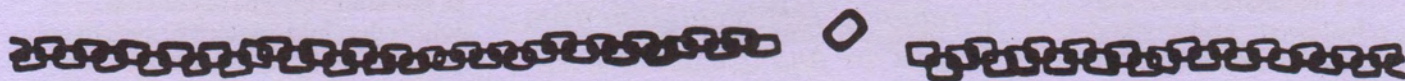


# Chain of Life

A FEMINIST ADOPTION REFORM AND CHILD WELFARE NEWSLETTER

P.O. BOX 8081 ▲ BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA 94707

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## Foster Care and the Politics of Compassion

by Nanette Schorr

Editor's note: *The case of Gregory K., who wanted to live with his foster family permanently, was decided in September. Adoptees often point out that we had no say in being relinquished and adopted as infants, yet we must abide by society's rules of secrecy about our origins.*

*Gregory, a twelve-year-old, was in a different situation; he made the choice himself. He was living on a boys' ranch when the man who was to become his adoptive father found him; he had not lived with his birth mother for most of the past eight years. Children Gregory's age are not often adopted, but live out the rest of their childhoods in group or foster homes. Frankly, I was glad he got his wish.*

*Even so, I acknowledge the unfairness of poverty in situations like that of Gregory K., whose mother was an unemployed waitress at the time of the trial. The following long article explores the impossible pressures on low-income parents who lose custody of their children. The "good child/bad parent" judgment made by many middle class professionals against lower income parents will sound familiar to birth mothers who were told that they should relinquish their child because they would not be "good" parents.*

*This article also mentions mandatory therapy. While I believe that good quality, politically conscious psychotherapy can be helpful for people who voluntarily*

*engage in it, this article describes mandatory therapy that replaces social change and holds individuals responsible for conditions that are often beyond their control.*

*Reprinted with permission of the journal Tikkun and originally published in its May/June 1992 issue, the article was written by Nanette Schorr, an attorney who specializes in family law at Bronx Legal Services, a community-based law office. She represented plaintiffs in the Hauser v. Grinker lawsuit that challenged the failure of New York City's Family Court and social services agencies to make "reasonable efforts" to reunite families. ▲*



In 1910, a single mother wrote a poignant appeal to the Bintel Brief (letters) section of the *Jewish Daily Forward*. The social supports in her community had failed her, and she had nowhere else to turn.

My husband deserted me and our three small children, leaving us in desperate need. . . . I am young and healthy, I am able and willing to work in order to support my children, but unfortunately I am tied

down because my baby is only six months old. I looked for an institution which would take care of my baby but my friends advise against it. The local Jewish Welfare Agencies are allowing me and my children to die of hunger. . . . It breaks my heart but I have come to the conclusion that in order to save my innocent children from hunger and cold I have to give them away. . . .

The dilemma this woman faced is hardly different from that of many working mothers today. But the editor of the *Forward*, in response to the letter, looked beyond the responsibility of the Jewish social welfare agencies to that of the larger social order that forced parents to consider such desperate measures. The *Forward* editor replied: "What kind of society are we living in that there is no other way out than to sell her three children for a piece of bread? Isn't this enough to kindle a hellish fire of hatred in every human heart for such a system?" The *Forward's* passionate and righteous anger is unequivocal; the enemy is the capitalist system.

At a time when class-based analyses had greater currency, it was easy to arouse the public's indignation at a skewed division of resources. The moral fault lines were clear — hungry children, innocent parents, guilty social order. But in the course of the twentieth century, denunciation of the

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social order has been diluted by the need of a large middle class to define social relations in ways that assuage its conscience and shore up its economic position. As a result, contemporary social policy rationalizes unfair distribution of resources without implicating society's fundamental decency. Instead of finding fault in the failure of the current economic system to meet all its members' needs, modern social theorists assure us that those who have not achieved a measure of material security are inherently flawed. And as social-service providers, journalists, educators, academics, and others lose faith in a more equitable and meaningful social vision, this view becomes more seductive and powerful.

