parents. Please don't attempt to engage me in the "real parent" discussion — you know, "all that makes adoptive parents is babysitters for 18 years." Kahlil Gibran says it best about children, "And although they are with you yet they belong not to you."

Practice, policies, laws and attitudes must change to reflect the realities rather than the myths about adoption.

Professionals/society must provide opportunities for adoptive parents to share and explore unique aspects of adoptive parenting. Remember, having children by adoption is different than having children by birth. In the 1950s and 1960s, Canadian sociologist Dr. David Kirk developed the major themes of "rejection of difference" in the adoption process. Social workers, social agencies and legislators have paid scant attention to this major work. We are still in the "denial of difference" frame. If it were 1965 we might be excused for such ignorance, although even this is hardly of much comfort to those affected by it.

Adoptive families must provide opportunities and encourage adoptees to comfortably ask questions regarding their origins. "He/she never asks about adoption" is absolutely no indication that he/she does not have questions. Children are amazingly perceptive in knowing "what's safe." Of course, during adolescence children may trample unmercifully on unsafe areas — you know, "you're not my real mother/father."

We (social workers, counsellors, society) must give adoptive parents a different message regarding adoptees' need to know, their need for reunion with birth parents.

Birth parents have been mostly ignored following the relinquishment of their children. Social workers have been insensitive to the ongoing issues of loss and pain experience by many birth parents, especially birth mothers. Although there are some birth parents who do not wish to be found, I submit that this is a very small percentage. Those who do not want to be found do so, not because they are rejecting their offspring, but because they fear further censure, disapproval and embarrassment from the same source (social workers, parents, society) as they experienced originally. Most birth mothers, however, want contact. A birth mother said, "I would

much prefer public censure for my decision to search to the private pain I have endured for 25 years."

Detractors and critics of open records leading to reunion parade a series of horror stories and tragedies as evidence that records must remain closed. In my view these stories are largely imagined, embellished, concocted and orchestrated by the detractors rather than the participants. In my 10 years of intimate involvement with reunions, I have neither witnessed nor heard first hand accounts of these horror and tragedies. That is not to say there are not difficulties and stressful issues associated with reunions. As in any social/emotional relationship there are going to be complications and disappointments because of unmet expectations. However, the overwhelming majority who have had reunions speak of the healing, growth and resolution brought on by the experience. People and

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organizations who focus on negative reunions experiences are distorting the facts.

Dr. David Kirk has described adoption as a "modern institution in need of reform." If social workers are to have a significant role in this reform, they must begin listening to the "real experts" in the adoption process, namely, the adoption participants themselves. In the final analysis, however, it is irrelevant what social workers, other professionals, agencies and legislators think and feel about reunions and open records. Adoptees, birth parents and some adoptive parents will continue in

increasing numbers to pursue the normal healing process of reunion and reconciliation. Of course it is sad, frustrating, infuriating, perhaps unethical and most assuredly immoral that professionals, agencies and legislators erect and fortify barriers to this healing process. However, there is absolutely no question in my mind that in the long run (meanwhile many must suffer and some will die) openness and honesty will prevail, conquer and eradicate the destructive social policies and laws of sealed records, secrecy, and forced anonymity (in the name of confidentiality) that much adoption practice still entails. Reuben Pannor, a well recognized authority on adoption, has said he hopes "one day soon closed adoption will be merely a footnote in child welfare programs."

I am sure my position regarding sealed records is abundantly clear. Lest there be any doubt whatsoever, permit me one further analogy. Governments/social agencies which maintain sealed adoption records are akin to a hospital which has, but refuses to release, the cure for cancer. The hospital will however release vague clues (non-identifying information in adoption lingo) to cancer patients. If these patients can specifically identify the complex chemical formula for the cure, the hospital may then release it to that particular patient. But the hospital, through its elaborate bureaucratic structure, must reassure itself repeatedly with each patient that the cure is in his/her best interests because sometime in the past it heard a third hand account of a patient who died from the cure.

People are dying emotionally. Adoption practice is fraught with problems — it is not a nice social welfare program of matching [unplanned] babies with loving, caring couples. You see, birth parents have always been acutely aware, adoptees have often suspected and adoptive parents have sometimes feared that adoptees do not come from the cabbage patch. Opening adoption records is one step towards debunking that myth.

