

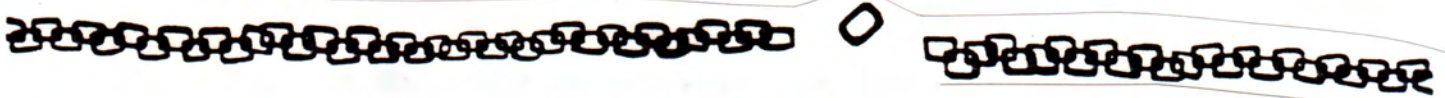
Chain of Life

Issues in Adoption and Child Welfare

▲ SINCE 1989 ▲

P.O. Box 8081 • Berkeley, California 94707

ISSUE 31 • SUMMER 1994 • JANINE BAER, EDITOR



UNIFORM ADOPTION LAW RECOMMENDATIONS TO BE FINALIZED AT THE END OF JULY

Given widespread public dissatisfaction with closed records, it seems inconceivable but it is true: the National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws (NCCUSL) will finalize its recommendations for adoption laws at its meeting in Chicago at the end of July, and one of its recommendations is to keep records sealed for ninety-nine years. NCCUSL members, all lawyers and mostly men, have been working on the Uniform Adoption Act for several years.

These recommendations come just as a new study of adolescent adoptees by the Search Institute of Minneapolis found that 57 percent of the boys and 70 percent of the girls adopted as infants wanted to "meet their biological mothers and fathers" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, June 24, 1994). These were a sample of 881 adolescents from the Midwest who were between the ages of 12 and 18 in 1992 and 1993. The Search Institute of Minneapolis is a research organization that studies children and adolescents. In its recommendation to keep records sealed, the Uniform Adoption Law is clearly out of synch with the desires of today's young adoptees.

After the NCCUSL meeting ends in early August, the fifty states will be asked to pass the group's recommendations, which will then replace

existing state adoption laws. The urgent letter from Concerned United Birthparents warns, "...if NCCUSL adopts the proposed Uniform Adoption Act, ... pressure will continue to be applied for years to come in order to encourage your state to enact it into law in place of your state's current adoption laws." The most recent draft of the Uniform Adoption Act, dated July 29 - August 5, 1994, can be obtained for \$13.00 from NCCUSL, 676 N. St. Clair Street, Suite 1700, Chicago, IL 60611; 312-915-0195.

According to CUB's letter, written by president Janet Fenton and vice president Carole Anderson, M.S.W., J.D., adoption would become more commercialized than it is now. Any person, business or legal or commercial entity could arrange adoptions. "[U]nlicensed, unregulated commercial companies could be set up to 'assist' in locating babies, their mothers, or potential adopters and in transferring physical custody of babies to prospective adopters. Not only would adoptions that used to be called 'black market' be legal, it is likely that the vast majority of infant adoptions would be done in that manner," according to Fenton and Anderson. Among other objectionable recommendations are that advertising for babies would be legal in all states; mothers could sign relinquishments — called

Consents to Adoption — any time after a child's birth; and there would be no chance at all for a birth mother to change her mind about the adoption if she signs the Consent to Adoption 72 hours or more after the child's birth. Current law in California gives a mother four months during which she can revoke an adoption consent.

The recommendations state that anyone who gets information from adoption records, even if it is not obtained in a criminal manner, "is guilty of a misdemeanor for the first violation and of a felony for each later violation." Concerned United Birthparents leaders fear that records might not even be kept by non-agency adoption brokers if these recommendations become law. This kind of law would be a huge step backward for the kind of open communication that is necessary for healthy families. It seems to be a desperate backlash by people who are uncomfortable with the increasing openness that has become more common in adoptions today.

Although there will not be much time to contact the Commissioners in your state before the Uniform Adoption Law is voted on, it is important that each of us stays aware of the upcoming attempts to

continued on page 2...

Adoption and Spirituality

by **Randolph W. Severson, Ph.D.**

Available from *Aries Center, 1437 Meandering Way, Garland, Texas 75040-4213*. \$6.00 includes postage.

