

My submission is a synopsis of my involvement in the Forced Adoption community over the last decade predominantly within NSW.

This is not to impress you, but to impress upon you the diversity of need within the community and more specifically where the gaps in services lie.

My experience has been that in most cases these needs are then met by other stakeholders in a peer support capacity.

I hope this may be instructive in providing a broader context in which the Western Australia Forced Adoption community may benefit.

Even though each state is governed by different legislation the commonality of experience throughout Australia is expressly understood.

I have provided a collection of different writing I have done over the last year.

This includes two entries for the Post Adoption Resource Centre/Benevolent Society newsletters and some published Poetry.

My hope is that this writing may illustrate the level of complexity adoptees as a minority population have to manage throughout their lifespan.

We are the last invisible minority to obtain the same human rights as the remainder of society.

All other minorities have legislation to protect them from prejudice, where adoptees on the other hand are prejudicially treated specifically because of the legislation that is applied to them.

Many thanks

Michael Grenfell

“ADOPTEE RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS!”

Member of the Australian Adoption Literary Festival Working Group

Working group established by Post Adoption Resource Centre / Post Adoption Support Queensland

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DNA - MYTHS AND POSSIBILITIES

(Clarification regarding language - I use mum and dad when talking about my adoptive parents and use mother and father when referring to my biological/first parents.)

So, you are thinking about DNA testing?

I would like to share with you some of my experience and reflections I have regarding commercial DNA testing.

I hope this may illustrate some of the complexity as well as some of the benefits found in doing a commercial DNA test.

Firstly, a little background.

I first made contact with PARC in 1997 and then again in 1999, both being a simple phone call. Needless to say I was in a distressed and questioning state of mind, looking for some answers and a more effective way to make sense of my adoption experience up until this time.

Counseling as yet, was not freely available as it is currently.

I neither had the finances to enter into counseling or the time to do so with work and family responsibilities.

This was further impacted by living on the NSW Central Coast, far from any face to face support or someone that may normalise my experience of being adopted.

Then venturing online, I ultimately found others affected in the same way and sharing similar history.

I started to 'come out the fog' hard and fast with a new awareness and understanding that I had a lot more to learn. This was not only in regards to my own experience of adoption but also the history of adoption throughout the world.

I had organised to attend the Federal apology with other members of a support group I was in , but at the last moment decided to not go.

I choose to view it online, in the safety of my home.

I recognised how raw and vulnerable I was and did not believe it would have been fair on others to have to attend to my acute distress.

March 21st, 2013 was a turning point for me as it was for many in our community. 1.

I felt I could now point to something outside of myself regarding adoption.

It was no longer a matter of a negative attitude or poor psychology as I was often told.

In my mind (and body) the apology made what happened to me, to be a real and tangible phenomenon for the first time in my life.

After viewing the Federal Apology for Forced adoption practices given by Julia Gillard, and later attending the first PARC adoptee retreat; I committed to some serious unpacking emotionally and otherwise.

I was now able to get some support through counseling with PARC which was now freely available.

This was as a result of recent funding.

One positive outcome that came as a result of the apology.

Adjacent to the counseling, I also then attempted to communicate firstly with my mother and then also my father.

I had made multiple attempts with my mother over 3 decades, communicating first by phone (which I would advise against) and then via email, without a change in outcome.

I now requested PARC to mediate on my behalf.

My hope was that my mother may make use of the support services now readily available or engage with similar services within the state she is living in.

My thinking was that since some time had passed, things may be different and she may wish to have some communication with me.

This was not to be.

So where to next?

I had learnt, as my previous experience had shown me, that a direct approach may not lead to a positive outcome. I decided to turn my focus now on searching for my father.

The legislation recently changed in 20, now allowing adoptees to apply for their putative father's information, or more specifically ; releasing to me the family name of the person named as my father.

For many years I had my father's first and middle name, along with other 'non-identifying' information.

This was issued to me when first making contact with the department.

His surname/family name was a mystery to me, with it being redacted from all the documentation I had, as is the case for most adoptees.

In many cases the painful and fanciful 'father unknown' exists within the adoptee's records.