It is therefore not surprising that "blaming the victim" has become a cornerstone of the way the state provides child-protective services. Partly as a result of the growing sensitivity about oppression within families (an awareness fostered by feminist critiques and the growth of the "children's-rights" movement), but partly as a result of society's unwillingness to acknowledge the social forces that put stress on families, the state's child-protective bureaucracy fosters the notion that we are dealing simply with "good children" and "bad parents." By defining the parent as a personal failure and abstracting that failure from the social reality within which parenting occurs, the state manages to perform a necessary function — protecting the child from extreme forms of abuse — and at the same time denies the existence of the social conditions that often account for bad parenting. Once having identified the primary problem as bad parenting, the state is free to intervene without restraint in its clients' daily lives by removing children from their parents with minimal investigation and little respect for legal procedures — before exploring avenues for keeping the family together.

These interventions rarely touch the sexual abuse, physical violence, or simple neglect that occurs in middle- and upper-middle-class families. This

abuse typically comes to light much later in life — in therapy, or in consciousness-raising groups — but not because the state has become involved. Often communities that have already been defined as pathological because they haven't made it in the competitive market economy — Third World people, those on welfare, or the working poor — become targets of an overzealous bureaucracy.

*the child-protective system removed L.H.'s children from her care and insisted her problems could be solved with psychology*

The case of L. H. is striking in its ordinariness. A mother living in the Bronx in 1987, L.H. was in a position not unlike the mother who wrote to the Bintel Brief. She had recently separated from a husband who had abused her and was now alone with three young children, without money or job skills, in a house with broken windows. She sought help from child-welfare authorities — money to fix her windows and someone to watch over her children while she looked for work — but they responded by charging her with neglect for leaving her younger children in the care of her older ones and for causing them emotional distress by arguing with her husband in front of them. As a result, the child-protective system removed L.H.'s children from her care and insisted her problems could be solved with psychology. The institutional foster care providers ignored L.H.'s concerns for the safety of her boys, whom they deemed "fragile," and placed them in separate group homes as a way of treating "parentification" syndrome (older siblings protecting younger ones). L. H. found no justice in the family courts, either. Her court-appointed counsel was inaccessible and unresponsive, and the court itself did not have time to hear her case. L. H. was finally reunited with her children, but only after taking extraordinary legal action. The

wounds of the utterly unnecessary separation have yet to fully heal.

I work as a lawyer representing parents who are trying to regain or maintain custody of their children and I see cases like L.H.'s all the time. Most of the time parents don't fight back because they have already come to believe that the system is so rigged against them, and are so steeped in the belief that they are unworthy simply because they are poor, that any serious struggle seems futile. Moreover, the degradation they have suffered — which the child-protective system only compounds by its treatment of poor families — makes some parents doubt their own ability to care for their children.

Of course horrendous things do happen to children in some families. But defining the problem this way provides everyone with an excuse to avoid confronting the way the child-protective system works. It's analogous to questions that similar professionals raised about women who acted irrationally in the days before the women's movement. On the one hand, it was certainly true that some women acted in ways that could be described as irrational — and so one could understand why, given the level of social understanding at the time, mental health workers would typically prescribe doses of therapy, or even institutionalization. On the other hand, as early feminists pointed out, much of the behavior deemed irrational or hysterical was simply a natural expression of women's frustration and rage at an oppressive system of male domination. Similarly, the child-protective system makes things worse by intervening in ways that focus on rescuing good children from bad parents, without acknowledging the adverse conditions in which families function and the debilitating frustrations that lead parents to abuse or neglect their children.

