

ADOPTION

CANADA'S POST-ADOPTION QUARTERLY ON REUNION & REFORM

CIRCLES

ISSUE 6 SPRING 1993

WILL THE B.C. GOVERNMENT COME OUT OF THE DARK AGES WITH NEW ADOPTION LEGISLATION?

by Tom Nelson

A look at the community panel
recommendations to the B.C.
Ministry of Social Services

BIRTH FATHER TALK

by Peter Raeside

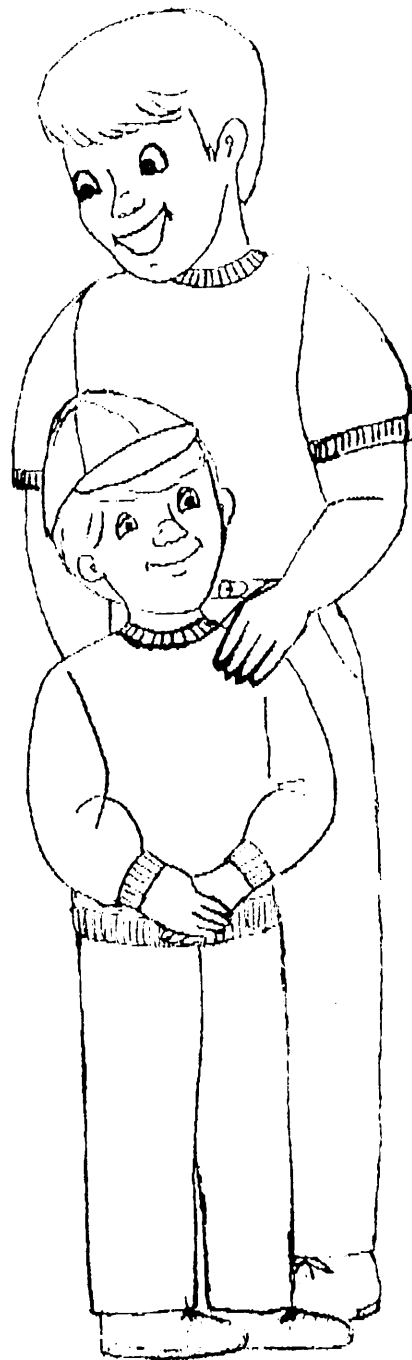
A provoking disclosure

POST-CONFERENCE NOTES

by Kathryn Vea

The 1st Canadian
Post-Adoption and Reunion
Conference was a success

ADOPTION NEWS & INFORMATION



ADOPTION CIRCLES

ISSUE #6 SPRING 1993

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1993-1994

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Self-help and support groups generally attract women participants. Many of the adoption support and reform organizations across North America were founded by women. However, in the British Columbia area there is a trend among a handful of male journalists and broadcasters to write about their adoption experience. Broadcaster and former politician Barrie A. Clark lead the pack in 1989 with *My Search for Catherine Anne* (Lorimer & Company: Toronto).

Over the last few years, Rick Ouston, an investigative journalist and adoptee, published many stories about his search and reunion. In addition, he contributed to several radio programs advocating open adoption records.

In 1990, veteran broadcaster Jack Webster wove his disturbing birth father story into his autobiography. Webster later married the birth mother and had more children. In an effort to help his wife erase the painful memory of their child, Webster and medical professionals drugged, administered electroshock treatment and psycho-surgery to her. But she never forget her daughter. While promoting his book, Webster admitted a deep sense of regret and guilt about the adoption. The Canadian media giant bares all in *Webster!* (Douglas & McIntyre: Vancouver/Toronto).

Last year Peter Raeside, in his *Vancouver Sun* column, wrote about his first phone call with his daughter, 23 years after she was born. Raeside also

lead a workshop at the 1993 "Let's Talk About Reunions" conference on the male perspective on adoption. Raeside's grippingly frank admission of abandoning his girlfriend when she became pregnant, contains a confession — that many birth mothers were surprised to hear — the loss of his child haunted him for many years. In "Birth Father Talk" on page 6 Raeside describes how, as a young man, he felt he would make a lousy father. Societal forces were imminent in compelling both birth mothers and birth fathers to feel incapable of parenting their child. Raeside claims the glaring absence of birth fathers in the adoption reform community is not a sign they do not care, but rather they are not good at expressing vulnerability, fear, shame and loss.

