

CHAIN OF LIFE

A FEMINIST ADOPTION REFORM NEWSLETTER

EDITOR: JANINE BAER

Issue 6 • March/April 1990 ▲ P.O. Box 8081, Berkeley, CA 94707

Editorial ▲

This issue completes the first full year of publishing for **Chain of Life**, which began with the May/June 1989 issue. I am thankful for all the connections I've made with individuals and adoption reform organizations throughout the country during this year and for the support of subscribers who have sent articles and letters, letting me know that there is a need for an adoption newsletter that is concerned with women's freedom of choice, children's right to know their heritage, and full equality for lesbians and gays.

Chain of Life faces challenges from all sides in connecting our various movements. The movement for openness in adoption has sometimes collided with progress made by gays and lesbians toward parenthood. Just when adoptees and birthmothers have begun demanding the right to know our relatives -- and even questioning whether it is ever appropriate to permanently separate families -- gays and lesbians have begun to exercise the right to adopt children and to use donor insemination to have children.

It is essential that the two movements listen to each other. I sometimes wonder whether new parents know what it's like to be an adoptee or a relinquishing mother. Could they imagine going through life uncertain of their ethnic background or medical histories? Of never seeing the people they look like? Of never knowing what happened to their children?

The subject of closed adoption and donor insemination has arisen in gay communities from Seattle to San Francisco and from Austin to New York. At parenting workshops, adoptees and birthmothers have described their experiences to prospective parents, hoping they will choose open or cooperative adoptions and known donors. Some certainly have listened and taken the advice seriously. But according to an adoptee speaking at an Austin workshop (see **Letters**), "the lawyers came first and scared everyone so badly with stories about how known donors snatch lesbians' babies that I don't think what I said had much impact."

We have already experienced a backlash of sorts against adoption activists in San Francisco. At a parenting panel there recently, a gay father expressed defensiveness toward adoption activists who have spoken strongly on these issues. When questioned, however, the same man seemed to share our goals, and is doing what he can to obtain information about the birth parents for his child. And I have heard that many women in the Bay Area are choosing knowable sperm donors to ensure their children's right to their heritage.

On another parenting panel, a woman who had adopted children from Central America told how she had insisted on an open adoption, very unusual transnationally because of distances and language barriers. Her child's birthmother was eager to meet her prior to the adoption, since the birthmother had heard a rumor that some Americans were adopting Central American children to use in medical experiments. Meeting the American woman helped reassure her that this would not be the fate of her child. The adoptive mother and the birthmother have continued to maintain a Spanish language correspondence.

A conflict from the other side came to my attention recently when an adoption reform newsletter printed a book review that recommended the

continued on page 5 . .

Birthmothers Don't "Abandon" Their Children, Says New York Protest

On October 12, 1989, Judge Eugene Nardelli of the State Supreme Court in Manhattan ruled that Michele Launders "abandoned" her daughter Lisa to attorney Joel Steinberg, who has been convicted of killing the 6-year-old; and that Michele is not entitled to sue for damages as her mother. (Launders could, however, sue for the assault that led to the child's death.) On November 16, the following speech was given at the New York City Federal Courthouse in response to this ruling. Letters of protest can be written to Justice Nardelli, Supreme Court, 60 Center Street, New York, NY 10007.

BY CAROL GUSTAVSON

We are here today to protest publicly against the use of the word "abandonment" to describe the action of birth parents who have been counseled to surrender their sons and daughters.

Picturing original families as persons who (according to Webster's 9th New Collegiate Dictionary), "Give up with intent of never again claiming a right or interest in" their children, is an outright disregard for the truth. A mother is a mother is a mother. Becoming a mother through adoption *does not* negate the original mother or her moral obligation to be there for her son or daughter in their need to claim their heritage or place in life.

It would be as ludicrous as saying we all *abandon* our children to the educational systems, religious affiliations, or any other nurturing area of life. The more fitting word that comes to mind is that most original mothers believed they *entrusted* the lives of their children to others with a level of love and concern that evidently goes beyond the ability of compassionate understanding we had hoped all others would grow to feel and see as the truth.