Those of you who attended the workshop on ritual and spirituality at the 1993 American Adoption Congress conference in Cleveland, or who have read the excerpt in a previous issue of the *Origins* newsletter, are already familiar with this work. The entire booklet was very movingly read by Dr. Severson as his contribution to the workshop; if you were fortunate enough to have been there, no doubt you have been waiting for it to come out in print. If you are not yet familiar with Randolph Severson's work, this booklet is a good place to start, as it contains some of the most scholarly, skilled, and luminously beautiful writing to come out of the adoption reform movement.

Although not a triad member himself, Dr. Severson manages to empathize with and express the feelings of all sides of the adoption reform community. His analysis of illegitimacy, and how the punitive concept of closed adoption rises directly out of hatred and fear of women and sex is especially brilliant, and goes right to the heart of the problem — the poison of patriarchy.

He says, "Closed adoption commits the most common form of spiritual evil in its desire to sunder soul and body, spirituality and human sexuality." Yes — exactly! Also incisive and true is his analysis of the failure of "victimology" as a strategy to obtain open records, as opposed to a demand for justice because it is good and right, rather than because we are pitiful victims.

It is difficult to describe *Adoption and Spirituality*, as it is unlike almost anything else in the field by an

adoption professional. In form it is an essay, but in language and emotion it is poetry — the sound of water flowing over smooth stones, or wind through broken winter trees. The level of scholarship is impressive and original; instead of social science jargon, Severson employs lovely quotes from Yeats, Rilke, Faulkner, Irish myth, and much more. The tone is warm and impassioned — a far cry from the usual boring sociological treatise.

Adoption and Spirituality is brief, but it covers a large and complex subject with wit, compassion, poetry, beauty, and the true light of inspired writing that makes this a fine piece of literature beyond the boundaries of the adoption reform movement. I most highly recommend it to all.

— Mary Anne Manning Cohen
April 1994

**Origins is an organization for women who have lost children to adoption. Its excellent newsletter can be obtained for \$15. for 4 issues from P.O.Box 556, Whippany, New Jersey 07981.*

...continued from front page

replace existing state laws with these regressive, archaic recommendations. Since we still live in a nominal democracy, our elected legislators will have to vote on the Uniform Adoption Act's recommendations before they become law. We must tell them our opinions after the final version of the Uniform Adoption Act

is approved.

CUB's letter includes a list of all Commissioners on Uniform State Laws. Unless my eyes deceive me, every single member of the Commission from California is a man, and these people are deciding laws that are especially important to women's reproductive choices. However, the Adoption Drafting Committee does have one or two women.

Although not a voting member, Joan H. Hollinger is the Adoption Committee Reporter and academic advisor. She thinks the concept of having uniform laws will be helpful in interstate adoptions. The new recommendations require prospective adoptive parents to be approved before they can be eligible for independent adoption, which is an improvement over existing law and an additional safeguard for children. Although Hollinger does not agree with the recommendations to keep records sealed, she believes the Committee has made up its collective mind on this issue; the Committee has been "inundated with letters" and its members no longer look at them. Hollinger is a law professor at University of California, School of Law, Boalt Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720.

In contrast, Janet Fenton and Carole Anderson urge people to contact the commissioners prior to the July 29 meeting with your opinions. They are willing to answer questions by phone: call Fenton at 308-384-3571, or Anderson after 7 p.m. at (319) 359-4068. CUB's analysis of the Uniform Adoption Act is available by fax from: (308) 389-3900 or writing to Janet Fenton, 4111 West Airport Road, Grand Island, NE 68803. (A donation to cover CUB's costs for postage and copying would be helpful.) The American Adoption Congress's analysis is available from A.A.C., 1000 Connecticut Ave. NW, Suite 9, Washington, DC 20036, phone 202-483-3399. ▲

THE POWERLESSNESS OF BIRTH PARENTS

by Morgan Firestar

Birth parents are faced with the aftermath of the hardest decision of our lives without any way to evaluate that decision. The agonizing question is always: Did I do the right thing? Is my child happy?