This article appeared in The Advocate, August/September 1989 published by the Alberta Association of Social Workers. Raymond O. Ensminger, M.S.W. is a clinical social worker with Alberta Mental Health Services, Stony Plain and a consultant to Parents Finders, Edmonton. Reprinted with permission by the author.

IT DOESN'T MEAN YOU FAILED

by Clare Marcus

The aura of secrecy surrounding adoption often creates a dilemma for adoptive parents, as well as adult adoptees who feel a deep need to find their origins. For many adoptees the pursuit of genealogy is frustrated by the resentment from their adoptive parents. Sometimes the resentment is expressed, but often the adoptee senses it.

It takes courage for adoptive parents not to be resentful or afraid when faced with questions from their grown-up children. Many adult adoptees are not satisfied with the reassurances and platitudes about being "chosen." The general population knows their roots, something they may take for granted. More and more adopted adults want to know their roots, too.

Some adoptive parents choose to participate in the search for biological identity. An adoptive mother who knew the name of her 29-year-old daughter's birth mother practised saying the name in front of mirror before she could tell her daughter the name. Often, either fear or a sense of ownership stand in the way. Adoptees grow up sensing that questions should not be asked. Instead, adult adoptees turn to adoptee activist groups for the help and support they cannot find at home. There are many organizations including Parent Finders of Canada. Over 8,000 adoptees and birth relatives are signed up in Parents Finders' national computer register.

Jean Paton, an adoptee and social worker, was the pioneer in the United States for open adoption records. She founded Orphan Voyage and was an inspiration to the three adoptees who founded Parents Finders, Vancouver in 1974. Other chapters of Parent Finders have been organized across Canada. Generally, members who have found their birth family remain active to assist newcomers.

Searching can be a difficult process. However, many adult adoptees refrain from searching because of the conflict it brings to their adoptive parents. "I can't ask my mother," a 33-year-old teacher sobbed after contacting Parent Finders in Vancouver. "I

think my Dad would understand but not my mother. I've stopped asking her questions because she gets hysterical. I can't search behind their backs. I don't want to hurt them, yet I have to know."

Although adoption practice has existed under state and provincial laws for more than 50 years, only recently has it been researched. For years it was assumed that adoption practice based on the "as if born to" concept, wherein the adoptive parent/child relationship was considered a duplication of the natural parent/child relationship, was in the best interests of the child, the birth parents and the adoptive parents. Social workers therefore often believed there was something wrong with the adoptee, or

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the adoptive family, when the adoptee persisted in asking about his/her origins. Adoptive parents, in turn, took the cue and blamed themselves when their grown adopted children tried to learn more about their history.

Members of the adoption triangle who have experienced reunions, as well as researchers, find the aura of secrecy creates difficult and lasting problems. The wisdom of sealing the adoptee's birth records is being challenged. Without access to biological information, adult adoptees can ex-

perience genealogical bewilderment.

"When the need is not fulfilled, adoption is then often interpreted by the child as something 'bad' and may result in the child resorting to fantasy for answers," says Edward M. Schwartz, a University of Michigan psychologist in the *Journal of Paediatrics*. He found that 40 of 44 children seen at the university paediatric clinic wanted to know something about their biological families. In 26 of the cases the adoptive parents were unaware of the children's wishes. When learning of it, the adoptive parents often expressed amazement or disbelief and resentment or anxiety.

For many years it was thought that telling the adoption story when children were young was considered to be enough. Now it has become clear that as children grow they need more information. Schwartz claims that during middle childhood, around the time a child can understand something about heredity, there is a need to know what the birth parents look like. Usually at this stage the children are not concerned with the names of their birth parents. As children enters adolescence they need to know details about their backgrounds. In late adolescence and young adulthood, often there is interest in the medical and health status of their birth parents. This increases when adoptees marry or become parents.

Too often adoptive parents respond to such questions defensively, pleading that their love is real and greater. Sometimes they accuse the child of being ungrateful for all they have done. It is a difficult time for adoptive parents especially if they deny that the birth parents exist.