Reunited birth and adoptive families know first hand that our children were not abandoned. It has never been a part of the adoption story given to our children. To see and hear the word "abandonment" used against Michele Launders in her efforts to stand in defense of her murdered daughter, Lisa, is so very cruel and unjust. It stabs at my heart. I can only imagine what it feels like to Michele and all others who, in good faith, nurtured their children for the nine months they could before entrusting them to others.

We implore society at large and governing officials to take a good look at the injustices that fall upon the adoption community. Help us to bring about the truth, honest approaches, and changes we deserve.

Lisa and Michele remain in our thoughts and prayers. ▲

Carol Gustavson can be reached through Adoptive Parents for Open Records, P.O. Box 193, Long Valley, NJ 07853. Thank you Carol for allowing CHAIN OF LIFE to reprint this speech.

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A Parenting Experience

by Patricia Sherman

"I know you're sad that you're adopted," my just-turned six year old daughter said to her doll, Ava, "But I love you and will help you find your first mommy and daddy." As I listened from the other room, my heart burst with pride, pain, and a myriad of other emotions too complicated to articulate. The "experts" say that children of my daughter's age are too young to fully comprehend the meaning of adoption. That may be true -- even as adults we have difficulty truly comprehending the full meaning of adoption for everyone involved. My daughter, however, was obviously very much in touch with both the sadness inherent in adoption and in the healing touch of love, as well as the importance of connecting with ones biological roots.

How had Jenny gotten to that point? How had we as a family grown to understand the necessity of openness in adoption? When we adopted our children eight and six years ago, my husband and I were ignorant of the many complexities involved in adoption. We only knew that we were not able to bear children of our own and deeply desired to raise a family. We were aware that to surrender a child for adoption was a very difficult decision and were fully prepared to help our children search for their biological parents when our children became adults. What we did not know, however, was that almost all adopted persons grow up with huge pieces missing from them. Pieces represented by their genetic heritage. They have no biological link to any persons known to them. We were not aware of the desperate wrenching that occurred in the birthparents' lives when they surrendered their children for adoption. We knew that they had great hopes that their children would be provided with those things that they themselves were not in a position to provide. We knew that they would not just be able to "forget" that they had borne their children, but we really believed that they would find healing and happiness in their lives.

Through becoming involved in various adoption related support groups and through my own training as a social worker, I slowly became aware of a vast arena of knowledge to which I had not been privy. I found out about birthparents who would have been able to raise their children had they been given the least amount of financial and emotional support. I learned of adopted persons who put off searching for their birth families because they believed to search would hurt their adoptive parents. I met adoptive parents who denied that there was any difference between adoptive and biological parenthood. Fortunately I also met adoptive parents who were very aware of the needs of both their adopted children and their children's birth parents. I learned of the destructiveness of the present system of closed records. When I received my children's amended birth certificates, I was appalled to see that they were based on lies! They stated that these children had been born to my husband and myself. Why was there a need to divorce my children from their birth parents? Through much reading and research I learned some of the reasons put forth by the professionals throughout the

years. These reasons made no sense at all to me. My husband and I began to see that the best way we could raise our children would be to include actively helping our children deal with the realities of adoption in their lives. It would probably also include seeking out and making contact with their birth families.

Was this process an easy one? By no means. We would give almost anything to have given birth to these precious people. We do not want to share them with anyone. But the reality is that we did not create them. They were given life by others. Chris and Jenny are not our possessions. Even though we have accepted the responsibility of raising them, we do not own them. Therefore we cannot lose them if we share them with their families of origin.

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Now that we are here, how do we help our children? Perhaps by continuing the process I engaged in with Jenny and her doll, Ava. Jenny brought Ava in to me and told me that Ava was having trouble with the fact that she was adopted. I held Ava and told her how much I loved her. I also said that I knew it was hard to understand how her first parents could have surrendered her for adoption. I explained that it was because they felt they could not provide for her the things they wanted her to have. They did not give her up because they did not love her, but because they felt incapable of caring for her adequately. I told her that she was very fortunate to have Jenny for a mommy because Jenny, too, had been adopted and could share her feelings and thoughts with her. I told her that if she wanted, Jenny and I could help her look for her first mommy and daddy. Then I hugged both Jenny and Ava. I told Jenny that one of the hardest parts of being a parent was that you couldn't always make things better. Sometimes you could only hold someone and cry with her or him. It didn't make the pain go away, but it did make it easier to bear because of the sharing.