The good child-bad parent definition works very well for those social workers, therapists, and others whose job is to keep the system working smoothly and who long ago have given up any hope of changing

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the larger society. But the system's very effectiveness is often a disaster for the children and parents caught in its vise. Families are torn apart and children suffer in the process. Children may be separated from their brothers and sisters, moved precipitously from foster home to foster home, or — worst of all for children in such a vulnerable position— abused or neglected in foster care. Their parents are not much better off. As overwhelmed and undertrained caseworkers make arbitrary or impossible demands on them, parents lose hope of being reunited with their children. They complete a drug treatment program only to be told they must find a job. They receive a certificate from a parental skills class, only to be told that they can get their children back only when a therapist determines they are ready. They are told they must find an apartment, but there are no apartments to be rented for what they can afford to pay. Frightened and bewildered, they go to family court hoping to find justice, but instead they are shuffled from one court appearance to the next. Months, sometimes years, pass as cases are repeatedly adjourned and professionals who sit behind closed doors determine the fate of their families.

*Were every kind of harm subject to state intervention, all children would at some time have been removed from their parents' homes.*

Children in protective care, meanwhile, are forming bonds with their foster parents and foster parents are becoming attached to their foster children. The longer children live in foster care, the more the state recognizes the bond that is built between foster parents and child — a bond that will be sustained by the state against the aspirations of parents who seek to reunite the natural family. The courts are full of custody battles between foster parents and natural parents, battles in which the state throws its

substantial power behind foster parents. Ask yourself to whom a child's affections will naturally turn: the foster parent who daily provides the child's needs (as well as many things above and beyond those needs), or the parent who earns a paltry income or lives on public assistance and is permitted to visit for only an hour once every other week. Social engineering, not child protection, is the net result in this system, as children are taken from poor families and placed in middle-class families that can give them a "better" life. Such interference overextends the role of the state. It is not for the state to decide what constitutes an enlightened upbringing, but rather to establish threshold criteria for the care of children above which its intervention is not required. There are many types of harm from which the state is unable to protect children, such as the emotional harm they experience when their parents argue or divorce, the internalized pain and loss of self-esteem they suffer when discipline is imposed in an arbitrary manner, or the damage they live with when they are punished corporally in ways the state does not deem "excessive." Were every kind of harm subject to state intervention, all children would at some time have been removed from their parents' homes.

Over its century of existence, the child-protective movement has tended to reflect the country's broader political and social context — in the 1940s and 1950s, for example, it adopted the then-burgeoning middle class's rigid definitions of healthy families and began to put growing emphasis on psychiatric labeling. Yet in some sense, the field of child protection has evolved independently of the national discourse; continuities in practice have overshadowed the changes in theory. In the 1900s as in the 1990s, the focus of casework has remained the treatment of individual weaknesses. As a result, caseworkers make little practical distinction between "neglect" and "abuse" — despite the dramatic differences between the two. A neglected child is legally defined as a child whose physical, mental, or emotional condition is impaired or is in

imminent danger of impairment because his or her parent fails to supply him or her with adequate food, clothing, shelter, education, supervision, or guardianship. The law defines an abused child as a child whose parent inflicts or allows to be inflicted physical injury, by other than accidental means, that causes or creates a substantial risk of death or serious or protracted disfigurement. Yet whether the case be one of "neglect" or "abuse," the child-protective system treats parents in much the same way.

*the focus of casework has remained the treatment of individual weaknesses*

Until the nineteenth century, when the term "child abuse" entered the national discourse, most Americans saw the suffering of children pragmatically, as part of the human condition. The contemporary child-protective movement reflects internationally recognized human-rights protocols that define children as separate beings of inherent value. But while the discourse of human rights has helped to transcend cultural distinctions and placed the field of "children's rights" squarely within its purview, state intervention has gone far beyond safeguarding the right of children to be protected from harm and provided with basic nurturance. Since child protection became a social institution, compulsory separation of children from their parents has remained the primary form of state intervention in family life. In the nineteenth century, "orphan trains" carried the children of immigrants westward to be loaned out as indentured servants. Now, foster parents and foster-care administrators have an economic incentive to perpetuate the institutionalized practice of child removal and placement. None of this is to say that abuse and neglect do not exist, that parents are not responsible for what happens to their children, or that child protection is

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merely a capitalist conspiracy to make money by stealing the children of the poor. But one cannot ignore the images evoked by the vocabulary that predicates intervention: Reductive characterizations of parents as "crack mothers," for example, justify dehumanizing social policies and underwrite the state's recourse to criminal sanctions instead of remedial therapies.