The rationale behind adoption laws that give total control to the adoptive parents is that children are property to be owned. The child has no legal rights at all until s/he reaches a certain age. So in the adoption "triangle," only the new parents have any power, and they have absolute power, which they may not handle very well. They may hate the birth parents or be indifferent to our suffering. But we have given them the world's most precious gift: a human life. Part of ourselves, body and soul. How can you love a child and hate their birth parents — unless they were abusive?

I have an illness called CFIDS: Chronic Fatigue Immune Dysfunction Syndrome. I was already ill when I became pregnant but I did not find a doctor who took my illness seriously until it was too late to get an abortion. I saw eight different doctors over a period of a year and they all said I was imagining the whole thing.

From the time my son was born, I knew we might have to part. I tried to get him used to the idea by always having a child care person and teachers he could relate to, so that he wouldn't get too attached to me. It worked about as well as could be expected. We were very close and by the time he was adopted, after his fifth birthday, it was painful for both of us.

His adoptive parents were

very good to him and I could see he was very attached to them. He is happy and I probably made the right decision. But they promised I could see him once a month and they have not kept this promise. I see him very infrequently and, in fact, they are moving out of town without giving me their new address. The adoptive parents say that how I feel does not concern them. It's my problem.

I feel very bitter about how this adoption has turned out. I feel it caused unnecessary pain for me and for my son. He has the ability to love many people. His parents don't need to possess him so completely. I wish I had had a support system or relatives who could have helped me take care of my son. I would like to support, in any way I can, mothers who are in a similar situation. I feel that there are sometimes alternatives that you can't see when you are in the situation, because it's too overwhelming.

I feel that birth parents should have some legal rights so that adoptive parents don't have absolute power as they do now.

Face-to-face visitation is the only way birth parents can be sure they made the right decision. This visitation should be a legal right. When we give up our parental rights, we should at least retain the right

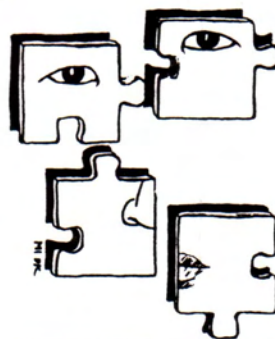
to visit our own children.

What about the feelings of the child? Children are not born with a limited ability to love. There is no shortage of love in a child's heart. Why should he or she have to live with a feeling of rejection, a fear that the birth parents don't care? Why should anyone have to live with that unless it's true? Most birth parents do care. And those of us who gave up older children care passionately.

A child's best interest is to feel loved. The court's role should be to protect that interest until the child is old enough to verbalize what she or he wants. If the desires and needs of birth parents and adoptive parents are in conflict, make it mandatory to go to a trained mediator.

We owe our children the truth. Some birthparents did reject and/or abandon their children, but most of us did not. We are motivated by unselfish love and our children have the right to know this. ▲

Morgan Firestar publishes *Lunatic Fringe*, P.O. Box 7652, Santa Cruz, CA 95061.



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Dear Readers,

I want to continue publishing *Chain of Life*, but I need your financial support to do it. I must raise \$250 to print the Fall issue on time and mail it to you in October. There is not even enough money in the *Chain of Life* bank account right now to pay the printer for the issue you are reading. Only one person subscribed in June, and the expenses for publication and overhead, although low, add up. Overhead expenses include a home business

license that was renewed when it expired in June, envelopes, stamps, post office box rental, and printing (or xeroxing) costs. (Unfortunately, this "business" has never been able to pay writers or editor.)

If *Chain of Life* is meeting a need for you and you want to see it continue, please send a donation of \$5. or more to *Chain of Life* by September 1st. Ask someone in your adoption support group, feminist group, or

university to order back issues — a flyer was enclosed with this newsletter listing their contents. I will continue to donate my time and labor to produce *Chain of Life*, but I am unable to pay the expenses too and must rely on subscriptions and back issue orders to cover them.

Many of *Chain of Life's* current 98 subscribers are probably members of other adoption or feminist groups. If 50 of you send a \$5. donation, that will pay for the Fall issue. If, in addition, 32 people — perhaps your friends in adoption groups around the country — order 4 back issues for \$8, or 14 people buy 10 for \$18, that will pay for the Winter 1995 newsletter's costs.

