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Recovery from Relinquishment: Forgiving my Birth Mother. My Journey from 1954 to Today

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Abstract

Adoptees carry the burden of shame for being “given up, abandoned, unwanted, not right,” and birth mothers carry the weight of shame for succumbing to external pressure to relinquish their children. There is ample literature addressing recovery for both adoptees and birth mothers (Buterbaugh & Soll, 2003; Franklin, 2019; Lanier, 2020; Soll, 2005, 2013, 2014); however, there is little recognition of the co-shame and need for forgiveness. Utilizing autoethnographic methodology, I discuss the issues of misogyny prevalent in the 1950s, the “Baby Scoop Era [BSE],” and my ongoing process of forgiving my birth mother after five decades of rage. This piece attempts to provide insights into the questions: Did my birth mother voluntarily “give me up” because she didn’t want me? Who was she, and are we alike? Is it possible to stop being so angry? My findings include an understanding of the situation in which my mother struggled and forgiveness of her decision. While we share commonalities, the chasm between the social construction of reality in which she lived and mine is vast; however, we are “others of similarity” (Chang, 2008). My anger has shifted to the patriarchal and misogynistic system that permits the involuntary separation of mother and child.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Adoption, Baby Scoop Era, Misogyny

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Recovery from Relinquishment: Forgiving my Birth Mother. My Journey from 1954 to Today

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Adoptees carry the burden of shame for being “given up, abandoned, unwanted, not right,” and birth mothers carry the weight of shame for succumbing to external pressure to relinquish their children. There is ample literature addressing recovery for both adoptees and birth mothers (Buterbaugh & Soll, 2003; Franklin, 2019; Lanier, 2020; Soll, 2005, 2013, 2014); however, there is little recognition of the co-shame and need for forgiveness. Utilizing autoethnographic methodology, I discuss the issues of misogyny prevalent in the 1950s, the “Baby Scoop Era [BSE],” and my ongoing process of forgiving my birth mother after five decades of rage. This piece attempts to provide insights into the questions: Did my birth mother voluntarily “give me up” because she didn’t want me? Who was she, and are we alike? Is it possible to stop being so angry? My findings include an understanding of the situation in which my mother struggled and forgiveness of her decision. While we share commonalities, the chasm between the social construction of reality in which she lived and mine is vast; however, we are “others of similarity” (Chang, 2008). My anger has shifted to the patriarchal and misogynistic system that permits the involuntary separation of mother and child. Keywords: Autoethnography, Adoption, Baby Scoop Era, Misogyny

Introduction

I have suffered much of my life – and I am 65 years old- wondering who I am, who my parents were, and why I was “given up.” I have alternately and concurrently been furious, sad, hurt, and afraid- afraid I did something wrong, or more accurately, that there is something fundamentally wrong with me. My goal has always been to be perfect so that I wouldn’t be “given up” again. This is the reality of adoption. It is said that adoption is the only trauma for which the victim should be grateful. I am not grateful. I am grieving.

Contradictory messages permeated my childhood. “Your mother loved you so much that she gave you away.” “We love you so much.” “You’re ours- no one needs to know you’re adopted.” “Your birthday is a joyous occasion.” “We are your only parents.” “You look just like your father.” “All other parents get what they get. We got to choose you.” “You’re special.” “You don’t look adopted.” But underneath the well-intentioned platitudes lay the shameful secret. I was discarded; I was a burden. I was not wanted by my mother.

Misunderstood by the adoptive family and everyone else (except other adoptees) is the truth that adoption is authentic trauma. Nancy Newton Verrier (1993) writes in her groundbreaking book, *The Primal Wound*:

In his book, *Babies Remember Birth*, Dr. Chamberlain goes on to say, “Babies know more than they are supposed to know. Minutes after birth, a baby can pick out his mother’s face-which he has never seen-from a gallery of photos...The newly discovered truth is that newborn babies have all their senses and make

use of them just as the rest of us do. Their cries of pain are authentic. Babies are not unfeeling; it is *we* who have been unfeeling.”

If babies remember birth, then they also remember what happened right after birth, which is that their mother, the person to whom they were connected and whom they expected to welcome them into the world, was suddenly missing. How does this experience impact the emotions and senses of a newborn baby? (p. 5)

David Chamberlain PhD, a well-known birth psychologist, lecturer, and author, began using hypnotherapy in 1974 to discover and resolve traumas arising in the womb and at birth. In 1980 he claims to have demonstrated that birth memories were reliable memories via a side-by-side comparison of birth memories obtained in hypnosis from ten children, aged 9 to 23, who had no conscious memories of birth and their mothers who claimed they never shared details of the birth with their children. Reports were compared and found to be almost identical (Chamberlain, 1999).

Everyone misses the most crucial fact: I was there. I experienced being left by my biological mother and being handed over to strangers. I no longer had the person, with whom I shared 40 weeks and with whom I am biologically, genetically, historically, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually connected (p. 10).

