

A Personal History of Birthmother Activism

This will not be a scholarly presentation, as I am not a scholar but a poet. Dates and places will be approximate and names may be inadvertently left out or forgotten. This is my opinion as a birthmother active in adoption reform since the mid 70s, from my unique point of view, which others may question, dispute, or add to. It is not meant to be the last word or the whole story, but it is my piece of this history which few know or care about, and I am honored to be here today presenting it to you.

Birthmother activism was born out of adoptee activism, which began with adoptee Jean Paton and publication of her book "The Adopted Break Silence" in the late 1940s, and the growth of her group Orphan Voyage through the 50s, 60s and 70s. Adoptee activism exploded in the early 70s when adoptee Florence Fisher started ALMA, the Adoptee's Liberty Movement Association, in NYC. From NY, ALMA chapters began to blossom around the country, and I, who had already been in touch with Jean Paton by mail, joined a MA Alma group where I was living at the time. I had always wanted to know what had happened to my son since surrendering him, but had no idea adoptees ever had any desire to know their birthparents. When I first heard Florence Fisher on a radio show, then read a magazine article about Jean Paton, I was shocked, and immediately wanted to get in touch with them and join their groups, if I could.

There were always a few birthmothers and enlightened adoptive parents who joined the early adoptee-led adoption reform groups, We were there to support adoptees in their quest for open records, and to find and reunite with our surrendered children. We also had our own separate issues that we wanted to address, Lee Campbell was another birthmother in my local group, whose surrendered son was then 11, and she had recently found out his new name and identity.. I was excited and determined to find out how I could find my young son, who was then only 8 years old. If others could find the secret door, so could I!

I had written a piece for Jean Paton's newsletter "The Log of Orphan Voyage" asking birthmothers to get together, come out of the closet, and support adoptee rights. Lee was also in touch with Jean, and we began talking about forming our own support group for birthmothers as a sort of auxiliary to ALMA and Orphan Voyage groups. We got together with a few other birthmothers from our local groups, and in 1976 the first formal birthmother organization, Concerned United Birthparents, was born. Lee was a superb organizer and spokesperson, and really got the group going. Within a year we were picking up national membership and getting lots of media publicity, including several appearances by Lee on the popular Phil Donahue show. Lee appeared in shadow in her first TV appearance, but then came out of the closet in a big way, and gave courage to a lot of other mothers who were still hiding the "Big Secret" and grieving alone. Birthmother activism was out of the closet and into the streets!

I moved back to NJ where I had grown up, found my son with the help of the woman who had found Lee's son, and got involved in NY ALMA . I also continued to be active in national CUB by writing for the newsletter "The Communicator" and attending conferences. The American Adoption Congress was formed in 1979 to be an umbrella adoption reform group, and I and other CUB members joined.. In 1980 many of us spoke out in favor of the federal Model State Adoption Act which included a provision for open records for adopted adults, but this was defeated by the Adoption Industry lobby group The National Council For Adoption which was founded by the Edna Gladney Home and other conservative agencies to fight open records. We are still fighting that battle today, state by state,

Birthmothers have been active and involved in every state where open records legislation has been proposed, writing and speaking to legislators, demonstrating, testifying at hearings and committee meetings, and writing to the media whenever an adoption story appears. This has gone on for almost 4

decades, with many of the same women active the whole time, and now on the Internet, blogosphere, Facebook and other social networks.

In 1980, a group of 5 New Jersey birthmothers who were members of CUB wanted to form a local support group, but did not want the red tape and constraint of being a formal CUB chapter, so we started our own group and called it Origins. We held in-person monthly meetings for many years, had several conferences, and published our national newsletter Origins which I edited from the late 80s until 2007.. We were all mothers of young children whom we had found as teens or pre-teens, so we were dealing with different emotional issues than older birthmothers, and there was a certain amount of hostility from adoptee groups and the adoption reform movement about finding minor children. In some ways we were the blind leading the blind, and made some mistakes, but there was nobody to guide us as we were the first openly searching, openly outspoken reunited birthmothers. So we stumbled along. Many of us contacted our teenage children or their families, with every imaginable good and bad result, including a woman whose 12 year old son was given back to her because the adoptive father and stepmother did not want him! Some adoptive parents welcomed contact, but most were threatened, which put some young adoptees in the middle. If I had my own contact to do over, I would do it later and differently, but that is a subject for another day.

