

## Choice

The illusion of choice in adoption may be what holds public opinion in place, the notion that the mother chooses to give her baby away. The theory of the unwanted child and the unworthy mother have become the two great lies of adoption that have been sown together into a mysterious tapestry that has firmly embedded itself into public consciousness. Even the more open minded in today's society will focus their discussions about adoption on whether or when the adoptee should be told about his adoption. The two great lies have been so oft repeated, that they have been unquestioningly accepted as today's truth, and have become the founding principles of the modern day adoption institution which uses them to justify inhuman practises that, were we thinking with our eyes wide open, we would simply not allow to happen.

Looking back to the baby boom era of thirty and forty years ago, a curious fact begins to emerge. It seems that the "unwanted" children were exclusively born to single mothers. It is clear that many pregnancies were unwanted or unplanned, and that the phenomenon of an inconvenient pregnancy was shared by unmarried and married alike. For the married elite who had the luxury of not being torn away from their babies, these unwanted pregnancies, however, became children who were very much wanted and loved. How did it come about that the unmarried mother did not experience this natural transition, but something altogether more horrendous - a lifelong prison sentence of separation and lies, dressed up as choice, and labeled with adoption stickers. Adoptions, it seems, almost exclusively involved the children of unmarried resourceless women. If adoption were truly and only about giving unwanted children a loving home, there would be less discrepancy. Unwanted children would be born in roughly equal percentages to married and unmarried mothers alike. Listening to mothers who lost their children to adoption, one thing becomes abundantly clear. The pregnant women who happened to be single were treated totally differently from those with wedding rings. They were made to feel shame whilst their married peers were congratulated; they were lied to about their legal rights whilst their sisters were given everything they needed; they were made to believe that their children would not cope with growing up with the stigma of being called a bastard (as if falsifying birth certificates changes that, it only allowed society to pretend that sex before marriage does not exist), they were rebuffed and thrown out of their families by their parents whilst the acceptable face of pregnancy wallowed in applause. Single pregnant women were bestowed with scorn and ridicule whilst married pregnant women walked with pride. Adoption had nothing to do with whether a child was wanted or not, but was about the circumstances into which the child was born. Born into wedlock, the child was assumed wanted and no questions were asked, adoption was never encouraged. Born out of wedlock, however, adoption was taken for granted.

What becomes clear when this information is understood, is that the tables have been turned. Yes, adoption is about choice. But those who do the choosing are not the mothers. Society, with its judgmental views had a vote. Religion, in particular Catholicism, with its scolding attitude towards premarital sex and deep belief in punishment as salvation, whacked great fistfuls of vengeance, repression, guilt and fear into the unmarried mother's soul with the existence of their penitentiary unmarried mothers homes, and fearful parents of unmarried mothers made choices for their daughters, with their own hidden agendas of avoiding conflict and shame amongst their peers as their motivation. Yes, choices were made, and there are reasons for these choices. But they were not made in the best interests of the mothers or the children. Furthermore, the choices were then presented as if made by the mothers, as if in their best interests and as if in the best interests of the unborn child. Adding this toxic soup to losing a loved and wanted child to adoption, in effect experiencing the death of her child, it is no wonder that so many reunions can go astray when these hidden fears and past events are relived.

Whether the baby was unwanted or not, had therefore become society's choice, and in fact it was the mother who had been rejected by society, not the baby by its mother. The legacy of

manipulation that has become adoption required that the truth be hidden. The rejected mother, whose only crime was that someone found out about her sexuality was labelled “unworthy”, and the baby who was removed from her, who committed the crime of simply existing, was labelled “unwanted”. A heavy burden for anyone to bear, especially with so many hidden undertones. But the propaganda has been so efficiently decorated, and is so convenient for society and those responsible for what happened, that most mothers and adoptees believe in it. Mothers often testify to their choice in relinquishing their baby. The words of one mother still torment me, “I offered my child to adoption”, parodying the sacrificial lamb to the slaughter. Adoptees readily testify to the hypothesis that their mother was in some way deficient and bubble over with gratitude to their adoptive parents who saved them from a horrible fate, quite often without even knowing the most basic information about their mothers, such as her name. The denial in these situations is quite stunning, and whilst there is nothing out of place with loving and appreciating one’s adoptive parents, such overwhelming gratitude is most certainly a sign of deep, deep longing and hidden grief.