I have spent decades nursing my anger and resentment. I was not able to receive any information about my parents, my genetics, me. I did not even know my name! All that changed on January 27, 2020, when I finally received my pre-adoption birth certificate. Much has shifted inside me as a result. My resentment is no longer at my birth mother, my adopted mother, or me. I recognize that all three of us were victims of the unaddressed sexist and coercive adoption practices of the Baby Scoop Era.

Recovery from Relinquishment is a lifelong quest. This piece explores my first effort at coming to terms with my birth mother’s decision. I see this as the first step in my healing process. I share this process with you via autoethnography. I begin by delving into the Baby Scoop Era, the period between 1945 and 1973; I was born in 1954.

Literature Review

The Baby Scoop Era

While researching this paper, I found many “testimonials”; but I wanted to know what it was like to be an unwed mother during the BSE from someone I know and trust. I turned to a dear friend from high school who only revealed this secret to her friends a decade or so ago. She had a child in 1970 when we were juniors in high school. Here is our conversation:

Me: Did you go to a maternity home?

Friend: No, there wasn’t enough time. I hid the pregnancy until November 15, and he was due December 29. So, from that day on, I stayed home, and my family hid me in my bedroom. Whenever anyone came to the door, I had to rush to the bedroom and close the door. That happened a lot with 7 kids – always someone coming by. My parents made me get on the floor of the back seat of our station wagon to take me to doctor appointments. I was allowed to get up and sit on the seat once we were on the highway. My sister was married December 19, and

I was not allowed to come out into the house from my bedroom for that whole week, as relatives were there constantly. I still feel the shame. I know my parents were trying to protect my reputation, but I seriously have PTSD from that time. I always struggle with feeling tainted, not good enough, somewhat like I have a permanent “scarlet letter” on my chest. My father told me my life was ruined. His lawyer/sister wanted to charge my boyfriend with statutory rape. I had a fit at that, and said we were both to blame.

Me: What was the hospital stay like? Did you get to see or touch your baby?

Friend: When I was in the hospital, I was scared shitless during labor and delivery. The nurses were unkind. I thought I was dying and that I wasn’t going to come out of it. I knew nothing about what was happening. I was gassed and knocked out. When he was born, I was told he was a boy, and I was able to speak on a phone from the delivery room to my mother in the waiting area, but I never saw them. The baby was whisked away and I never got to see him. The nurses treated me like I was a slut. One said “babies having babies” because I looked so young, even at almost 17.

I had nightmares, one vivid one where [a high school peer] was in the hospital hallway and yelled that she knew what I did and that she was going to tell everyone. It was so real. I was in the hospital for 5 days, in a private room that my parents and my boyfriend’s parents paid for. No insurance then for unwed mothers/babies. The whole time I was there, I knew my baby was down the hallway but I had no right or permission to see him, or so I believed. I felt absolutely strangled. On day 3, my father came and said “I have an idea. We can say that my nephew and his wife died in a car accident, and that we will raise their new baby.” I told my Dad that I couldn’t lie to my child his whole life, having him believe I was his cousin. So I said no. We both cried.

The doctor came in and said, “Would you like to see your baby?” and I said yes. The three of us walked to the nursery window, and my baby was in an isolette in the back corner of the nursery. The doctor had the nurse roll his isolette to the window, and we all marveled at what a truly beautiful baby he was. The doctor said, “Would you like to name your baby?” I said I didn’t think I was allowed to. He said “You can name him, and that will be something he’ll always have.” So I named him Patrick because I wanted him to one day know he was Irish.

Me: What happened then?

Friend: The next day, a woman from Catholic Charities came, I signed papers, and I never saw him again until 2002, when we reunited soon after my mother died. He was 31 years old. I was so glad that I his adoptive aunts had found me on the internet, and that I had photos even though we hadn’t met. That came later. But, before my mother died, she had a photo of “Patrick” on her mantle. He struggled with his aunts interfering in his life, and it wasn’t until May 2002 that I sent a letter before Mother’s Day, telling him I was sorry he lost his mother (Lupus, a couple of years earlier) and that I had just lost my mom, and I could only imagine his pain as an only child who cared for her through her illness. He wasn’t aware that he had four full siblings, so in the letter I enclosed a photo of his brother and sisters. He said it was the first time in his life he saw people who looked like him, and apologized that it all was overwhelming, that he was never going to search, and that it took a long time for him to wrap his brain around it all.

[An aside: My friend married the birth father and they had four more children together after high school.]

Giving my baby up for adoption has colored every decision I've made since. I cried, secretly, every night for five years, until [my next child] was born. And then holding him, I realized then how much I had really lost. It was such a bittersweet moment, holding [my next child] for the first time.

It still haunts me, even though "Patrick" and I are reunited. It was such a big scar, it can't be erased.

History of Baby Scoop Era

Since ancient times there have been children who needed someplace to live and people to take them in, be it for love, labor, or to carry on the family name. As cities in the United States grew in the mid-19th century, so did the number of homeless children and state legislatures began passing adoption laws, led by Massachusetts in 1851. One early solution was to load children on "orphan trains" to the Midwest and West to help pioneers with their farming (Waxman, 2019). Those unmarried pregnant girls who were able to keep their children were assisted by altruistic Christian women who sheltered and fed them and trained them in the life skills necessary to raise their children successfully. The focus was on mothers and children staying together (Clothier, 1943; Esposito, 2015; Fessler, 2006; Gerow, 2002; Herman, 2003; Soll & Wilson-Buterbaugh, n.d.; Wilson-Buterbaugh 2001a, 2016, 2017). The world understood – at that time- that separation of child and mother was trauma and had lifetime consequences for both.