Most of us retained dual membership in CUB and Origins, and were still involved with various adoptee groups. CUB went through some changes when Lee Campbell left and Carole Anderson became president. Carole was a brilliant woman, an MSW Social worker who went back to school and got her law degree and became a partner in her firm. She became a dear friend of mine, although we sometimes clashed mightily on issues and policy, that never interfered with our personal connection or respect, Carole was a proud, tough, stubborn Swede, who like so many of us found her surrendered son when he was young, and eventually had a wonderful relationship with him. Carole was president of CUB, Vice President, and for many years editor and frequent contributor to the Communicator.

She was CUB President during the infamous "Baby Jessica" custody case, and got hate mail and even death threats for sticking up for the natural parents in that badly botched adoption custody dispute. The natural parents did eventually win and get their daughter Anna/Jessica back after several years of delays and horrible court battles. Carole and CUB were portrayed viciously in an article in the New Yorker about this case, and I don't think she ever got over it. The whole situation was a disheartening picture of what the general public thinks of birthparents, especially the uppity activist kind!

Carole and her good friend Janet Fenton were CUB leaders through much of the 90s, and produced some brilliant position papers and other writings on birthmother issues. They were also instrumental in stopping The Uniform Adoption Act (1994) which could have potentially have sealed records in every state.

Where I diverged with Carole was on supporting open records for adoptees even if records were not open to birthparents. I felt adoptees were the innocent parties always, and while of course I supported birthmother search, having done it myself, I did not see legal access to records as the same for both sides. Carole felt that giving birthmothers access to the amended birth certificate and adoptee's new identity was only fair and showed that birthmothers did not want confidentiality. I saw it as more complicated than that. We in NJ Origins always supported adoptee rights legislation, while CUB for a while did not. This has since changed.

Carole developed incurable lung cancer, and passed away at age 56 in 2003. I still miss her. CUB almost went with her, as in the last years of her life the CUB Board at that time had talked seriously about dissolving the organization, but Karen Vedder, Mimi Janes and some of the West Coast members stepped in and revitalized it, moving the headquarters to CA. There were some tough years, but CUB is coming back up with a new Board, of which I am now secretary, and new modern web page in the works, and a

great yearly retreat that moves back and forth between the East and West Coast. This year it will be in October in Carlsbad CA and all adoption related people are welcome.

In the 90s a new and outrageously named adoptee activist group, Bastard Nation, was started. Some birthmothers, including me, joined right away and have been supporting the Proud Bastards ever since, I feel that their stance of adoption legislative reform being about rights, not reunion, and keeping medical, emotional, and psychological issues separate from legal issues is the right way to go. In 1998 500 birthmothers signed a newspaper add supporting Measure 58 which passed and opened records in Oregon.

Now a word about birthmother literature, which is an important and permanent part of activism. The first birthmother memoir was "Birthmark" (1979) by Lorraine Dusky. Lorraine was active in NY ALMA, a writer with the courage and skill to tell her own story of surrendering her daughter in 1966, Lorraine is still active and has a blog, Birthmother/Firstmother Forum, The next significant book was Marsha/Mirah Riben's self-published "Shedding Light on The Dark Side of Adoption", (1988) an expose of adoption abuses. . Mirah was one of the Co-founders of NJ Origins and now has a blog "Family Preservation Advocate". She recently wrote a second book, "The Stork Market" (2007) about abuse and corruption in domestic and international adoption. Several adoption reform books, while primarily about adoptees, also touched on birthmother issues, including adoptee BJ Lifton's "Lost and Found" and "Journey of the Adoptive Self", and "Adoption Triangle "by Sorosky, Baran, and Pannor.

Carol Schaefer's memoir "The Other Mother" (1991) was widely read and turned into a made for TV movie. It portrayed the experience of a mother sent to a maternity home in the 60s and later reunited with her adult son , and is still one of the best memoirs of the birthmother experience. With the explosion of self-publishing, quite a few sincere but ill-written adoption memoirs came out . I have found most of them unreadable and some embarrassing. There is a difference in writing for therapy, which can benefit anyone, and for the public which takes skill.