Reversing these lies requires the acknowledgment that the “unwanted” children were very much the opposite. They were children born in circumstances that were deemed inappropriate by society. By truthfully confronting this fact, the humane result would have been a society realising that its ideals were out of touch with reality and amending them accordingly. Thirty, forty years on, this has still failed to happen. The injustices have gone unnoticed, and the same tired labels continue to be worn, out of habit, convenience and laziness. Passing the buck, it was the poor and defenceless women who bore the brunt of society’s choice, a reflection of its dis-ease with itself.

Choice is not high up on the agenda for mothers and adoptees today either. Practices have opened up to allow international adoptions to take place, making the possibility of later reunions impossible. The ensuing anxiety that this can create is often unbearable. A whole life long of not knowing whether your child or your mother is still alive or not. Where is the choice for the adoptee? It may sound ridiculous to complain that no one asked us whether we wanted to be adopted or not, but the fact remains - no one did. If we had been able to choose, I don’t imagine anyone saying yes, take me away. Assumed not to know the difference between two mothers, which any basic book about motherhood will prove to be complete nonsense, it is someone else who decides the adoptee’s fate. Choosing to explore our heritage later in life, it is other people who decide that it not in our best interests to do so, and keep our records sealed. Simultaneously, families unaffected by adoption are buying family tree programs for their laptops, which in the course of a few minutes will tell them the name of their great great great grandfather.

There are those in society who say that we all have choice, that we are all creating the moment that we live in. They claim that we choose everything in our lives. I cannot prove this statement to be untrue, but I find it hard to believe. I cannot imagine that the people in Iraq choose to be bombed. I cannot imagine that people in Africa choose hunger over nutrition. Yet, there are those who claim this to be so, without realizing, that being one community, one society, one global family, we are interdependent beings, so that a decision made in one corner of the globe can have consequences in distant continents. In other words, we are robbed of our choice when someone withholds food from us when we are starving, and instead of passing the buck to the one without resources, it has to be made abundantly clear that the person who is withholding is committing an act of violence. Then there are those who claim that bad things only happen to those who deserve them. The logic behind this is that the Iraqis deserved what they got. The Africans deserve to die from hunger. Mothers deserved to have their children taken away from them. Unfortunately, the disempowered victims will often believe in their own badness or wrongness and accept the labels given to them. But the uglier truth must be told. Ignoring suffering is a form of violence, as is inducing it. Ignoring the Iraqis who burn to death on a daily basis is a form of violence. Refusing to feed the starving in Africa and ignoring their plight is a form of violence, especially when we have everything in our

power to correct these problems.

Mothers did not deserve to have their children removed from them. Doing so was a form of violence. Ignoring the pain and suffering in the aftermath is another form of violence.

Millions of women were lied to, were coerced, had their babies physically stolen from them, were not informed and therefore bullied into relinquishment. For these millions, the time must come for justice and humanity to be restored. It is true that the past can never be changed, but through acknowledging our mistakes, choosing truth over profit and humanity over convenience, we can create a better future.

The haunting words of Barbara Bush, ([www.cnn.com/2005/US/09/06/katrina.presidents.ap](http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/09/06/katrina.presidents.ap)) in response to the world's latest disaster, provide a fitting comparison to the treatment of victims of adoption. By insisting that the victims, the survivors, the suffering homeless people were "underprivileged anyway" and therefore better off in the Houston Astrodome than in their own homes makes some things abundantly clear. Attitudes of the powerful, wealthy rulers have not changed. Whether such comments are made out of lack of empathy, ignorance or stupidity, America's first family does not understand the plight of the underprivileged, much less does it care. These condescending attitudes were also alive and kicking when the less fortunate mothers "chose" to "give away" their babies, and they will continue to shape the future of the world unless we confront and change them.

Had real choice, in the absence of violence, in the absence of force, in the absence of manipulation, in the absence of lies, in the absence of fear and in the absence of coercion been possible forty years ago, adoption would have been a fraction of its real numbers and quite possibly been wiped out.

More importantly, making comments such as these shows complete ignorance of the root causes of poverty, again something we have in our power to eradicate. The "solution" to the "problem" cannot be to rehouse people in the Astrodome and claim they are better off, the solution must be found by attacking the causes of poverty. Similarly, creating a "solution" to the "problem" of women being pregnant, without the resources to take care of the baby cannot be to take the baby away from her. Situations like these need to be looked at more holistically, and we all have to take responsibility for our part in creating them.

In the words of Martin Luther King Jr, "True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it comes to see that that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring".

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