At the end of World War II, it all changed for several reasons: 1) there was a substantial increase of babies born after the soldiers returned home; 2) some soldiers returning home from war brought with them sexually transmitted diseases which led to infertility for many couples; 3) the rise of the social work profession who claimed to be "experts" in the field and changed the view of illegitimacy from a moral lapse to a psychological deficit on the part of the unwed mother and the subsequent need to control these young women's sexual behaviors; 4) the increase in sexual messages in society ("the sexual revolution") coupled with unattainable birth control or sex education; and 5) the creation of adoption as big business as suddenly there were more adoptive parents than potential adoptees (Fessler, 2006; Wilson-Buterbaugh, 2016, 2017).

This period from 1945 through 1972 (up to *Roe v Wade* in 1973) is the Baby Scoop Era (BSE). Closed adoption was the only choice for young, wayward, unmarried girls. Girls were pressured to relinquish their children with no discussion of options or rights. Wilson-Buterbaugh (2017) reports that during the BSE, more than a million- and one-half unmarried mothers in the United States were pressured to relinquish their babies (p. 301). These young women were no longer considered "fallen" victims of men; they were viewed as willful violators of moral norms and labeled "feeble-minded" or "delinquent" and consequently unable and undeserving to raise their children. Fessler (2006), in her book *The Girls Who Went Away*, labels this period a social phenomenon, that is, relinquishment was what society demanded from these young women (p. 13). Story after story articulates the shame these girls felt for disappointing their families, churches, and communities and the guilt they felt when they fantasized about keeping their babies and purposely relegating their children to lives of bastards and ostracization. Times were different, Young women were not socially or economically powerful; they were not allowed to be assertive; they really could not influence these decisions that affected them- and their children for the rest of their lives. Factor in the unceasing adoption

propaganda that their babies would have “a better life” with two highly educated, professional, wealthy parents and anything other than relinquishment was selfish.

To be absolved of their sins, the young women were relegated to maternity homes; these homes’ philosophies changed with the times as well and now were warehouses for girls, sequestering them until giving birth. The girls were not supported, counseled, informed what delivery would be like, or what their rights were. Girls were shuffled through on this conveyor belt, with the only goal being to get the adoption paperwork signed quickly. Many of the girls were not allowed to see or hold their babies. They were expected to go home and live their lives as if this trauma never happened. The “shipping off” of the girls allowed parents to hide their daughters’ mistake from friends, relatives, neighbors, and churches. Adoption records were sealed to ensure neither the mother nor the child could ever find each other, thus assuaging any concerns from the adoptive parents that the secret of infertility and subsequent adoption would be discovered.

As the demand for white infants surged, young unmarried mothers were viewed as “breeders” and babies as “commodities” while potential adopters competed for this resource. Wilson-Buterbaugh (2017) quotes Reid (1956):

There is not so much a shortage of adoptable children as a surplus of would-be parents. Each year close to 700,000 couples [1956 data] try to adopt children, but there are only 90,000 children available. Besides, 95% of these couples want a white infant... The pool of adoptable babies consists largely of babies born out of wedlock. But the number of white children born out of wedlock is only about 54,100 each year... it must be remembered that few, if any, of the children in our institutions who might be made available for adoption are the ‘blue-eyed baby girls’ in so great demand” (p. 121)

The fear of the birth mother reclaiming her baby was so palpable that even more pressure to sign binding contracts pre-delivery was applied to young women. The price per infant skyrocketed, ensuring healthy incomes for white, male baby brokers, which included doctors, lawyers, and private adoption agencies, perpetuating the socially sanctioned paradigm of male power and female purity with impure females deserving punishment (Chemaly, 2018, p. 52).

This is my story as a female, blue-eyed, blonde child born in 1954 to an unmarried woman. I was the second born twin born to my mother; I have a male, blue-eyed blonde twin brother (well he’s not blonde anymore- grayer), and I do not presume to discuss his story, which is different from mine. Through numerous years of self-reflection and therapy, self-pity and self-blame. I experienced the liberating, albeit traumatic occurrence of my adoptive mom’s death in May 2019, freeing me to research my birth mother further. Coupled with the receipt of my original birth certificate led to an epiphany that:

- This isn’t about my birth mother.
- This isn’t about my adoptive mother
- This isn’t about me.
- This is about a systemic, sexist, misogynist attack on women in the Baby Scoop Era that affected women deeply, be it the birth mother, the adoptive mother, the female adoptee, her daughters, and granddaughters, etc.

Methods

I have been a social worker for more than 40 years. Thus, when I chose a methodology, analytic autoethnography seemed to be the obvious choice, albeit terrifying to be so vulnerable.