Most parents who qualify for therapeutic rehabilitation find that it is administered in a compartmentalized, ineffectual, and ultimately alienating way. Beating your children? Let's talk about learning acceptable outlets for anger — not about what you're really angry about. Leaving your children alone? Go to a parental skills class. No need to consider that what you really need is some day-care assistance, or someone to watch the little ones while you take the older children out to the store or the doctor or simply for a walk. You've sexually abused your child? Go to a sex-offenders clinic, where you will get behavioral modification therapy. No need to explore the physical or emotional violence you experienced as a child or your own lack of self-esteem and sense of alienation. Abusing drugs or alcohol? Have your urine tested regularly and exercise greater self-discipline. No need to say that you feel narcotics may be the best thing going, given the conditions under which you're living. This does not mean that these behaviors should not be controlled; indeed, they must be. But in the absence of a real commitment to addressing the isolation and degradation from which abuse and neglect follow, they will only continue.

In the early days of the child-protective movement, the most common approach to "treating" the neglect of children was to preach to parents about morality. Sometimes that morality had a feminist message, as in the Prohibition era, when the battle against domestic violence focused on alcoholism. However, moralizing did little to address the root causes of bad parenting. Gradu-

ally moralizing gave way to psychological labeling, and parents who were seen as shiftless and morally lax were redefined as manifesting psychopathology. Now the focus of scrutiny has turned to single parents, many of them women. When these parents criticize a social order that gives their parenting efforts little material or emotional support, social welfare experts term this an "externalization of blame." Instead of treating the crisis in meaning — the despair and emptiness born of lifelong experiences of physical or

### *you might teach them how to reach out to neighbors and community leaders*

emotional violence, unemployment or meaningless work, broken families, inadequate education, loneliness, lack of stable longterm relationships, dangerous, dirty, and violence-ridden neighborhoods, decrepit housing, and lack of community — the symptoms of crisis are treated in isolation from their causes. When one is afraid to leave home for longer than necessary or to let the children go out and play because of the drug dealers in the neighborhood, a sense of social isolation closely follows and, if unrelieved, may very well lead to neglect or abuse.

If you were designing a program to assist troubled families, what are some of the elements you would intuitively include? Instead of instructing parents on how to build ideal family units, you might teach them how to reach out to neighbors and community leaders who are familiar with local resources and address the problems that led to the neglect of their children. You might assist parents in building the kind of mutual-support societies that sustained many immigrant communities, giving them financial assistance, emotional sustenance, and connection to their heritage. You might help them locate their own experiences in a historical understanding of the social and economic organization of American life and teach them how to use

that knowledge to empower other parents as well. The focus must not be on individual change — ideally that follows of its own accord — but on helping people build new social institutions that can address their needs for support, community, and meaning.

This approach does not easily fall into any ideological camp. There are those on both the left and right sides of the political spectrum who address these issues in analogous terms; however, this is more a linkage of interest than a confluence of values. For the Right, constraining the child-protective system is appealing because they wish to inhibit extensions of the long arm of the state into the sphere of private life — sometimes because such interferences challenge patriarchal organizations of family life that they wish to protect. Others fear that state intervention will destroy the unique fabric of people's intimate lives. But neither the protection nor the destruction of patriarchal structures provides sufficient justification for state intervention where a child's life, health, or safety are not at risk.