Arthur D. Sorosky, M.D., assistant professor of child psychiatry at the University of California, believes that the secrecy surrounding adoption probably has been more of a burden than a protection to adoptive parents. Sorosky is co-author of *The Adoption Triangle*. He studied 50 reunions and found that adoptive parents suffered the worst trauma. "Adoptive parents fear that a

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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liberalization of the adoption statutes would result in a loss of their adopted children to the birth parents even though there is no evidence to support this finding," he says. "It would appear that this anxiety represents a resurgence of the pre-adoption childless feeling of emptiness and the sense of inadequacy associated with infertility." Sorosky found that few adoptees regretted their search. Most reported a deeper sense of love and appreciation for their adoptive parents whom they view as their psychological parents.

Sorosky also found that secrecy does not help the birth mother to adequately heal the wound of separation. He believes that the anonymity standards were developed as a safeguard to all of the parties involved in adoption, but "they may, in fact, have been the cause of insoluble problems." He urges recognition that birth parents probably have not resolved their feelings about the child surrendered to adoption. For example, many birth mothers suffer intensely around the birth date of their child. A birth mother said, "I know when I signed those papers I gave up my rights as a parent, but those papers did not stop my love for my baby or interest in her welfare."

The strong bonds of love that can develop in an adoptive family are plainly evident among the adoptive parents and their grown children who share in the search for a lost identity. Emotionally freeing the adoptee to do this involves a new concept in adoption. The adoptive parent/child relationship works best when it is nurtured by parental love that does not seek to possess or hinder normal needs for growth through a sense of continuity.

Clare Marcus is the author of 'Who Is My Mother?' and 'Adopted: A Canadian Search Guide.' Clare Marcus died early in 1992. This article was provided by her husband, Robert Marcus.

Dear Editor,

After reading the interview with Ken Derby, Director of the Adoption Reunion Registry in British Columbia (*Adoption Circles*, Issue 4, Winter/Spring 1992), I wrote to the Ministry of Social Services, Adoption Section. I have questions and concerns regarding my son (now 16 1/2) and other adoptees not being given identifying information about a deceased birth parent if requested. The following is an excerpt from my letter to the Ministry regarding this regulation and a reply from the Adoption Section. Other birth parents may find this information useful.

Dear Nora Hynes

Social Worker, Adoption Section

I am writing about something I read in *Adoption Circles*, that an adoptee cannot be given the name of or other identifying information about a deceased birth parent. I was alarmed to read this and wonder what happens if: a) I die before my son is 19 or b) he doesn't desire contact until he is in his 40's or later, and I have died? In my case, I've not had other children so my son would not have siblings to contact on my side of the family. I have letters and information and mementoes that I want my son to have. So the question is: What do I need to do to ensure my son has access, if he wants it, to these things and identifying information about me, if I'm deceased? Can I write a letter of permission/waiver to be kept on hand in my Ministry of Social Services file? Would you require a name and address of someone my son could contact in the event of my death? It is most important to me that my son have access to any information about me that he needs. Things happen, and it seems the ultimate injustice is to think of my son, at some time in his life, wanting contact only to find that I am deceased and that no one will give him information he requires. Please let me know how to proceed.

Yours sincerely,

Heather Vaughan

Ladysmith, British Columbia

THE REPLY

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

Dear Ms. Vaughan,

We are in receipt of your recent letter in response to our letter expressing your concerns about the adoption legislation.

Current legislation prohibits us from sharing information if one of the parties to adoption is deceased. However, if you wish to provide us with specific directions as to what information is to be released to your son (in the event you are deceased when he does a search), we will be happy to honour your request. Another suggestion would be for you to discuss with your lawyer the possibility of putting the package of letters and mementoes in your will. Instructions could be given for your lawyer to contact our office in the event of your death. We would make every effort to locate your son under these circumstances.

The Ministry will be undertaking a White Paper on Adoptions in the near future. We would be happy to send you a copy when it is available and would welcome your comments. We have noted your name and address for this purpose.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact our office.

Sincerely,

Nora Hynes

Social Worker, Adoption Section

Ministry of Social Services

The Ministry of Social Services can be contacted at: Parliament Buildings, Victoria, British Columbia V8W 3A2 for a copy of the White Paper on Adoptions.

The Adoption Reunion Registry in British Columbia can be reached at #202 - 1600 West 6th Avenue, Vancouver, B.C. V6J 1R3 or (604) 736-7917 or outside the local area: 1-800-665-1899.

Send letters to the editor, Adoption Circles, c/o Forget Me Not Family Society, Box 61526, Brookwood Post Office, Langley, B.C. V3A 8C8 Canada.