Bochner and Ellis (2016) write, “Autoethnography brought heightened attention to human suffering, injustice, trauma, subjectivity, feeling and loss; encouraged the development of reflexive and creative methodologies through which to navigate the landscape of lived experience; and legitimated unconventional forms of documenting and expressing personal experience in literary, lyrical, poetic, and performative ways” (p. 45). They go on to describe the ethical obligations of an autoethnographer, including a duty “to give something back to the people or communities we study and write about...” (p. 56). This piece is personally important to me, and I feel a responsibility to tell this story and let my heretofore, silent voice ring. My intent is to share with the other cohorts of women who were victims of this violation of human rights as well as eventually with young social work students who are on the front lines with young mothers and adoption. My hope is other adoptees and birthmothers from my era will find some comfort.

Additionally, I hope to bring light to the misogynistic, sexist, patriarchal system that made all this suffering possible. And, finally, I hope to provide insights into my questions: Did my birthmother voluntarily “give me up” because she didn’t want me? Who was she, and are we alike? Is it possible to stop being so angry?

Chang (2008) writes that “autoethnographers are expected to treat their autobiographical data with critical, analytical and interpretive eyes to detect cultural undertones of what is recalled, observed, and told. At the end of a thorough self-examination in its cultural context, autoethnographers hope to gain a cultural understanding of self and others directly and indirectly connected to self” (p. 49). As an autoethnographer, I use my personal experience as an adopted female child in 1954, and my perception of my birth mother’s experience as my primary data. My nature is to be interpretive and I want to be part of the data and describe not only what was, but what could have been and what should be going forward. My goal is to better understand the social construction of adoption, mothering, and family in the 1950s through the lens of socially constructed gender norms and expectations.

Participants

I am not the main character. My birth mother and others like her are my co-participants. She determined my entry into my world – my world of fantasy, hope, grief, and anger...and now compassion. By focusing on her, I am exploring the most pivotal experience of my life. My birth mother and I are equally emphasized and valued as I start with myself and include an analysis of my birthmother’s experience alongside my own. As a child, I developed a composite of my birth mother, who I will call Lizzie in this piece. I believed she was truly beautiful- physically and spiritually- a young spirit- a hippie perhaps- that was 15 years old and deeply in love with my birth father, who I named Charlie.

Data Generation and Collection

I collected my old diaries tracing the decades of loss, shame, anger, and fear. I include an email with my half-sister from 2019 and information shared verbally from the only first cousins I have found sharing the only personal information and pictures I have of my birth mother. I went to my birth mother’s hometown and walked in the local cemetery among the headstones of my ancestors. I share a very intense, honest, and loving email I received from a dear friend who became pregnant and relinquished her son when we were both juniors in high school. And I utilized Chang’s (2008) exercises in Appendix B (pp. 157-173) to expand my understanding of my birth family and my place within it. The intent is to give “contextual information to confirm, complement, or reject introspectively generated data” (p. 105). And, finally, an extensive literature review enabled me to contextualize my personal story within the

history of the Baby Scoop Era. The literature review gives my autoethnography “an identity as social science research, intersecting the subjectivity of the inner world with the objectivity of the outer world” (p. 110).

Analysis

Chang (2008) identifies analysis and interpretation in autoethnography as a process of 1) fracturing and connecting; 2) zooming in and out; and 3) utilizing the three I’s of insight, intuition, and impression. It is a process of searching for connections between my data and sociocultural context (p. 128). I applied Chang’s ten strategies for data analysis and interpretation (pp. 131-141). These include the recurring themes of 1) unwed mothers do not deserve to raise their children; 2) children need two-parent families; and 3) “bastards” will be ostracized. The cultural theme inherent in adoption in the 1950s is benevolent sexism, that is, “the historic relevance of women as property and of some women – ladies- being “good” and worthy of respect; while others – sluts- are “bad” and not deserving of respect” (Chemaly, 2018, p. 169). This theme sanctioned the taking of children from their unwed mothers to punish them for their moral ineptitude and to benefit childless couples for money.

Rigor and trustworthiness

Chang (2005) contends that culture is a product of the interactions between self and others. We are bearers of culture. The test of rigor and trustworthiness, then, is how well my thesis of culture meets the psychological requirements of its members, those of the Baby Scoop Era (pp. 19-23). As a woman viewing women who came a generation before, struggling with the social construct of carrying a “bastard child”, I hope I did justice to these brave mothers. As the daughter of one of these mothers, I have attempted to use myself to transmit the culture in which my mother lived in an attempt to spread knowledge, to spread empathy and understanding in a determination to not repeat the paternalistic, greedy, and misogynist practices during the BSE

Results

“All sorrows can be borne if we put them into a story.” -Karen Blixen

Riding in the passenger seat of the 1950 baby blue Nash Rambler convertible sits Lizzie in short blue cutoffs and a brand new red and white halter top and covered by a blanket. Long blonde hair flying behind her, corralled in the front by a matching red bandanna, she laughs aloud as Charlie accelerates, her dirty bare feet sticking out of the window. She is a startlingly beautiful girl. She sits as usual in the middle of the front seat with a hand on her boyfriend’s knee as they sing along to Mister Sandman. She turns her blue eyes to her guy, and they briefly kiss, her eyes twinkle with love. They are headed to the lake to hang out with friends on this unseasonably warm late March day, and Lizzie smiles to herself, crinkling her eyes and accentuating the cute little cleft in her chin. Charlie’s dad is away on another business trip and doesn’t know Charlie “borrowed his car,” but it’s their six-month anniversary after all. Lizzie’s parents think she’s at the library studying with her girlfriends...again. It’s so exciting, being young and free!