Another male writer joins us in this issue of *Adoption Circles*. In the feature story on page 4, activist and adoptee Tom Nelson reports on British Columbia's adoption legislation which is currently under review. Nelson met several times with the Minister of Social Services to make recommendations for open adoption records.

Other minorities have been successful at making their demands for justice and fair treatment known. It is time for adoptees, birth parents and adoptive parents to bump out the hard, pointed corners of the adoption triangle — isolating us from each other — into a smooth, fluid circle. The adoption circle.

M.S.

POST-CONFERENCE NOTES

Mark your calendar :
March 5 & 6, 1994
for the 2nd
"Let's Talk About Reunions"
Conference

The Forget Me Not Family Society was established with hopes, dreams and the goal of providing an educational channel to the adoption community. Workshops, conferences and our newsletter will be available to all those touched by adoption.

On February 6 & 7, 1993, one of our goals was reached — the first annual Canadian conference on post-adoption, "Let's Talk About Reunions," held in Surrey, British Columbia. It was two days of emotionally charged workshops that left many who attended with a deeper understanding of our feelings and experiences.

I would like to thank everyone, particularly the executive and volunteers who worked hard for many long hours behind the scenes, for making our first conference a success. Yes, we will have

another conference. The next one will offer more socializing time (with more cookies and coffee) and workshops will repeat to allow everyone the opportunity to hear as much as possible. The evaluation sheets will help the organizers plan according to the community needs.

Please mark your calendar for March 5 & 6, 1994 and tell your friends: the next "Let's Talk About Reunions" conference will be held at the same location (Sheraton Guildford/Surrey, B.C.).

Our new board of directors have been elected. We have expanded our executive and it is our dream to enlarge our membership across the country. We look forward to the coming year, to new challenges, to new acquaintances and to old friends.
Kathryn Vea

WORKSHOP SCHEDULE

Place: New Westminster Public Library, Auditorium
716 - 6th Avenue, New Westminster, B.C.

Times: 1:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m. / Social: 4:00 p.m. - 4:30 p.m.

Cost: \$30.00 per workshop

Saturday, June 5, 1993

Topic: Pre & Post Reunion Basics for Adoptees and Their
Extended Family Members
With: Lee Crawford, M.Ed., R.C.C.

Saturday, July 17, 1993

Topic: Pre & Post Reunion Basics for Birth Parents and Their
Extended Family Members
With: Lee Crawford, M.Ed., R.C.C.

Saturday, August 21, 1993

Topic: Post Reunion Family Changes -- for adoptees
With: Arden Henley, B.A., M.A.

Saturday, September 25, 1993

Topic: Living With the Decision of Relinquishing
With: Pat Roles

Saturday, October 16, 1993

Topic: Adoptees in Relationships
With: Lee Crawford, M.Ed., R.C.C.

Saturday, November 20, 1993

Topic: Post Reunion Family Changes for Birth Parents
With: Arden Henley, B.A., M.A.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CALL (604) 530-2160

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

**Dear Forget Me Not
Family Society,**

Thank you very much for the great conference. The work and organization you put into it was fantastic; I know what a lot of hard work it was.

Being around all those reuniting people helped to sensitize me, as a social worker, to the reality of the adoption experience. I'm sure it will influence my future practise. It was very helpful, as well, for my husband and I to prepare for his potential reunion.

As you know, adoption legislation is under reform in this province. Please encourage your members to make their opinions known through their local MLAs or directly to Joan Smallwood, Minister of Social Services. (See page 5 for address.) Laws are changed according to the will of the people.

Thanks again for the opportunity to hear from some of the authorities on the subject. Please thank your presenters, particularly those brave people who were willing to share publicly their own experiences.