The question then becomes: When should children be taken from their parents? Quite simply, when their parents are abusing or neglecting them, when there is imminent risk of harm to their lives or health, or when "reasonable efforts" have been made to ameliorate the problem. While abuse cases may require long-term removal, in the majority of neglect cases a family's needs may be met by limited remedial intervention such as that provided by the Homebuilders' program or the "family preservation" models that are being developed around the country. The cost and pain of family separation should be — but aren't — considered before a child is placed in foster care. One client voluntarily placed her children in foster care a number of years ago at a time when she was unable to meet their needs. She could have maintained a parent-child relationship with them, however, had she not been limited to brief biweekly visits. Another client is being threatened with the removal of her grandson because she does not consent to his

being treated with psychotropic medication or placed in a residential treatment center — even though protective agencies have made no effort to assess whether a school in her community could meet his needs. In March of this year, the Supreme Court eviscerated parental recourse to legal remedies for such egregious abuses of power. The Court ruled that parents could no longer use federal law to sue state agencies for failing to make “reasonable efforts” to reunite families. It is now in the hands of Congress to enact legislation that would supersede this ruling.

We shrink from the difficult decisions we cannot avoid: The fear of drawing the line too narrowly leads us to draw it too broadly. When we focus on the neglectful and abusive behavior of individual parents, we allow ourselves to avoid recognizing how their failure reflects larger social failures for which we are all ultimately accountable, since the state — in

whose operation we are all implicated — is the most neglectful parent of all. The degree of intervention into parent-child relationships must be tailored to fit (and not exceed or fall short of) the needs and circumstances of each individual family. When the state uses untempered intervention as a blunt instrument, and describes all parental failures of children as “child abuse” — provoking the uniform response of removing all the children from the home — we needlessly destroy otherwise viable families.

*Cynicism [and] loss of the sense of community . . . has led us to believe that we need to save who we can (in this case children), since we can't change the larger social and economic environment.*

What might a profamily politics look like? Can “family” be redefined in ways that support nontraditional alignments based on feminist, gay, and cross-cultural critiques of the nuclear family and recognize extended networks of social relationships based on ties of kinship or affection? How can we support the institution of the family — for all intents and purposes the only social institution based exclusively on loving commitment — without compromising our intolerance of domestic violence and abuse? In part, the answer lies in the emergence of new kinds of households that can renew family life — but only if they are given the social acceptance and nurturance they need in order to flourish. Thus family support policies must be designed in ways that allow such households to be economically viable and create supportive communities in which they can function.

A number of factors have compromised the goals of the child-protective movement. Cynicism born of ineffectual efforts to combat domestic violence, combined with the loss of the sense of community that lent hope to the movements of the

1960s and 1970s, has led us to believe that we need to save who we can (in this case children), since we can't change the larger social and economic environment. Furthermore, the policy of massively applying state intervention to change the balance of power in families where women and children are physically and emotionally abused has often left liberals aligned against people in inner-city and poor communities, who view themselves in an adversarial relationship to an oppressive system that is destroying their neighborhoods and their culture. The source of this problem lies in the failure of liberal policymakers to address the deeper social meaning of the issue by bringing a historical perspective to the problem and by understanding and addressing the reasons for such anger.

An analysis of the child-protective system in the United States requires (for example) understanding the brutalization of African Americans, starting with the systematic breakup of their families in slavery, and continuing with the racism and class oppression that span from the Reconstruction period to the present time — a history that is distinctly different from that of other oppressed minorities in our country. Like the War on Poverty, which gave services and money to poor communities without supporting their efforts at leadership and independence, the child-protective system respects neither its clients' cultural heritage nor their humanity. Caseworkers classify angry parents as “noncooperative” clients and treat noncooperation as a reason to keep children in foster care. Professionals need to support the efforts of parents to reassert their dignity, even if that assertion challenges the child-protective system itself.

Neglect cases too often have resulted in unnecessary removal of children, often without prior notice to parents — even when the child faces no imminent danger. The state often removes children with little attention to legal process; and the judges and attorneys in the family court system rarely question the state's actions. The

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net effect is to ratify the caseworkers' decisions, thereby rendering child-protective intervention arbitrary and unjust.