How she loves to dance and play. She and Charlie have been together for six months, and she is sure he is “the one,” but as her mother said, “you’re only 15. You don’t know who “the one” will be.” But Lizzie knows. They love the same music. They have plans to travel across the United States to California when she graduates and join the hippie movement, be a

part of the happenings of the '50s. Upstate New York is so dull. She would be a junior in high school next year, so she only has two more years, and then she is gone. Charlie graduates next year and maybe even will go to college. He will get a full-time job then and save for their trip. They will be together forever and have beautiful babies and live the perfect life, with a beautiful house and a dog and a cat. Maybe she would work as a teacher. She loves children.

There's a question that has been plaguing her for the last week. Should she, or shouldn't she? Charlie has been more and more romantic lately, and they have gone to second base already. Does she want to go all the way? She really loves him but isn't sure. It could hurt. She could get pregnant although he promised he'd pull out before that happened. She told him she didn't know, and he was so sweet: "Don't worry about it, baby. I can wait until you're ready. I love you so much, and there is no way I could ever love anyone else for the rest of my life". "He loves me," muses Lizzie as she glances to the left, admiring the handsome profile of his face. "I am so lucky. Everybody says so."

They pull into the clearing next to an old Rambler and Chevy, careful to avoid the dirty mounds of aging snow. Surrounded by the trunks of green pines is the idyllic setting she has grown to consider theirs. Blue rippling water interspersed with chunks of dying ice caress the sides of a dock a few yards away. Charlie's buddies gather around the Nash eager to talk engines. Lizzie's best friend sits on the dock in the warm sunshine, smiling up at the gaggle of girlfriends she loves so much. Lizzie hops out of the car, sprinting to the dock to share hugs. Life is good.

And that's how it happened. They played at the lake, pushing each other close to the still freezing lake, lying on the warm-ish sand together, sharing intimate kisses, listening to Wolfman Jack share sappy love songs, drinking liquor sneaked from a friend's parents' cabinet, and finally sneaking off to the back seat of the Nash. That's how I was made. Things all changed that May when Lizzie missed her period again and could not stop throwing up. Her mother noticed. My twin brother and I were born in December 1954 and adopted approximately three months later from wherever we were (no one seems to know, most likely an orphanage). Our names were changed. We learned we were adopted when we were about five or six, I guess. It was pretty cool to be "chosen." "Please mommy read me the book again" I'd squeal as mommy opened the copy of *The Chosen Baby* and my brother and I snuggled in her lap. Mommy predictably said, "Mr. and Mrs. Brown wanted a baby boy for their first child, but daddy and I were soooo lucky we got both a boy and a girl!" And she read the story as I drifted to sleep. Mommy and Daddy didn't tell any people we were adopted, but I bragged to some of my friends that I was wanted, and they weren't. That stopped after Daddy sat me down and talked about how mean I was to my friends. Adoption wasn't mentioned again. Ever.

Reality

I managed my trauma with my story. That was about to change when fact entered the picture. I got pregnant out-of-wedlock at age 27 (yes, I said 27, not 15!), and my [adoptive] mother was so ashamed she "forced" me to get married so I wouldn't have a "bastard child." What? What does that say about me? Anyway, my pregnancy started me on my journey to find out more about my birth mother. Well, I mostly wanted medical information because I didn't know what the hell I could be passing on to my child. But I was curious and wanted my beautiful story to be confirmed. Maybe she was even looking for me after missing me for 27 years and searching high and low. Irving (1985) writes in *The Cider House Rules*:

But Homer Wells knew he was just playing a game by himself, with himself; orphans are notorious for interior games. For example, one of the oldest games

that orphans play is imagining that their parents want them back- that their parents are looking for them. (p. 89)

I thought of her intermittently over the years when I felt out of place in my family. I didn't act like them, didn't like the same things, was always "too big, too loud, too clumsy, not delicate." Yeah, well, that's who I am. But I was smart and completed not only a bachelor's but master's and eventually a Ph.D. That didn't hold any significance for them as I had not married rich, refused a debutante ball, and looked like a hippy growing up with my long blonde hair parted down the middle. My dad used to say it looked like an alley between two buildings. I was a doctor! Just not the right kind as my dad was a medical doctor and had "high hopes" for me. It wasn't that I was unhappy growing up. I liked my dad. He had a quirky sense of humor and was very kind. He didn't talk much, but when he did – provided he was sober- I listened. My mom...well, let's just say we didn't have much in common. But I loved my parents and knew they undeniably loved me. This is not about them either.