*Kathryn Grant, B.S.W.
Nanaimo, B.C.*

Will the B.C. Government Come Out of the Dark Ages with New Adoption Legislation?

by Tom Nelson

The adoption act was enacted in 1920 and although reviewed in 1957 it has remained virtually unchanged. Three recent amendments reflect the changing face of adoption in British Columbia (B.C.):

1. Amendment Act's objective was to secure suitable adoptive homes for children with special needs who would otherwise not be adopted (1988).
2. Amendment Act was designed to regulate growing number of private adoption placements in B.C.; it provides for licensed adoption agencies and sets out criteria for licensing private placement and consent (1990).
3. Amendment Act established an active adoption registry to supplement the existing passive registry (1991). The active registry conducts searches for birth relatives for a small fee.

Amendments to regulations for private adoption placement will be presented this spring in the legislative assembly. According to Trudy Denton (Adoptive Parents Association, B.C.), the ministry wants stricter regulation of private placements. There is concern that children are placed inappropriately and concern about the exchange of money. However, Denton claims the ministry is rushing the process of consulting with the community. She also claims the ministry adoption section is understaffed and adoption workers take on child welfare cases. Sometimes there are emergency situations, so naturally the adoption work gets pushed aside.

In November of 1991, the honourable Joan Smallwood, Minister of Social Services, appointed a ten person community panel to review child protection legislation in B.C. This panel travelled to over 40 communities in B.C. during 1992 to meet

both privately and publicly with groups and individuals who wanted to participate in the discussions. The belief was that a comprehensive review of the Family and Child Service Act was long overdue.

The panel presented over 260 recommendations published in *Making Changes: A Place to Start* and *Liberating Our Children: Liberating Our Nations* on Aboriginal issues (see next page).

In January 1992, I received a letter from Joan Smallwood with a copy of the consultation paper. In May, I was invited to a private meeting with the panel. In June, I was again invited to spend a day in a round-table discussion on adoption issues. Also present were Pam Hendy (Cariboo Adoption Support Group) and Audrey Scammell (Triad, Victoria, B.C.), as well as other adoption professionals.

As a result of the tremendous interest generated toward adoption issues there will be additional discussions with the Ministry of Social Services. The ministry is also accepting written submissions until November, 1993. In particular, open adoption records and international adoptions will be under examination. Please write to: The Adoption Legislation Review, Ministry of Social Services, Parliament Buildings, Victoria, BC V8V 3A2. Call 1-800-663-1251 for further details.

I discourage petitions or briefs by way of groups, but rather submit individual and personal views. Let them know your propensity for these issues. You can be part of making change, not only in B.C., but in Canada.

The following page contains excerpts from the community panels recommendations for adoption legislation change published in October 1992.

Tom Nelson is an adoptee, search consultant and advocate for open records.

THE COMMUNITY PANEL RECOMMENDATIONS

Reprinted from:

Making Changes: A Place to Start

ADOPTION

Under current legislation, adopted children are considered to be "as if born to" the adoptive family, meaning that the rights, obligations and responsibilities of the birth family are permanently extinguished. Our new definition of adoption is significantly different from that which now exists in the Adoption Act.

We have concluded that the notion of "as if born" is not realistic in these times. We want to redefine the word "adoption" from its current use as a term equated with permanent ownership. Our redefinition of adoption is consistent with our understanding of kinship, which is based on the principle that the bond between children and their birth family and heritage cannot be extinguished. It is consistent with the direction of current adoption practices, which are tending toward increasing openness and access to information.

We recognize that the issue of adoption is a high-profile and sensitive family issue. We heard that adoption is not a single entity, that is, the placement of newborn infants. Adoption encompasses a range of options along the alternative care continuum. Adoption includes the placement of infants, special needs children, older children, and children from other countries. In all of these situations, we believe that kinship is never extinguished. However, within each adoption placement, the degree of contact shared between birth families and adoptive parents will be based on needs and capacities of all parties. A common element of all adoptions must be the right of all parties to receive full information and the recognition of the need to preserve and honour a child's birth family heritage.

Our new definition of adoption will require a transition phase, a comprehensive review of adoption options and practices, new legislation, and considerable public education. As well, the implications of the Hague Convention on Inter-Country Adoption, due for ratification by Canada in 1993, should be reviewed by the provincial government.