The courts must respect the rights of parents by ensuring that caseworkers are making "reasonable efforts," both before and after they remove children. The courts can neither rectify the unequal scrutiny given to poor families nor change the social conditions that give rise to neglect. But they can make better efforts to keep families together by ordering and supplying necessary services, even if those services cost money.

The consequences of the liberal approach to child protection are disturbing. The good child-bad parent dichotomy gives credibility to conservative policies that hold parents accountable for their children's criminal acts — for example, the punitive eviction of parents from public housing when their children are found possessing drugs. Such policies mete out equal punishment to parents who have abandoned the effort to influence their children's behavior and parents who simply need support in dealing with their children's rage and hopelessness. Furthermore, such responses show little understanding of the ways in which parental failures represent the defeat of parents' own deepest hopes for the future, just as they symbolically represent the defeated aspirations of the working class. As the ranks of the middle class diminish in the face of unrelieved economic recession, the American Dream is increasingly inaccessible to poor and working parents, who struggle on a daily basis against the drugs, crime, and violence that are claiming their children.

Despite the child-protective bureaucracy's heavy investment in the good child-bad parent dichotomy, the struggles of parents in impoverished communities have moved into the foreground of public consciousness. Movies such as *Boyz N the Hood* reflect a growing humanization of

parents and children's struggles to survive and even flourish amid daunting conditions. Ongoing news coverage of issues such as steadily diminishing public support for single mothers and the fears of parents whose children have been involved in violent incidents in the schools has educated the public about the often tragic limitations of liberal approaches to family policy — and helped clear the way to a compassionate, morally consistent response.

*Many of the clients in the child-protective system do need help. The question is, what kind of help?*

The Left urgently needs to address the pain of poor and working parents, and we can begin to do this only by recognizing that the issues are not merely economic, although they often stem from economic privations. Liberal child-welfare experts ignore this pain at their peril since the Right will continue to fill the resulting vacuum by claiming this issue as its own. We cannot allow the language of empowerment to be co-opted by the Right, which uses it to justify a hands-off approach to state involvement in employment, education, and welfare in order to "liberate the forces of individual initiative" in the inner city. Properly defined, empowerment of parents means helping them confront racism, condescension, and inequality.

The complexity and immediacy of the issue requires us to respond quickly and decisively. Many of the clients in the child-protective system do need help. The question is, what kind of help? Rather than focusing on child removal as a remedy, that help could take the form of funding "family preservation" programs that assist families before their children are removed and maintain the parent-child bond during foster care with frequent visits. "Family preservation" should be broadly defined to include support for poor and working parents in the form of publicly funded day

care and health insurance. In addition to providing services, government should support community organizations and mutual-assistance societies such as those formed by many ethnic groups that share day care, provide seed money for new endeavors, and run parenting groups and advocacy efforts.

Recognizing the pain of parental struggle does not mean that all parents are good. It does require recognizing that real support for families must be linked with efforts to change the world of work and reorganize the economy. The social significance of child neglect extends beyond its current impact. Its human implication is also profound because it shapes the lens through which future generations will filter their memories, and, in turn, their hopes and dreams. A compassionate response to children must include an equally compassionate response to their parents. ▲

*Subscriptions to Tikkun, a bi-monthly Jewish Critique of Politics, Culture, and Society, can be obtained for \$31 a year from Tikkun, P.O. Box 332, Mt. Morris, IL 61054-7734. "Tikkun" is a Hebrew word meaning "to heal, repair and transform [the world]."*

**I STILL FIND MYSELF SOMEWHAT INCREDULOUS WHEN I MEET PEOPLE WHO WERE ADOPTED, OR ONE OF WHOSE PARENTS LEFT THE HOME AND HAS NEVER BEEN SEEN SINCE, AND WHO SO DEPRIVE THEMSELVES OF DOUBT AND CURIOSITY THAT THEY MAKE NO ATTEMPT TO FIND THE MISSING PARENT OR PARENTS — NOT NECESSARILY TO HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITH THEM, BUT SIMPLY TO WITNESS THE FACT AND QUALITY OF THEIR EXISTENCE.**

- David Cooper,  
*The Death of the Family*, 1970, p. 7

... continued from back page screening (at their own expense) before they can begin alternative insemination. If you have had this experience, you may want to report the name of the doctor or clinic to Center Kids in New York at (212) 577-3554. Center Kids is working to get such requests prohibited.