So, I requested my non-identifying information. I was not permitted the identifying information of my original birth certificate, that is the pre-adoption birth certificate. After all, I was an "adopted CHILD." Tearing open the envelope with expectation and hope exuding from my pores, I found this: "*Mother*: brown hair, blue eyes, Protestant, English, age 24; *Father*: brown hair, blue eyes, Catholic, Irish, age 25". Wait. What? They were twenty-four and twenty-five years old? WTF? They weren't 15 and 16? Wait; what? So started my rage at this woman who "gave me up" when she was old enough to raise me!

My entire story was wrong! They weren't star-crossed lovers, kids who without the ability to take care of me. THEY DID NOT WANT ME! And the rage built and built. I felt myself teetering on the edge of crazy. Who was I? What is wrong with me? I don't belong anywhere? How can I raise a child (or children) with no sense of identity and belonging and home? I am a piece of chain floating in space with no post on which to latch. Having children will add them to my chain, but we have no ground beneath us. On to thirty years of wandering, of searching for a home, of moving every few months, of job changing, working two or three jobs to raise children on my own, of divorces and failed relationship attempts – all to find my grounding. Bless my children for turning out as well as they have because I was fucked up. Not having a home is painful. The Cider House Rules again: "I'm a Bedouin! Thought Homer Wells...*Home*, thought Homer Wells. He knew that for the Bedouin-come from nowhere, going nowhere – there was no home" (p. 251).

I tried to get more information for years but could not until I had the money to retain a private investigator in 2016. Then came the pictures and her name. What? She wasn't blonde and beautiful? I LOOK NOTHING LIKE HER! By now I am 60 years old waiting with bated breath to find the person who looked like me, who had the same likes and dislikes as me, who had the same passions and dreams and...this is what I got? Oh, how I missed my fairy tale. I gathered some information about her from my half-sister who unfortunately was now traumatized by her lying dead mother because apparently our mother "took the shameful secret to her grave"; my poor half-sister never knew and oh yes, my birth mother died five years prior as had all her brothers and sisters. She kept the shameful secret. The last four or five years have been difficult. My children are grown. My career is coming to an end. And I still wondered who I am. Then two decisive events occurred: my adoptive mother died, and New York State adoption records were unsealed.

With the unsealing of the records, I found out my birth name. No, it's not the name I'd hoped it was, and no, it doesn't fit, but it's mine. And my heart opened. I read all I could find about the Baby Scoop Era. And I found compassion for my birth mother. I have not been the perfect mother to my daughter, but how do you mother a daughter when your mother didn't mother you? Is my daughter the victim of my mother loss? Will her daughters be the victims

of her mother loss and my mother loss, and how does this stop? Joe Soll (2005), an adoption expert, writes that during the Baby Scoop Era, infant adoption was sinister, illegal, and punitive, inflicting lifelong trauma...children were ripped away from mothers. This is an act of violence causing the mother and children a lifetime of pain (Soll, 2005). And, I contend, beyond. In a Daily Om lesson called “healing the mother wound,” I found this: “wounding mothers are themselves wounded daughters, acting out of the wounds of their own mothers...the mother wound is often inherited and generational, and we may find ourselves feeling the unfelt emotions of our mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers – all of our unmothered ancestors – as we engage the sacred work of unearthing and naming our wounds” (Daily Om, n.d.).

Time to re-read all the books about the Baby Scoop Era. And I did. What did I find that I didn’t see before? You see, I’d read all the books available for the past 37 years and attended conferences, and attended therapy, and did self-growth weekends. And yet I could not shake the rage. I was not ready to hear what the experts had to say.

This time around, though, something stuck. I’m not a dumb person, but I only saw “my story” through my eyes. What if I looked through her eyes in 1954? What do I know about her? What do I know about then?

1950’s America

The American society in the 1950s featured the ideology of the housewife, shaped by magazines, radio and TV ads, and TV shows targeted to women. After World War II, a girl’s ambition was to be married, have babies, and exude the “perfect life.” “During the war, the government told women it was their patriotic duty to enter the workforce to take the places of men entering military service. After the war, women were told it was their duty to leave their jobs to free them up for returning veterans”. Willis continues, “The 1950s was a decade when there was much pressure on women to look on the role of homemaker as their ideal in life. Finding a husband who would be a good provider was an unmarried woman’s goal. Children were the center of the now-suburban life; after the war and subsequent GI Bill, returning veterans could pay for education, and job training and mortgages were guaranteed to vets at a low-interest rate. As a result, millions of veterans and their families were able to buy their own homes, many in the suburbs. Homes were now part of neighborhoods of identical homes with a porch, front yard, and big back yard with a patio for cocktail parties, barbecuing, and get-togethers. It was a great place to raise kids. For the first time, the nuclear family became the backbone of society. Family became a national obsession” (Wills, 2005, p.11).

Life of an unwed mother

Let’s get back to my birth mother. Imagine being 24 years old, unmarried, and without children in a society led by men fraught with stereotypes shaped by the national media, Hollywood, advertisers, and the government.

As I gaze at the 1950’s ads and articles, I can but ask myself one question: Where do I come off judging a woman who had to live through this? Pregnant? With twins? Alone?