One important book came from researcher and feminist historian Rickie Solinger, who had never knowingly met a birthmother when she wrote "Wake Up Little Suzie: Single Pregnancy and Race Before Row V.Wade"(1992). Solinger detailed the different routes that unwed White mothers and Black mothers were sent down in the years before 1973 in her carefully researched and well documented book. She painted an accurate portrait of the experience of most birthmother activists who had surrendered in the 60s. She quickly became a featured speaker at adoption reform conferences, and got to know many of the women who previously had just been stories and statistics to her.

Ms Solinger went on to write "Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the U.S. " (2002) This book featured interviews with many CUB leaders and members, but I felt it was skewed toward a feminist and pro-abortion slant that was not really there for many of us early activists, who initially just wanted to find and reconnect with our kids, and tell the world what had happened to us,. We did not all think of ourselves as feminists.. Ms. Solinger's political agenda took precedence, as well as her anti-adoption stance, but I still find her works valuable and an aid to our cause.

By far the best book to tell the story of mothers who surrendered in the 60s is "The Girls Who Went Away"(2006) by adoptee Ann Fessler. Ms. Fessler interviewed a cross section of birthmothers, then told their stories individually, without much editorial comment. The stories speak for themselves and are riveting and heartbreaking. Ms. Fessler has also done several art installations and performance art pieces using this material, which are haunting to experience. She truly captures what it was like to be an unwed mother back in the day. Her book should be read by everyone who wants to understand the birthmother experience, and why so many of us have become activists.

Another book, a personal favorite of mine although not widely read in adoption reform circles is the memoir "Surrendered Child: A Birth Mother's Journey" (2006) by Karen Salyer McElmurray. This a beautifully written, nuanced, complex and harrowing story of a girl growing up in a terribly abusive home, and surrendering her child to save him from a similar fate. This book shows the fluid and shifting nature of memory, and the endless ambiguity that surrounds adoption, which is often missing from memoirs that are trying to make an ideological point,

The politics of adoption in birthmother activism have resulted in wide splits between diverging camps and ideologies unknown in the early days.. Since the growth of the Internet, support lists, web pages, online groups and blogs have proliferated. The variety and vehemence of these groups is bewildering. I was briefly on a couple of support lists where we were forbidden to mention any kind of activism, as this might be too much for the fragile souls there to deal with. They only wanted to be about "healing". This seemed weird and artificial to me. We use to consider activism an aid to healing, not a hindrance.

Other groups are militantly political and anti-adoption, wanting adoption not reformed but abolished. While this is understandable given the cruel treatment many of us got as unwed mothers, it is a dead end that shuts down dialogue and work for realistic reform goals and leads to a black and white, "Us vs. Them" attitude. A group was formed in Australia in the 90s that coincidentally took the name Origins, but had no connection to our NJ group. They quickly became vocally anti-adoption and set the standard for other groups of that kind, with a hard-line stand that adoption was always wrong. There is also an Origins Canada group that is still affiliated with the Aussies, and an Origins USA group that has broken ties with them, being less ideological and more willing to dialogue with other groups, although still a bit more radical than CUB. The OUSA group is focused on family preservation and preventing adoption abuses, which are many, and providing support to mothers who have surrendered.

Other small splinter groups have formed that are only for mothers who surrendered during what they call the "Baby Scoop Era", or "The Era of Mass Surrenders"; post-war and pre-legalized abortion. Younger mothers who surrendered after '73 are not welcome. They make a sharp divide between mothers of their era whom they feel had no choice at all, and those who came later and had more options therefore are more culpable for their actions. One of these groups is "Senior Mothers" (which sounds like they should be on a bus to Atlantic City)! Their principle activity seems to be declaring how old and wise and near death they are, so someone (the Government) better apologize to them soon! As a woman of the same age and era as these ladies, I find them and their group bitter, exclusionary, and endlessly depressing.

On the other side of the aisle on the Internet are younger birthmothers, many in open adoptions, some cheerfully working as shells for adoption agencies, often religiously affiliated ones of the Fundamentalist variety, some sincerely satisfied with their choice of adoption, and some unhappy because their supposed to be open adoptions were closed by dishonest adoptive parents. In most places open adoption agreements are not enforceable if either party wants to back out, so this is a real concern, The younger mothers seem to be somewhat polarized and caught between extremes of giddy "rah rah adoption is great" and great disillusionment and pain. Brenda Romanchik, a birthmother who has been in a successful open adoption for over 20 years, is one of the few who have a balanced and compassionate view of what works and what does not in open adoption, and the very real loss that is present even in the best open adoption situations.