—information from Mom's Apple Pie, Seattle, Washington

▲ "Are Those Kids Yours?" by Cheri Register (1991) is a book with a social conscience about international adoption. According to Register, an adoptive mother, adoptive parents of children from countries outside the U.S. can have a special role. "We can seek and promote greater awareness of the global socioeconomic causes for family dissolution and abandonment of children, and help find just and equitable solutions." Anyone considering adopting transnationally will find this book extremely valuable.

▲ *The Right to Know Who You Are: Reform of Adoption Law with Honesty, Openness and Integrity* by Keith C. Griffith is a handbook to support reform of adoption laws. Griffith is an adoptee and author from New Zealand. For more information, call Katherine Kimbell in Canada at (613) 828-3236, or send \$18.95 (U.S.) + \$5. postage (surface mail) to Katherine at 2836 Grandeur Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K2B 6Y9.

## Ten Commandments for the Adopted

written by an unknown author in Canada, include these:

1. *I, the Minister of Community and Social Services in Ontario, am the Lord your god, who legally brought you out of the stigmatic land of illegitimacy. You shall have no other gods but me and my underlings.*
2. *You shall not make for yourself any idol in the form of your own thoughts or*

feelings, . . . for I am a jealous god, punishing children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation for attempting to think out the adoption situation for themselves and demand truth.

4. *Remember your Original Sabbath Adoption Day to keep it holy. Six days shall you labour and do all that you have to do to seek for your original name, but on the seventh day you shall rest from seeking this name, resume your adoptive name, and behave with your adoptive parents as if all is well.*

8. *You shall not steal, except for lifting your name from adoptive parents' or government files, and then only with intelligence and careful planning. Having successfully managed such thievery, you shall share this success with others to encourage them to do likewise. YOU SHALL REMIND THE GOVERNMENT THAT IT IS THEY WHO HAVE STOLEN FROM US.*

10. *You shall not covet your birth-mother's name, her history which includes your past, her knowledge of your birth father's name, or anything else that is your birthmother's, unless it is also yours. Which it is, so go ahead.*

—from the Parent Finders National Capital Region newsletter, P.O. Box 5211, Station F, Ottawa, Ontario, K2C 3H5, Canada (October 1992)

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 A Feminist Adoption Reform and Child Welfare Newsletter  
 March 1992

**CHAIN OF LIFE**  
 A FEMINIST ADOPTION REFORM  
 AND CHILD WELFARE NEWSLETTER

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## CHAIN LETTER

In February of this year I received the following letter in response to Chain of Life's announcement of a new medical clinic for children of lesbians and gay men in San Francisco. To my pleasant surprise, the letter from one of the clinic's doctors, Larry Petko, told me he himself was an adoptee. Since many children of lesbians and gay men are likely to be adopted, I thought Dr. Petko would have a special sensitivity in working with them as a pediatrician at UCSF.

So it was with sadness, and naive disbelief, that I received the most recent Chain of Life newsletter, returned by the postal system in September, stating its intended recipient Larry Petko was deceased. Trying to determine if this were really true, I phoned Larry's clinic partner, Dr. Tamar Gershon, who confirmed that Larry had died in July of AIDS. She also sent me more information about him. Dr. Gershon is trying to sustain Larry's dream of the Rainbow Clinic. Lesbian and gay parents may phone her at 415-476-4883 for further information about the clinic.