I don’t know what happened. I don’t know if my birth mother was in love, had a brief affair with her boss, was forced to have sex, or they just didn’t take enough precautions. I will never know. What I know is that it must have been humiliating and painful to be an outcast. It must have broken her heart to lose her children; I say this because I know what it is to carry a child for nine months and feel the connection and love. It must have eaten away at her soul day in and day out.

The sanctioned, financially booming adoption industry, however, took great pains to subvert her strengthening maternal instinct to serve the needs of the adoption plan that required

an early adoption (Wilson-Buterbaugh, 2016, p. 288). This included the daily brainwashing that the only path to redemption is by surrendering her child. Wilson-Buterbaugh, 2016 cites Chambers (2006) who writes: It will be repeated over and over that her child will be called a bastard, will be handicapped by illegitimacy and grow to hate her as the cause of this misery. It will be emphasized that The Baby needs two parents who are able to afford things without needing public assistance, who can give The Baby material advantages unattainable by a pregnant girl who has only love to offer. She will be guided, cajoled, coerced, shamed, diagnosed, pushed, guilt-tripped and if she resists, even threatened into surrendering her child to these adoption workers who have The Baby earmarked for married (paying) strangers to parent. She learns that wealth is preferable to love (p. 289).

My first “exceptional occurrence” (Chang, 2005, p. 131) was my adoptive mom’s death in May 2019. The grief was monumental, but it freed me to pursue more information about my birth mother without any disloyalty. I wrote my half-sister wanting information about our mother; she wrote on December 10, 2019. I am including portions of the letter:

I'll start with the easy stuff. Mom's favorite color was blue, she liked vanilla ice cream (that she stirred until it was soft and melted), she loved coffee (black, at home she drank instant, she would drink coffee all day and all evening) and her favorite meals were chicken and dumplings and stuffed peppers. She wasn't much of a cook. She tended to forget things were cooking (I remember a charcoal frozen pizza for lunch one day). Her seasoning for every meat was garlic powder, onion powder, salt and pepper. She did make a killer leg of lamb with roasted potatoes. She didn't wear makeup except for lipstick (bright red). She always wore her hair short. Permed to be curly. I remember her perming her own hair when I was young. She loved to read. The White Indian series was one of her favorites. She also read a lot of Danielle Steele. When she was younger, she enjoyed hunting, fishing and camping. She hated gardening (I think she had to do too much of it as a child in the depression.) She was not great with houseplants. My grandmother would come to our house for a week after Easter and Thanksgiving. She would revive all the plants, so they looked great while she was there. Then they would begin their slow decline when she left.

Family was very important to her. We went to Indian Lake every other weekend to visit my grandmother. She went out of her way to help her many nieces and nephews many times. She loved being a grandmother. She lived for spending time with our boys. She spoiled them in a good way. She always made sure to have their favorite cookies and drinks in the house for when they came to visit. She loved having them around and was happy to let them play and be crazy at her house. She didn't want to be a "Grandma No No." When she was healthy, she loved to go shopping for the boys. After she was ill, and it was hard for her to get around she made sure to ask them what they wanted and sent me on mission to find it. She wanted to share her love of reading with them and read to them often. Once our boys were old enough to walk through the woods to her house, she loved having them come to visit (She always made them call me so I would know they made it).

She had a quirky sense of humor.

She was tough. Emotionally and physically. She fell and crushed the top bone of her right arm. It was unrepairable because of osteoporosis (take your calcium). She took a Tylenol when she got up in the morning and another before bed. That was all. I watched her pick up her arm and plop it on the table. I asked if that hurt and she said "of course but I had to get it up there" She

broke her back while skate sailing but never went to the doctor (that was when she and my dad were dating). She never knew it was broken until much later when she went to the doctor for back pain. She expected me to be as tough. She often told me "Not to be such a blat calf." When I was about 5, I stapled my thumb at my parent's office (through the nail and out the other side and folded over). She took me to the ladies room and took it out with pliers. Then there was a lot of peroxide. She loved peroxide! That was the go to.

She was fiercely independent. She made sure that I was also.

She was good at fixing things. It might not have always been the "right" way, but it usually worked.

It is hard for me to pinpoint what kind of mom she was. She was strict in some senses. She always expected me to be kind and share. She always expected me to do my best at whatever I chose to do. She worried and always expected me to check in when I was traveling or if my plans changed. To this day, I feel like I should be calling someone when I get to where I'm going on vacation. She was also my biggest supporter. She was always willing to transport me or the horde of friends with me wherever we needed to go. Our house doors were always open to who ever wanted to come over.

One of my birth cousins said what she remembers most is that my birth mother loved animals and children. Another cousin said she doesn't think anyone knew [about the pregnancy] as she [my birth mother] was a very private person but she liked horses, skiing, sports; was very intelligent and hard-working; was devoted to her family and "was one of the nicest, most giving people I ever knew." So, who was my mother? I still don't know.



Discussion

This piece attempts to provide insights into the questions: Did my birth mother voluntarily “give me up” because she didn’t want me? Who was she, and are we alike? Is it possible to stop being so angry? I utilized autoethnography as the method.

Question 1: Did my birth mother voluntarily “give me up” because she didn’t want me?