Recommendations:

1. The term "adoption" must be defined as the life-long transfer of custody and care of a child while retaining kinship, which is the bond between the child and the birth family.

2. Adoption, as defined in this report, must be incorporated into new legislation following a thorough review of all issues related to adoption. This review and integration must not delay the new legislation.

INFORMATION RIGHTS OF ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

The panel received many submissions on access to information in matters regarding adoption. We have proposed a redefinition of adoption based on the principle that the bond between children and their families cannot be extinguished. This re-definition would provide open access to adoption records consistent with the principles of this chapter [Access to Information].

This change will also require a transition phase to deal with information and privacy issues arising from adoption placements made under existing or previous legislation.

PRINCIPLES

We believe:

The bond between birth families and their children is never extinguished.

Families should be expected and enabled to retain or resume their custody and care responsibilities. They can remain as closely involved as is consistent with their child's welfare, even if the child cannot live with them.

PERSPECTIVE

Many who made submissions to the panel believed that maintaining children's connections with their family of origin, their history and their heritage is of vital importance. Again and again, we heard "don't cut me off from my roots."

KINSHIP

Kinship is a public and legal statement of the importance of the existing bond between birth families and their children. Because it is based in a biological relationship that cannot be altered, kinship cannot

be transferred, denied, terminated or extinguished by any act of legislation. Kinship is a significant birth connection that needs to be legally recognized and enshrined in provincial legislation.

Reprinted from:

Liberating Our Children:

Liberating Our Nations

NATIVE ADOPTIONS

At present, the federal Indian Act recognizes custom adoption by Aboriginal families. Provincial law does not. As a result, in situations where a child might benefit as an adopted child under provincial statutes, the child is denied benefit because the custom adoption is not recognized. Custom adoptions are characterized by the consent of the parents and the ongoing ties between the child and his or her extended birth families.

Recommendations:

1. Provincial legislation must recognize Aboriginal custom adoptions involving Aboriginal children and an adopting Aboriginal family.

2. Legislation must recognize no other forms of adoption of an Aboriginal child other than custom or open adoption by an Aboriginal family.

Present adoption laws have resulted in the sealing of adoption records. This process denies children the right to know who they are, and violates the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Recommendation:

1. With respect to Aboriginal children, adoption records must be made available to the body generally considered as representing the child's Nation or community and the body must be empowered to determine the best course of action to assist the child in re-establishing his or her identity.

Both publications are available from:

The Ministry of Social Services

Parliament Buildings

Victoria, British Columbia

V8W 3A2

1-800-663-1251

BIRTH FATHER TALK

by Peter Raeside

I had all the makings of a truly humiliating experience.

I was to address Canada's first conference on post-adoption called "Let's Talk About Reunions" as a birth father — telling a group of strangers how I had left my pregnant girlfriend 25 years ago, about my feelings of shame and loss over the child she bore but gave up for adoption, and how I had recently been united with my grown-up daughter.

Fortuitously, the experience turned out to be both healing and empowering.

The invitation to take part in last month's conference in Surrey, British Columbia had its genesis in a column I had penned in *The Vancouver Sun* in the fall of 1991 about the 'rediscovery' of my daughter a few weeks earlier. That column was the first of several I wrote for *The Sun* over the next eight months about men's issues. The desire to write from a man's perspective grew out of my awakening sense of male consciousness, my subsequent involvement in the men's movement and the feeling that I wanted to publicize some of the pain and loss that men often experience but rarely express.

That was essentially why I had agreed to take part in two panel discussions at the conference — one about reunions, the other about the birth father experience. The birth father participation was the more perilous for me — because I knew I needed to explain how I had come to leave my girlfriend 25 years ago. I wasn't going to make excuses — there is no way to excuse a man for failing in his responsibility to protect the life he helped to conceive. But I felt it important to take responsibility for

that act of irresponsibility years ago.

It was the right thing to have done at the time in the sense that I had been true to myself. At some deep, largely unconscious level I knew that I would have been an inadequate and abusive husband and father.

And I also needed to explain, without too much bitterness or blame, that my feelings of inadequacy as a man at that time were deep and real. True, I had a veneer of competence and confidence that I needed to survive as a newspaper reporter in those days. But, inside I felt scared and needy, with a considerable measure of self-hatred. I had little idea of what it meant to be a man.