Jenny told me that she and Ava both wanted open records because they wanted to be able to find out about themselves. She reminded me that Ava was not real. I said that I knew that, but that she, Jenny, was real and that some of the concerns Ava had were some real concerns of hers. She nodded and hugged me.

How I wish our children didn't have to suffer the pain of feeling rejected! How I wish I could just kiss the hurt away the way I do the little boo-boos of life. But this is not a little boo-boo. This is a major life adjustment that is best handled by ongoing open communication and a willingness to be torn apart inside when we see our children hurting. We must never let our hurt keep us from helping our children. ▲

Thanks to Patricia Sherman and Adoptive Parents for Open Records for allowing me to reprint this true story.

▲ ANNOUNCEMENT ▲

Monday, April 23 is the first meeting of **"Being Adopted,"** a 4-week class led by CHAIN OF LIFE editor Janine Baer, at El Cerrito High School, from 7 to 9 pm. Cost is \$17.50. Guest speakers will be Colleen Houlihan, an adoptive mother with an open adoption (April 30), and Sheila Ganz, birthmother and filmmaker of SEALED RECORDS (May 7). Offered through Richmond Adult School. Write to Chain of Life for a registration form; for more info call (415) 524-3586.

"Can we get the message? By whatever name you prefer, the birth family, the biological family, the genetic family (choose what you like), this gathering of souls is inherently important. That's part of why we have search and reunification in the first place, because the individuals involved need to reconnect with what has been lost. . . . Then why aren't we looking to programs that prevent the loss to begin with? Healing is wonderful, but the better path is not to contract the disease."

-- from a paper by Hal Aigner

▲ Letters ▲

GAYS MOLEST CHILDREN, DON'T THEY?

... Keep those newsletters coming! I enjoy each copy. As a social worker and family member interested in adoption, they carry a great deal of information. I am currently conducting research on gays and lesbians as adoptive and foster parents. I've tried to provide this perspective when talking with colleagues and other professionals.

Sometimes I find it difficult to work in child welfare and be a lesbian. I feel as if I must protect my privacy or my career is gone. After all, gay people molest children, don't they? So I do my activism quietly with individuals or small groups by providing sensitive, factual information. So far it's been successful and many who work in adoption and foster care have become more liberal minded! In fact, I've shown several caseworkers your newsletter and encouraged one to subscribe.

Well, thanks for reading this and thanks for publishing your newsletter. I know it takes a lot of patience, commitment, and love. I'd like to keep in touch and share with you any information I come across. It's nice to know there's someone out there who really understands. ▲

- A lesbian social worker

ADOPTION CAN BE FREELY CHOSEN

The feelings of concern that I have had about the "adoption reform movement" in general gelled while reading your latest newsletter (#5). While I certainly agree that major reforms are needed in the adoption system, we need to be careful not to take an "all or nothing" perspective that precludes us from validating the experiences of those women who *choose* adoption. The recent issue had numerous references to the continuing pressure that young women are subjected to to place their children for adoption. I have been working with birthmothers for ten years and I no longer find that to be universally true. More often, birthmothers choosing adoption repeatedly talk of suffering enormous pressure from peers, family and strangers alike to bring the baby home and become parents, whether they desire to do so or not. If they do not comply, they are stigmatized as "selfish," "uncaring," and as "copping out" on their child. While it is certainly true that many women have historically been coerced into adoption, and I have no doubt that it still happens today, it is unfair to globalize that experience.

I have seen women stand up to enormous pressure against their choice of adoptive placement. They are by no means poor, they have full family support (even pressure) for parenting, and they still choose not to parent at this time in their lives. It is an insult to the conscious, thoughtful, and still painful decisions of these women to refer to them as "marketing a child like a commodity." It is not a matter of "dollars and cents" to these women who do not benefit at all financially, and for whom money did not factor into their decisions.