What I have learned is that in 1954, girls were taught “benevolent sexism” that focused on being a young lady, that is, being modest, obedient, quiet, accommodating, and selfless. Chemaly (2018) writes: “A woman’s first experience with everyday sexism, double standards, biases, and sometimes overt discrimination often occurs when she’s a girl, frequently in her own family. In these early lessons and contexts, overt sexism isn’t the problem, benevolence is. It’s hard to be angry at or resent people who love you and are working hard to take care of you. This is a significant part of why sexism is so difficult to call out at its most granular and intimate levels: at home and in settings that often dominate social life” (p. 168). It was a time of increasing sexual messages in society, with sexy women selling everything from jello to cigarettes to cars. Yet, birth control was unavailable, and sex education was nonexistent. Boys enjoyed male privilege, and girls were to be popular, pretty, and chaste until marriage. They married young and devoted themselves to making a home for their husbands and children.

I looked at what it would be like to be an unmarried young mother in 1954. The cultural context following WWII changed everything and a young, unmarried mother no longer had the same moral and legal rights as a married mother of a ‘legitimate’ child. Those days were over because it was now essential to meet the demand for adoptable infants. Once adoption became lucrative, mothers without husbands were determined to be “feeble-minded” or “delinquent” or “mentally ill” to justify the removal of their newborns. The mother was shamed, ridiculed, isolated, tormented, and brainwashed, so relinquishment was her only option. There was no support for her to raise her child, who would be considered a “bastard” and likely ostracized. Did my birth mother voluntarily relinquish us? It would be foolish to assume this. Interestingly, my first cousin (who was ten years younger than my mother and with whom I’ve been in contact a few days) relinquished her daughter in 1966; she wrote to me and said, “All moms who make the hard choice to surrender feel that they’re giving their kids a better life. I have 2 adopted kids and I pray that their moms are at peace with their decision. I’m sure that was true for [your mom] as it was for me.”

Research and narratives (that I have found) about adoptees and adoptee healing do not reference the Baby Scoop Era. The focus tends to be on grieving and coming to terms with the “side effects,” for example, attachment issues, relationship, and trust issues. Understanding the Baby Scoop Era, I believe, will assist adoptees from this era in understanding the situation in which their birth mothers lived and will cultivate compassion.

Question 2: Who was she, and are we alike?

I still know very little, but bit by bit I am getting a [superficial] picture of her strength and values and find similarities between us. We both like animals and children; we are both tough, intelligent, hard-working women; we both are athletic and skied; we both are very private; we are devoted to family; neither of us wears makeup; neither of us can grow a houseplant; we both love being a grandmother; we both have a quirky sense of humor; we both stir our ice cream; and we both like stuffed peppers. We are “others of similarity” in simple ways (Chang 2008, p. 26). I judged her by my reality, not hers. I still cannot imagine relinquishing one of my children, but I better understand why she had to. As my cousin said at

the end of her email, “You’ve got some tough genes- her gift to you.” Knowing more about her helps me. Knowing some of my genealogy helps me, and my children and their children find a post on which to hook the chain. While there will be no reunion with her, I encourage other adoptees to learn as much as they can about their birth parents and heritage. It can feel less lonely, and one doesn’t have to feel so “odd” and alone.

Question 3: Is it possible to stop being so angry?

I am no longer angry at my birth mother. I feel compassion for her and grieve for the loss of her children. I forgive her. This surprised me the most. I believed I was destined to carry this rage to MY grave. I am grateful the death of my mom and the opening of my birth records freed me to be open and curious about the discoveries I was to find.

Limitations

This is my story, and I do not presume to generalize my findings to all adoptees or birth mothers. The reliability of this data is impacted by the death of my birth mother or of anyone who knew her during her pregnancy. I am slowly developing my family tree; I have only my half-sister and two cousins (and adopted daughter of my cousin) from which to gather information. Therefore, the results cannot confirm how she felt or why she did what she did; this is supposition based on who she was as a person (as defined by her daughter and our two cousins) and the pervasive social reality at the time.

Implications

These results build on existing evidence of the damage caused during The Baby Scoop Era. My journey contributes to a clearer understanding of what this period was like for unmarried mothers and the pressures exerted on them to relinquish their children “for the good of their children.” My hope is that this information will become available to all victims of this atrocity and that those involved in adoption also understand that adoption is not just a “blessing,” but also a trauma that needs healing. How I wish I learned this in my graduate program in social work.

Next Step

As I indicated repeatedly, this is my first step in my journey. Next, I will research the experiences of adoptive mothers as I believe they, too, were ignored and coerced to adopt children during the BSE; additionally, I believe the impact of their infertility grief and loss was ignored. Third I will research the adoptee journey of this period and the effects on adoptees, their children, and grandchildren. Mother loss must be explored as I believe adoption to be gendered and the wound intergenerational. Finally, the patriarchal and misogynist system that allowed so much pain for so many, and that continues in this country today, including in the adoption industry, must be further explored. Sexism and accompanying rage are powerful. The Baby Scoop Era ended when the available newborn-white baby-well dried up, once Roe v Wade passed, and birth control was available to unmarried women. But women continue to be victimized and unheard. This is not over.

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