I have noticed that subscription orders tend to be scarce during the summer and pick up in the fall and winter when folks are indoors reading, so this is probably a temporary cash flow problem, but I thought you should know how close I was to not sending out this issue. It seemed important not to wait because of the upcoming Uniform Adoption Law vote at the end of July and the other events that have deadlines. But I won't be able to publish future issues on time without whatever help you can afford.

JANINE BAER
Editor/Publisher/Adoptee
July 4, 1994



9. Kenneth Russell Chamberlain.
Family Limitation—Old Style.
The Masses 6 (May 1915), p. 19.
Courtesy of Tamiment Institute
Library, New York University.

ILLEGITIMACY

The following letter was published in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 14, 1994

Editor — Illegitimate 1. Against the law, illegal. 2. Born of unmarried parents.

My son is illegitimate. When he hears that word, he understands the context of the second definition, but feels the mood of the first.

I explain to him that I believe in choice. It was my choice to have him, and it was his parents' choice not to marry. My son has seen the news on television, read the current popular opinion in the newspapers. He knows that it is harder for a single-parent household to get by. He knows that mom doesn't have all the answers, and he knows that he won't get everything he asks for at Christmastime.

My son works hard at school. He completes his chores, shows respect to adults, teaches himself to play the guitar and finishes his homework (mostly) on time.

He becomes angry when he hears the Dan Quayles and Charles Murrays blame his mother for the sorry state of the union. He becomes a bit melancholy when he hears that word, illegitimate, understanding the context of the second definition, but feeling the mood of the first.

STEPHANIE STRAND
San Francisco

FAMILY VALUES

In a victory for lesbian rights, Sharon Bottoms, 24, won custody of her three-year old son, Tyler, by a decision of the Virginia Court of Appeals on June 21. For the past year Tyler has been living with his grandmother, Kay Bottoms, 43, who won custody of him because she felt her daughter was an unfit parent simply because she is a lesbian; a local court agreed. Kay still has custody of Tyler and is appealing the new ruling.

ADOPTIVE PARENTS & SEARCH

Courageous Blessing: Adoptive Parents and the Search by Carol Demuth is a booklet written especially for adoptive parents about their feelings. It explains why adoptees search for birth parents and what role adoptive parents can take during the search. It offers guidance and reassurance for adoptive parents during what can be a very threatening and emotionally trying time. Demuth, an adoptee, has been an adoption educator and counselor for over 15 years. The 49-page book is available for \$7. from **Aries Center**, 1437 Meandering Way, Garland, Texas 75040, (214) 414-3639.

Chain of Life

is edited and published by Janine Baer.

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Chain
of Life

The title "Chain of Life" refers to the physical, genetic connection that *all people* have with other people, but that only adoptees in closed records adoptions are asked to ignore. Like everyone, adoptees are the product of our genes, our life experiences, and our own thoughts and actions. We have a right to know as much about ourselves as we need and want to know.

In addition to advocating open adoption records, *Chain of Life* works toward developing an understanding of when adoption is appropriate for some children, and when other forms of support are preferable, both in our current society and in a more humane society of the future.

ROBIN BROOKS, LCSW

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Fallen Women, Problem Girls:

Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945

by Regina Kunzel. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993; 258 pages

Fallen Women, Problem Girls is about the turf war for control of maternity homes in the early part of this century between their evangelical founders and the social workers who came after them. The book's title may have a double meaning: "fallen women" could refer not only to unmarried mothers but to the evangelical women who fell from control of maternity homes by the 1930s. If we stretch the pun, "problem girls" could refer to social workers, who were seen as a problem by the religious women, and not only to so-called "sex delinquents," those working class women who broke the rules of nonmarital chastity. A major group of evangelical founders of maternity homes was the Women's Christian Temperance Union, which was aided financially by Charles Crittenton who named the maternity homes after his daughter, Florence.