The language debates within the birthmother activism movement about positive or negative adoption language are comparable to the worst of academic political correctness. Adoptive parents started it, with "positive adoption languages like "make an adoption plan" rather than "surrender", but some birthmothers ran with it with their mirror-image negative adoption language. The innocent term "birthmother" which was popularized as one word by Lee Campbell when CUB was founded, as an alternative to "natural mother" or "biological mother" is now looked on as an unspeakable, unprintable curse word and insult by

some anti-adoption birthmothers who refer to it coyly as "the B-word". I guess they believe there will be terrible consequences if the dreaded word is uttered, much like the name of the evil wizard Voldemort in the Harry Potter series!

This came about because some social workers in the 50s started using the word instead of "natural mother" despite the fact that being called a "natural mother" did not mean you were treated one bit better as an unwed mother in the 50s and 60s! There is a great volume of twisted research and hysterical blather about this on anti-adoption sites. Adoptive parents are always referred to by the anti-adoption group as "adopters", because in their ideology adoptive parents are not parents at all. Only giving birth makes a mother, forever and ever amen, and everyone has only one mother, the biological one. Others raising children are mere adopters, caretakers or guardians, but never parents. Never mind emotional reality, just stick to the biological facts.

There is a whole insider vocabulary; children are never "placed" or even "surrendered" or "relinquished" but rather "lost" to adoption, or better yet, "kidnapped" or "stolen". Birthmothers can be "first mothers" "natural mothers" "exiled mothers", "mothers of loss", or the favorite, always and only just "mothers". Of which you only get one so everyone knows who you are talking about, and it is not that adopter! There are numerous almost cult-like elements to some of the online anti-adoption groups, where everyone's story has to be basically the same, and no divergence from the party line is tolerated.

As you can see, Birthmother activism today is a very mixed and scattered bag. Yet some of us keep on, supporting adoptees in their efforts in Bastard Nation and other adoptee rights groups, speaking out against compromised and flawed legislation, against "Safe Haven" baby dump laws, and speaking up for children and vulnerable young mothers at risk. Some are active in family preservation, trying to help Moms who want to keep and raise their babies get the help they need. Some are supporting better access to contraception and sex education to reduce unplanned pregnancies and protect young people from the awful dilemma we were faced with. Some are involved in ongoing peer counseling for mothers and adoptees in reunion, as we see more and more what a complicated and life-long task and journey reunion relationships can be, Some are getting involved in international adoption reform, and reaching out to surrendering mothers around the world, not just in the US and Canada.

For me, birthmother activism needs to focus outward, on what we can change and improve, not on the past, or our sorrow, or our loss and pain. Nothing can change that, and dwelling on it only leaves us in a downward spiral of self-pity. This is where many birthmothers get stuck and their activism dies or turns to the hopeless and insular anti-adoption groups. It is important for us to see what we have gained in our individual lives in reunions, even when that is not all we wanted or dreamed, and what we have accomplished in the short 40 years we have been a visible activist movement. We have a lot to be proud of, and a lot of hard work still to do. I would like to close with this poem for my friend Carole Anderson, who fought the good fight.

Poem For Carole Anderson

Warrior, you stood tall, six feet in stocking feet
Long, lean bones like the long ships
Blond hair a helmet, someone said, they did not know
How you fought for your son, how fierce your love
Sought him through fire and storm and brought him home
Fought for all the mothers, daughters, sons
Sundered by cruel laws

Stubborn as the grandfather you liked less, the one who was not

Beloved Grandpa Carl,
The other one you said was tough, pig-headed
Who organized the union, and stood tall
when the strikebreakers came, raw courage and guts.
Unmoveable as oak, rooted.....

We fought like sisters, over words, over ideas
We loved like sisters too, even to the end
When you told me how you took
All your children back to Sweden, to see
Ancestors graves, a thousand years, they are earth,
you are earth now too, but in my dreams you fly
Valkyrie, always leading on
This Mother's cause, your passion, your love...
We follow you, we honor you
Rest now, Viking, lay down your sword
Battle is done, you have won
Long in the Mead Halls
you will be sung

Mary Anne Cohen
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