This letter is not meant to defend a system that certainly has many flaws. Let us not go overboard, however, by stating that all adoptions boil down to economics and that women involved are "brood stock." This insults and invalidates the experiences of many women today. If we really care about women, we will serve them, not by working to eliminate one of their options, but by changing the adoption system to make it humane for those who freely choose it, and by changing the larger system so that no one needs to choose adoption by default. ▲

Sincerely,

Victoria R. Garner Barshis, ACSW
Director, Adoption Associates
St. Louis, Missouri

Closed adoption separates people from our closest links in the chain of life.

MORE LESBIAN ADOPTEEES?

I just read the notice about **Chain of Life** in LC. Great news! I've wanted to connect with other lesbians interested in adoption issues for a long, long time.

I was adopted as an infant, raised by an adopted woman, and have adopted a baby girl who is now 3 1/2 years old.

I searched and found my birth family in New Zealand in 1987.

At the ALMA [Adoptees Liberty Movement Association] convention in Austin, Texas a few years ago I heard the statement that there is a greater percentage of lesbians that are adopted than in the general population. I was intrigued by this and tried to follow up and find sources (and ended up coming out to a huge room of strangers!). I didn't get very far on this. Does anyone think this is true?

I am delighted that you are there. Can't wait to hear from you. ▲

Lynn Margaret Cole
Red Rock, TX

Comments from Chain of Life: I'm glad Lynn brought up the topic of the alleged greater percentage of adoptees becoming lesbians, since I've avoided mentioning this old (or new) husband's tale so far. I'm disturbed to learn that this interesting conjecture has been spread as fact in adoption reform circles.

I too had heard of this rumor and tried to find its source. I was led to John Taylor Gatto of New York, a birthfather who, with his daughter, has co-authored a book (*Are You My Father?*) about reuniting with and adopting back his adult daughter. Gatto explained to me in a letter that he and his daughter had interviewed 309 adult adoptees (83% of whom were women) in preparation for his book, and 15% of the interviewees told them they were lesbian or gay. If 10% of the general population is gay or lesbian, then this study showed at least a 50% increase over the average -- or possibly more, since we can guess that some of the respondents may not have chosen to come out. The Gattos, however, did not believe that 10% of the population is gay; they decided the number is only 5%, basing this calculation in part on articles about men's gay sexual activity (not orientation, but activity). So they concluded that there are up to 3 times as many adoptees who become lesbian or gay as compared to non-adoptees (3 x 5%).

More important than the problem of generalizing from men's reported sexual behavior to lesbian or gay orientation (since when are people considered heterosexual on the basis of how often they have sex?) is that the Gattos are not social scientists and their interviewees were not drawn from anything resembling a random or unbiased sample -- something Gatto readily admitted. The true number of lesbians and gays among adoptees is still unknown. It could be more than 15% or it could be less, but only a carefully chosen sample of respondents could provide an accurate picture. And even if this research could be done (and were funded), would it ultimately be used in a homophobic manner? Perhaps the biggest problem so far is that the advertising flyer for the book *Are You My Father?* uses the gay "statistic" with critical overtones, to draw attention to this supposedly negative consequence of adoption.

Nevertheless, the Gattos can be credited with presenting the plausible (but as yet unproven) hypothesis that some adoptees are reluctant to reproduce their unknown genealogy, choosing to remain childless or to adopt children more often than do non-adoptees. The authors considered homosexuality to be one of the strategies adoptees use to avoid having children.

Thanks Lynn for reminding me to tell this story. ▲

LETTERS continued on next page

Articles Wanted: April 1 Deadline

Articles for future issues of *Chain of Life* are wanted on these topics: multi-cultural perspectives of adoption in the U.S. and internationally; the experiences of children conceived by donor insemination; and the experiences of adopted gay and lesbian teenagers.

THE LAWYERS SCARED EVERYONE . . .

... I have to admit, when I heard the statement that there is a greater percentage of lesbians among adoptees than in the general population, I wanted it to be true. I wanted there to be lots of other adopted lesbians so I could have the chance to know them! I knew this was a group I could feel a part of.