The author focuses on issues of class, race, and gender. Evangelical women were middle class while the unmarried mothers in their homes were mostly working class, because only women who had no other options would choose these restrictive homes. In the early years, unwed pregnant women had to promise to keep their children after they were born and to stay in the maternity home at least three months with them. While pregnant, the women could not go outside unchaperoned, and their mail, both incoming and outgoing, was read and censored. The few maternity homes that were racially integrated had a limited number of spaces for women of color. And until the late 1930s, social scientists assumed that the

African American community accepted nonmarital motherhood and therefore black women would not need the protection of maternity homes.

Evangelical founders of maternity homes were associated with feminine values of morality

Evangelical founders of the homes were associated with feminine values of morality and a belief in female sisterhood. They believed that men seduced and abandoned women and viewed unmarried mothers as "innocent" of assertive sexuality. Pregnant women had to explain to the homes' matrons "how" they became pregnant, which meant telling them a story they wanted to hear in order to gain their sympathy and entrance to the homes.

Beginning in the 1920s, mostly female social workers wanted to take over illegitimacy as their own domain by becoming "experts" using a scientific model that aimed for objectivity. Social workers thought the religious approach was pathetically out of date and sentimental.

By the late 1930s, the services of social workers were required in maternity homes. The Community Chest, which by then paid for the homes' operation, agreed with the approach of social workers rather than that of evangelical women, and the latter group had to accept that they had lost control of the homes.

Social workers' status as experts on illegitimacy was short-lived. By the 1940s, psychoanalysis provided

the accepted explanation of "illegitimacy." The increase in white, middle class unmarried pregnant women had necessitated a new ideology. These women were not bad, now they were neurotic; they had become pregnant because of some problem with their parents. Working class white women who picked up military men for sex, however, were considered to be "sex delinquents" rather than neurotics. Black unmarried mothers were neither neurotic nor sex delinquents but were considered a problem of social policy when Aid to Dependent Children payments were extended to unmarried women in the 1940s. By then there was very little room for social worker expertise: psychiatrists were the experts on middle class illegitimacy, law enforcement took care of sex delinquents, and social policy planners dealt with the problem of African American illegitimacy, which had not been a problem before. Social workers were told to take the role of the "good mothers" that pregnant middle class women presumably didn't have. This scheme put social workers back into a role similar to that of evangelical women, a sentimental role from which they had worked hard to distance themselves.

Fallen Women, Problem Girls does not mention adoption policy or children of unmarried mothers, except to say that social workers supported adoption. Kunzel states that social workers wanted unmarried mothers to relinquish their children to adoption, but she is not entirely convincing; rather, given their options at the time, the sources she cites suggest that many unmarried mothers themselves wanted to relinquish their children, and social workers

found this to be an acceptable option while evangelicals did not. Kunzel concludes that illegitimacy and unmarried motherhood were "lightning rods" for social anxieties about sexuality, gender, race, and class. As such, it becomes clearer why adoption is such an emotionally charged issue for many people: "adoption" is a semantic stand-in for illegitimacy, abandonment, and social responsibility. And if unmarried parents are "bad," their identities should remain locked in a sealed file and their relinquished children should not want to know them, since they were sinful, irresponsible, or neurotic.

The insistence by evangelical women that unmarried mothers keep their children points to the pendulum swings of social policy. Free choice regarding unplanned pregnancy has become somewhat more meaningful since 1945, moreso when women can have abortions, choose open adoption, or raise their children without the same degree of social disapproval as in the past. Even with improvements, those choices are constrained today by social mores and economic realities.

— Janine Baer

Feminist Adoption Agencies?