Originally from New York, Larry Petko, M.D., Ph.D., died of AIDS at the age of 35, having been diagnosed as HIV-positive over ten years before. He was born April 21, 1957 and died July 17, 1992. Following is his enthusiastic letter from earlier this year:

February 1992

Dear Janine,

Thank you for your kind inclusion of our clinic in your newsletter [Issue 17, "Resources"]. It will be called "the Rainbow Clinic at UCSF" with some evening and weekend hours to boot! You will receive a brochure(s) when they are printed up.

In addition, I must comment on your last newsletter; it was superb! As an adopted child, I found the lead article ["The Withdrawal/Acting-Out Dichotomy As a Way Adoptees Respond to the Primal Wound" by Nancy Verrier] intriguing and I agree with her, there is an inescapable trauma of adoption even under the best circumstances and in the absence of secrecy. I've experienced and worked it out myself in therapy for 4 years!

Many thanks again,  
Larry Petko, M.D.

## FEEDBACK

### FROM RENEWAL FORMS

*I would like Chain of Life to include more...*

- on the connection between gay/lesbian issues and adoption (the shame of both)
- input from lesbian birth-mothers

*I have liked...*

- the broad-based, honest viewpoints expressed in C of L
- All of it! Adoption/birth-parenthood is just another closet.
- the variety of the articles and the "no-exclusion policy"

*Other comments:*

- Keep up the good work and thank you.

*I may be interested in writing an article for Chain of Life on the following topic:*

- finding death of a birthmother during search

## NEWS AND RESOURCES

▲ If you didn't make it to the AAC Conference in Philadelphia in March, you can still buy audiotapes of its sessions. The workshop titled "Gay and Lesbian Concerns in Adoption" was excellent (I got the tape), and includes lesbians from all sides of the triad, plus a gay man who is an adoptive father. If you are interested in these topics, it is worth buying the 2-tape workshop, for \$16. (\$14+\$2 for postage, plus tax for Californians). Make your check payable to InfoMedix and send to 12800 Garden Grove Blvd., Suite F, Garden Grove, CA 92643, or phone 800-367-9286 toll free for credit card purchases.

▲ Amy Jane Cheney, an adoptee who has led workshops and groups for seven years, is offering a workshop November 21, "Adoptees, Significant Others, and Friends" in San Francisco from 10 am to 5 pm. For more information, phone her at (415) 923-1454. Amy is also editing an anthology of writings and art by women adoptees. Send poetry, prose, essays, and artwork (photo-

graphs or slides, not originals) by February 15 to: Amy Jane Cheney, 2010 McAllister St., San Francisco, CA 94118.

▲ December 3, 1992 will be an evening for gay men who are considering parenthood, or who are biological fathers, adoptive fathers, co-parents, "father figures," or foster parents. Men will explore where they are and where they are going, and what social services they might need. For more information, call the Lyon-Martin Women's Health Services Parenting Program in San Francisco, (415) 565-7674.

▲ Orphans abused as foster children in Québec institutions from the 1940s through the early 1960s (the Maurice Duplessis regime) are preparing a class action suit through the Duplessis' Children Association. Various establishments and religious communities are charged under criminal and civil laws. If you were an abused foster child in Québec, you can phone the Duplessis' Children Association at (514) 326-5451 for more information.

▲ It's true, New York state has banned commercial surrogacy. The law will take effect some time next year. Baby brokers who thrive by arranging these contracts will have to find fertile ground for their profits in other states — such as California. California's bill that would have regulated "surrogacy" contracts was not signed by Governor Wilson. That means surrogacy is still legal in CA, and unregulated.

Even in New York, a woman can still give her child to others to raise, but not for money. Baby selling is still illegal in all 50 states, though baby brokers still manage to get around the laws by charging fees for their "services." Meanwhile, we as a society have let children as a group fall into poverty in greater numbers than before.

Thank you to the two readers who sent me information about the new law in New York.

▲ Are these women crazy? A number of fertility clinics and doctors offices in New York state are requiring lesbians and single women to submit to psychological

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