I heard this idea at a workshop at the national ALMA convention, and when I asked more about it, I immediately became aware how this "statistic" could be used to perpetuate homophobic ideas. One man said he thought it was true because pregnant women under stress would produce less female hormones and therefore give birth to masculine daughters! I'm not proud of the abuse I heaped on him in the lobby afterwards.

... I hope it's okay with you if I copy "Adoption is not the answer to abortion." A woman in my ALMA group had buttons made that said, "PRO-LIFE ADOPTEE" and "I'm here because my mother chose adoption." Many people in the group, especially birthmothers, were not pleased with these sentiments, but no one was able to express their opposition as elegantly or succinctly as you did. I'd like to make Chain of Life known to friends in my adoption support network. (Unfortunately, as far as I know, none of them are lesbians.)

Some of the people in my local ALMA group have been a great source of support and nurturing to me in my search and after-search adjustment. Many of them are doing good work lobbying the state legislature to change closed records laws.

Hearing the incredibly articulate birthmothers tell their stories changed my way of looking at adoption forever. Sadly, many do not attend meetings any more because they do not feel supported by the adoptees.

I have participated in two workshops in Austin for lesbians considering parenthood. I was asked because I'm an adoptive parent, but I also talked about my feelings concerning unknown donor insemination. Unfortunately, the lawyers always came first and scared everyone so badly with stories about how known donors snatch lesbians' babies that I don't think what I said had much impact.

I will be happy to share the story of my search and reunion with my birthmother and half siblings in New Zealand . . . The reform of adoption laws in New Zealand helped me only in that all the public discussion of the issue got my mother thinking about the possibility of being contacted. A big help really, but I was privately adopted, so I had some information to start with that agency-adopted people don't have.

A rather negative outcome of the reform [in New Zealand] has been the outcropping of search "experts" who try to convince people that they are the only ones who are knowledgeable and discreet enough to do the search or first contact. A woman from an organization called "Jigsaw" told me I was "very foolish . . . and sure to



hurt" my birthmother because I wouldn't let her call first (for a fee, of course).

I'm so glad that you're publishing. I guess I've really been hungry to know other people with a feminist perspective on adoption issues. I feel inspired and validated to be in communication with other lesbians in the adoption triangle.

I think I'll put a notice in the Lesbian and Gay Political Caucus Newsletter and the bookstores to see if other gay people affected by adoption would like to get together here in central Texas. ▲

Thanks again,
Lynn Margaret Cole

ADOPTION AGENCY SUPPORTS GAY/LESBIAN PARENTS

Thanks for your speedy response! . . . We eagerly await the next issue of your thought-provoking newsletter.

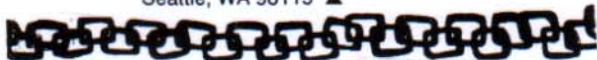
Children's Home Society of Washington is devoted to strengthening children and families. Adoption has been a major activity of this agency for nearly a century -- we have placed over 22,000 children in families. In the 1970s, the practice of infant adoption was ended, though "special needs" adoption continues to be a priority in several branches of this agency around the state. The Adoption Resource Center was created in 1985 to serve the unique needs of triad members. We consider it our historical responsibility to assist those whose lives have been formed by the institution of adoption. Our contact with triad members of every description has led to a deep understanding and support of the need to know one's biological relatives.

This historical perspective has influenced our views on the issue of donor insemination. We share with you the belief that a pathway must be kept clear for donor offspring to discover their parents by biology. We are offering a workshop on donor insemination in February [this has already taken place]. We are also developing a position paper on the topic. And, because the language currently in use tends to wind up in semantic snarls, we are working to establish a vocabulary for donor insemination. Please feel free to submit any suggestions you may have for how to talk clearly and non-judgmentally about alternative insemination.

We are just beginning to establish ties with the gay and lesbian community in this area. We hope to increase the visibility and legitimacy of gay and lesbian parents, as the needs of this group have long been ignored in traditional adoption practice. Many children are in need of healthy parents; the Adoption Resource Center holds that race, religion, ability, and sexual orientation should not be measures of health.

We look forward to receiving your publication!