Are there any adoption agencies/ services that respect both children and birth parents, have a feminist philosophy, understand the role of sexism and racism and international politics in adoption, and do not view gay/lesbian families as bizarre? Agencies that seek solely to find adoptive homes for children who really need them? I would love to know of any. Thanks so much for the Chain of Life perspective. — Iowa

(Note: Write to Chain of Life with suggestions and I will forward them to this reader.)

they said

they said i had to go to a home for unwed mothers
they never asked me what i wanted to do

they said my baby should have a mother and father
they never offered to help me see it through

they said the line on my belly would disappear
they never mentioned the wound in my heart

they said go on with your life and pretend it didn't happen
they never told me i would grieve all the years we're apart

they said i should be happy now that i'm free
they never said my flesh and blood has been amputated from me

they said i could get married and other children would call me mother
they never said one person does not replace another

they said why worry, she has a good life
they never talk about my pain of not knowing

they said it's against the law to look for her
they never knew this was my deepest longing

they said she's still young and has other things on her mind
they never say you're getting older, you've been waiting a long time

they said when she has children she'll want to know me
they never say i missed her first day at school, her wedding, her birthday

they said if i loved my baby i would give her up for adoption
she said don't tell me you love me, you gave me away

sheila ganz
april 5, 1994

Send in News Items and Announcements by August 31 for Events in October, November, or December 1994

If you have an article or an event that takes place in the last three months of this year, please send it to Chain of Life by the end of August. I would especially like to receive book reviews or articles about the politics, history, or psychology of adoption. If an item is received after the deadline, it may be held for the subsequent issue. Letters to the editor are also very welcome, as are financial donations to publish the Fall issue.

▲ E V E N T S ▲

July 15 • Deadline for receipt of proposals for the 1995 American Adoption Congress conference, to be held April 10-12 in Las Vegas, Nevada. For more information, write: AAC Conference Department, Pat Sanders, 20111 Riverside Drive, Santa Ana, California 92707. Fax: 714-434-7635.

July 23 • Oakland, California • After the Reunion: What the Talk Shows Never Tell You, is a lecture/workshop by Ronda Slater, who recently performed her one-woman play, "A Name You Never Got" in the Bay Area. Oprah and Geraldo never tell the whole story. Ronda Slater does. Slater discusses the ten years that have ensued since being reunited with the daughter she gave up for adoption. This is a touching and funny presentation of what really happens AFTER the reunion — the good, the bad and the ugly. Location: First Lutheran Church, Fellowship Hall, 4100 Mountain Blvd. at Redwood Road, Oakland. Time: 1 to 4 p.m. \$25 in advance, or \$30 at the door. For information and reservations, call 510/654-5264.

August 11-14 • San Jose, California • The North American Council on Adoptable Children sponsors a conference "Celebrating Diversity in Adoption" at the Red Lion Inn, San Jose. The NACAC invites child advocates, adoptive parents, social workers, and children to attend our 20th Anniversary Conference on Adoptable Children. Workshops and Half-Day sessions include topics such as "A Model for Successful Special Needs Adoption," "Standing Up for Your Child in the Face of Racial Bias," "Assessing a Family's Ability and Potential to Adopt Cross-Racially," and "The Challenge of Single Adoptive Parents of Older and Special Needs Kids," among others. Costs range from \$130 to \$160; one-day registration is also available. For more information, write NACAC Conference, 970 Raymond Ave., Suite 106, St. Paul, MN 55114-1149, or phone: 612-644-3036.

September 28 - October 2 • New York City • "Shedding Light on the Adoption Experience III," an educational conference about the

lifelong effects of adoption and the need for family preservation, sponsored by the Council for Equal Rights in Adoption, Roosevelt Hotel, New York City. Speakers include Annette Baran, Reuben Pannor, Betty Jean Lifton, Nancy Verrier, Rickie Solinger, Carol Schaefer, and Joyce Maguire Pavao, among others. Full conference registration fees range from \$80 for full time students \$185 for non-CERA members; one day registration ranges from \$35 to \$95 for registration before July 22. For information, call 212-988-0110 or write CERA Conference, 401 East 74th Street, Suite 17D, New York, NY 10021-3919.

November 4-6 • Mundelein, Illinois At St. Mary's of the Lake, Concerned United Birthparents Conference/Retreat: "Adoption: What's In Our Future?" "Discuss, share and learn about adoption issues surrounded by the support and understanding of fellow CUB members." Registration fees are lower if paid before September 1. For details, write: CUB, Inc., 2000 Walker St., Des Moines, IA 50317.

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I am an adoptee, a birth parent, an adoptive parent, an adoption professional, or _____