Hardly the stuff that makes for husband or father of the year.

These feelings grew out of my childhood, when I had longed for closeness with and acceptance from my father, but got very little of either.

There was the need to show the conference participants — who were about 90 percent women — that men, too, care a damn, even if they are often, like my father, not very good at expressing it.

It seems to me absurd — and offensive — to postulate that men have less capacity for caring than women, or that they suffer any less than women from shame, guilt, grief, or loss. How can we be sure the loss is insignificant compared with that of the birth mother? Do men care or suffer less, in effect, because they are generally less expressive?

The question is more than a merely rhetorical one. There is an insidious, pervasive message in much of the mass media

Peter Raeside is a birth father and journalist. He is active in the men's movement.

these days that men are just abusive, dangerous sociopaths who don't give a damn. And no one is immune to that perception.

The organizers and participants at the "Let's Talk About Reunions" conference were marvellously supportive of me and saluted my courage in being willing to stand up and be counted as a birth father. Few birth fathers attended the conference, and, of course, I knew why: men aren't comfortable at showing their shame or other feelings — it isn't the way we've been brought up.

The participants, whether adoptive parents, birth mothers, birth fathers, adoptees or professionals, invariably struck me as courageous, non-judgmental people who were willing to take the risk of showing their vulnerability.

And yet, after both panels in which I participated, women came up to me, some with expressions of surprise, saying in

**I wasn't going to
make excuses — but
I felt it important to
take responsibility for
that act of
irresponsibility
years ago.**

effect that they had no idea that birth fathers gave a damn. I felt it important to make the point that I had always cared about my daughter, and that the reason that I hadn't contacted her earlier was that I hadn't felt I had the right to do so. It was clear that they just weren't used to a man talking about his caring of his suffering or his shame and that, because it wasn't expressed, they had just assumed it didn't exist.

This was a sobering realization. But it was also gratifying to puncture the stereotype of male behaviour and hopefully lend some enlightenment to the post-adoption process and to the way men and women relate.

For that chance I am most grateful to the conference organizers and to everyone who took part.

NEWS & INFORMATION

Duplessis Orphans Launch a \$1.5 Billion Suit

Over 4,000 Quebec orphans lived in mental institutions between the 1940s and the 1960s. The premier at that time was Maurice Duplessis, who, along with the Roman Catholic church, ruled Quebec absolutely. Many of these orphans claimed they were abused physically, sexually and psychologically and were used as slave labour in the state-funded, church-run institutions. However, members of the religious community say the abuse is exaggerated. The suit was filed on March 11, 1993 to be heard in the Quebec Superior Court.

The Canadian Press reported that Myriam Kelly, age 57, was orphaned at the age of two after her father died. Kelly says she was jailed for 20 hours a day, beaten with a chain, forced to have ice-cold baths, drugged and received electric-shock treatment. She also witnessed a five-year-old girl beaten and later die.

The \$1.5 billion class action suit on behalf of 2,000 claimants will seek up to \$900,000 per person for psychological damages, suffering, loss of enjoy-

ment of life and loss of earning capacity. Another 2,500 victims are believed to have died and 800 others are believed to still remain in institutions.

The religious order received 75 cents a day for an orphan but \$2.75 for an "idiot." In addition, "idiots" unlike orphans, had no legal rights, did not have to be educated or paid for work. Perfectly normal children were labelled "mentally retarded" by doctors who did not examine them.

Alice Quinton who spent 16 years confined to a mental institution has recorded her experience. It forms the basis of a book, *Les Enfants de Duplessis* by Pauline Gill, a Montreal sociologist. Gill says, "We should all be ashamed that such a gross abuse of power ever occurred in Canada, and that such a flagrant lack of social conscience allowed it." Dr. Stan van Duyse in Montreal claims this story makes the abuse at the Mount Cashel Orphanage in Newfoundland "look like a Sunday school picnic."

-- from *The Vancouver Sun*, March 12, 1993 and *The Globe & Mail*, September 12, 1992.

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