Sincerely,
Dana Blue, Resource Coordinator
Adoption Resource Center
Children's Home Society, P.O. Box 15190,
Seattle, WA 98115 ▲



*Back issues of Chain of Life are available for \$2.
each. Write for descriptions of their contents.*

35 Studies of Gay Parents

In the Bulletin of the American Academy of Psychiatry and Law in 1986, three clinical psychologists from Brigham Young University reviewed the conclusions from 35 studies (done over a 15 year period) of the psychological impact on children growing up in a household with homosexual parents. Their conclusions tended to disprove some popular assumptions: Children of gay people are no more likely than children of straight people to become homosexual, nor are they confused as to whether they are boys or girls; they are just as likely to be psychologically well-adjusted.

Roberta Achtenberg, executive director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights based in San Francisco, says there are probably millions of lesbian mothers and gay fathers in the United States, most of them from a previous heterosexual relationship. She guesses that about 5,000 lesbians nationwide have had children through donor insemination. "It's remarkable, especially because lesbians used to believe they were not worthwhile enough to have children," says Achtenberg. ▲

Excerpted from article, "The Lesbian Baby Boom" in New York Newsday, July 13, 1989. Thanks to William Gage for sending this information.

YOUR SUBSCRIPTION ENDS WITH THE ISSUE NUMBER ON YOUR MAILING LABEL

If there is no number on your label, or if the number is 6 or lower, your subscription to CHAIN OF LIFE has expired and it is time to renew.

To assure the receipt of issue 7, please renew before April 15. Send \$5. (for 3 issues), or \$7 to \$15 (sliding scale) for 6 issues, payable to J. Baer, to Box 8081, Berkeley, CA 94707. ▲



KEEPING FAMILIES TOGETHER



Women's Alternative Center: Preventing Adoptions

Preventing adoption in the first place is one good way to avoid the problems that adoption and foster care encompass. One organization that works to keep families together is the Women's Alternative Center, located in rural Pennsylvania. Described as "an innovative program for female headed households," it provides a temporary home, along with educational and clinical services, to women and their children in a crisis situations. One of its goals is preventing the need to separate mothers and children.

Women's Alternative Center (WAC) is a home with 10 bedrooms, accommodating 8 to 10 mothers and 15 children at any given time. It provides day care services in which mothers participate part time, allowing them to learn about home management and to explore career possibilities the rest of the day. WAC helps prevent child abuse and neglect, and helps its clients obtain permanent housing, employment, and child care when they leave. The families that use its services are referred there by social service agencies. To qualify, mothers must live in nearby counties, have at least one preschool child, and show a desire to change their present home situation. Its operating expenses are paid through corporate, foundation, and community support.

This small scale attempt to help women keep their children during crises can be a model for mothers who might otherwise relinquish their children to foster care or adoption. (Information from Women's Association for Women's Alternatives, Inc., Station Road, Wawa, PA 19063, (215) 459-9177.) ▲

The WOMB BBS

*An Adoption- and Search-related
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General Message Base; Electronic Mail;
Dedicated Message Bases for Adoptees,
Birth Parents and Adoptive Parents;
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... EDITORIAL continued from front page

outlawing of donor insemination. I don't think that is the right answer either. Even if such a ban were enforceable (which is doubtful), and some of these women would then choose to get pregnant through heterosexual intercourse, this would not necessarily solve the problem of the child's right to know the father since the mother could still choose not to divulge his name. In addition, the medical screening would not be as good as that done by sperm banks, and such a situation could present custody challenges, especially for lesbian mothers, given our homophobic courts.

In writing a letter of disagreement (so far unpublished) to Concerned United Birthparents, the group that had published the article against donor insemination, I asked for CUB members' support for lesbian mothers who lose custody of their children to ex-husbands. With many adoption reformers working to keep original families together, the lesbian custody issue could create a natural alliance.

Finally, I want to tell a story about my own reunion. I am an adoptee, and last summer I had a second meeting with my birthmother. Our first meeting had been eleven (count 'em) years earlier. It was a long wait for me, and I wasn't sure until she called from her San Francisco hotel room that she would really make the trip.

This visit was more upbeat than the previous one; I felt satisfied with our connection, which took place over several days. It was her first visit to the Bay Area and she hit beautiful weather (no summer fog). My birthmother is a Canadian who hears of urban crime in the U.S., so she was pleasantly surprised when her purse was returned intact by a woman who had found it on a bus heading toward Fisherman's Wharf.

The dinner we had alone together at Diamond Street Restaurant (near The Castro) was especially memorable. Reunions, like works of art, are valuable for both their form and content. On the content side, I got answers to some of the questions I had been wanting to ask since our last visit. I asked my birthmother (whose name I'm not mentioning to protect her continuing fear of exposure) to tell me what happened, from the beginning. Where did she stay when she was pregnant with me? (alone in an apartment in a strange city). What did she think of open adoption? (terrible! I'd take back the baby if I knew where it was!) -- but in reality she had known my adoptive family's name and city (told to her by an obstetrics nurse) and she never looked for us. Social conditioning and lack of travel money had been adequate obstacles.

Her confession to me was that she had pretended to herself that she wasn't pregnant with me, but that she had appendicitis! I suppose our society's practice of having women give birth in hospitals lends itself to medical analogies. This confession did not offend me (as she had feared), but seemed an almost humorous defense against facing the sad experience of pre-planned relinquishment. Of course I doubt that such denial is ultimately healthy, but without any counseling and few confidantes, her impulse to pretend it wasn't happening is certainly understandable.

I was born on the Jewish Day of Atonement, and the obstetrician had told my birthmother that her sins were now cleansed. Since when is it sinful to have appendicitis? Well, those were confusing times.

Besides the content of our meeting, there was the form, the nonverbal. My birthmother and I are petite and have good appetites, and we both talk in a quick, assertive style (inherited speedy metabolism?), so it felt easy to spend several hours that evening talking and eating.

Eleven years was a long time between visits. But there are too many people who have waited longer than I did and still have not been able to find their birth relatives. They cannot have this kind of simple yet incredibly important meeting. For them, and for future generations who will be in similar positions, there is much that needs to be done: cleansing the stigmas of unwed parenthood (especially for past generations) and relinquishment; passing laws, state by state if necessary, to open adoption records; providing support for single mothers who would rather not relinquish. These goals will help make reunions possible -- or, better yet, make them unnecessary.

Janine Baer ▲

Bay Area Paradoxes

The problem is, I find myself wanting to include news items about adoption that contradict each other. I've gone ahead and included them, following the *Woman Warrior's* example: to make my mind large so there is room for paradoxes (Maxine Hong Kingston).

I was glad to see, in one article, that the San Francisco Board of Supervisors had agreed that children should be kept with their birth families whenever possible, with attempts, alternatively, to place children in adoptive families of their own racial group. Another piece of news that some **CHAIN** readers drew to my attention was the unusual joint adoption of a child by two women. It happens, though, that the child involved was of a different racial group than his adoptive mothers. Acknowledging the contradictions, here are the news items:

SAN FRANCISCO BOARD OF SUPERVISORS URGES ETHNIC PLACING OF CHILDREN

This past December, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors listened to five hours of testimony about black children who may suffer "serious emotional problems" growing up in white families. Supervisor Willie Kennedy presented a resolution urging city agencies involved with foster care and adoption to reunite foster children with their birth families, or to place them with foster families of the same racial group whenever possible.

▲ ANNOUNCEMENTS ▲

"Winds of Change. . . Adoption in the New Age" is the theme of the **American Adoption Congress's 12th national conference**, to be held in Chicago from May 23-27, 1990 at the Marriott O'Hare hotel. For more information, write A.A.C., Cherokee Station, P.O. Box 20137, New York, NY 10028-0051.

lesbian adoptee support group, open now for new members, every other Sunday in S.F. (but call if interested & can't make that time) 923-1454

May Day!, a new quarterly for women who have lost children to adoption, offers a forum for healing through creative self-expression. Premier issue February 1990. Special charter member rate of \$12. a year. Writer guidelines available for self-addressed stamped envelope and two first-class stamps. Your donations, subscriptions, participation, and referrals are invited. For details, send SASE to: May Day! c/o Rainbow City, Box 8447, Berkeley, CA 94707.

May 1 is **Birth Mothers Day**, sponsored by **May Day!** to restore dignity and healing to the much maligned birth mother by establishing a special day for her. For more information, write to the address above.

workshop for **adoptees and significant others** (partner, roommate, friend, etc.) date, time, and place to be announced call Amy Jane Cheney (415) 923-1454

Ronda Slater's one-woman autobiographical performance **A Name You Never Got** is the true story of her search for the daughter she gave up for adoption in 1966. Ronda is currently booking dates for the performance on college campuses nationally. Are there any colleges to which you'd like to recommend it? For further information write: Baby Bunny Productions, 5456-1/2 Locksley Ave., Oakland, CA 94618. (415) 654-5264.

Kennedy referred to a family in San Francisco in which a mother who had had a drug problem found her children adopted so quickly that she was not able to get them back, even after she overcame the addiction. "What better way to destroy the black family than do this?" asked Kennedy.

The advisory resolution passed unanimously. However, Supervisor Nancy Walker voiced concern about what the policy would mean for gay couples who want to adopt. (Did Walker assume all gay couples are white, I wonder?) Supervisor Harry Britt, who is gay, praised the resolution but said he hoped it would not be interpreted in other settings "as saying that interracial families are not desirable." (*Information from San Francisco Chronicle article by Kathy Bodo-witz, December 19, 1989. Thanks, Linda, for sending it.*)

And the second article: **LESBIANS GRANTED JOINT ADOPTION OF BOY WITH AIDS**

In November, lesbian couple Susan and Millie Jessen-Pavlik went public to tell of their unusual joint adoption of Eric, a 2-year-old boy who has AIDS. "It would have complicated matters if [Millie] were legally the parent, but [Susan] had to take care of medical problems" wrote Jacqueline Cutler in the *Oakland Tribune*, citing one reason the joint adoption was awarded.

Susan and Millie have cared for Eric since he was five weeks old. In approving the two-mother adoption, an Alameda County Superior Court judge had to override a County policy that recommends against granting joint custody to "non-married couples," gay or otherwise; a policy that is "homophobic and discriminatory," as Karen Strauss of the National Center for Lesbian Rights of San Francisco noted. This adoption marked the fifth time the National Center for Lesbian Rights has won joint adoptive status for a gay couple, all of whom have been from the Bay Area.

At a December parenting workshop at Congregation Sha'ar Zahav in San Francisco, Millie Jessen-Pavlik said that she thinks she, Susan, and Eric make a fine family ethnically, since Millie is Hispanic, Eric is African American, and Susan is white. Eric ran happily around the room that day as panelists spoke.

Millie and Susan are in touch with Eric's father; Eric's birth mother has died of AIDS. According to the *Tribune*, "Eric's father gave the women [his] blessing, saying he would be unable to give [Eric] the special care he needs."

Writer Jon Carroll of the *San Francisco Chronicle* (November 29; thanks Russell) commented wryly on this adoption: "In a society somewhat better designed than this one, the idea of having to fight to win the right to care for a sick, unwanted child would be foolish, even cruel....Should a sick child get care of erratic quality in a series of short-term foster homes, or should a sick child get loving, reliable care in a permanent home? That's a tough one, isn't it? . . . But Sue and Millie persevered, and that's why they're heroines."

I think "unwanted" was probably the wrong word just as "abandoned" was with Michele Launders, but Carroll's point was well made. Referring to the film "Immediate Family," he continued, "Nice healthy white babies get to live with Glenn Close and James Woods and see the tree with the white flowers every spring . . . but other baby flavors are not popular."

This is racism's Catch 22. The effects of racism lead to the need for alternative care for more children of color. White parents often have greater financial resources, though they often prefer children who look like themselves. But even when they want to adopt non-white children, potential identity problems for the children that result in part from racism create a preference for racially matched families. All of which says that ours is not the best of all possible worlds, and people choose from a hierarchy of imperfect solutions.

I would like especially to hear from people of color who are trait members or who are involved with issues related to adoption and child welfare to further this discussion. ▲

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