I had lost count of the times I had read through what information I had, trying to make some sense of it all. I would imagine that something might just magically happen or that I would find a clue that I had missed somehow on a previous reading.

Such was my hopeless wanting.

Not only (non identifying) information about my mother and father but their siblings and parents too. This always seemed to me to be at odds with the response I received from my mother, only adding to my frustration and confusion.

What I do know now, was that I had quite a considerable amount of information when I compare it to what others have told me that appears on their file.

My heart breaks for them, the ruthless unfairness of this is beyond me.

I finally received notification from the A.I.U. (Adoption Information Unit), of my putative father's name as stated in my adoption records.

I don't recall anything specific, but I do know I felt angry, sad and indignant, while at the same time feeling relief, expectation and humiliation.

I feel that living in an adoption construct we seem to carry opposing thoughts and live in a constant state of cognitive dissonance.

It is the most painful expectation and waiting; not unlike a plane never landing or ship never mooring.

This creates a perpetual holding pattern of hypervigilance; where some of us are wanting the call that others are fearfully dreading.

It is a burdensome existence for all parties.

With this new information I decided to reach out to my mother again.

I had no expectations of a different response but I thought at the very least she should be informed that I was reaching out to my father.

I was concerned that he might attempt to contact her and trigger her even more.

I knew I was flying blind and in very real terms had no true knowledge of the reality of their relationship or the nature of its demise.

What I did know was that there was little I could do but let it flow its course.

I had wrestled with the idea of what a father is and what they need to be throughout the entirety of my life. As I was now a father myself this was of primary importance to me.

This allowed me to reflect on the parenting I too had received (or not) from my mum and dad growing up.

Conversation between the AIU and PARC then led the AIU to attempt to make contact with all men on the electoral roll in NSW who shared the same name.

Ultimately this was to also end in a negative result.

So where to now?

Ultimately, the decision to do DNA came as a result of an ongoing failure over 30 years in attempting to communicate with my mother and a negative result with the department's attempt to contact my father.

The decision to do DNA was in many ways the only option left.

I felt I had nothing left to lose.

I thought at the very least I would be able to find out my ethnic background and had zero expectation of any matches and furthermore any contact from anyone on either side.

This belief was ultimately proven to be false.

Note. My original ethnicity of Irish has now changed to English.

Needless to say this was met with some disappointment. 2.

DNA may answer all your questions at the moment, but it may also add an additional complexity to your life that you could not comprehend.

The sudden knowledge that my father was one of 9 siblings (with another one believed to be lost to adoption) and that I have 40+ first cousins may be on the extreme end of possible outcomes.

Words fail me in attempting to describe the sudden realisation that I am the eldest of many siblings, and I believe they felt the same way.

It may also add complexity to others lives that they have no capacity to understand, comprehend and at the very least have the emotional space available to process this new information.

This was largely to be the case.

Unfortunately, the adoptee is in a position of absolute disadvantage here.

You appear suddenly, within a family structure with no coordinates to orient yourself.

You do not have the assumed knowledge and understanding regarding the history and dynamics that all other members intrinsically have.

Current and historical (often unresolved and unspoken) issues may be further exacerbated when an additional stressor is applied.

It is important to understand that this same result may happen to any 'surprise' person that were to show up at the same point in time,

This is not a reflection on the adoptee and is regardless of what history/herstory they bring with them.

Communication is essential throughout, and even the most benign or best intended attempts may produce a negative outcome.

This can be the case in any family; even without difficult situations.

I believe the term 'reunion' to be woefully inadequate in clearly describing what is actually happening to all parties within the adoption construct.

This is a pattern throughout the lexicon of infant removal; both historically and currently as it is principally a product of the adoption industry as a whole.

Reunion and the way it is portrayed sensationally in the media and as a form of entertainment, fails to address that in majority it is adults meeting adults for the first time.

It is further complicated with the residue of decades old unresolved needs and trauma that has not been appropriately addressed.

Others may feel differently regarding reunion, the apology, and how they as individuals make sense of any of this.

And that is more than perfectly ok, it is to be appreciated.

Kind Regards

Michael

REFLECTIONS

Like many others from the Forced Adoption era, I came to DNA very late in my journey in 2017. Even when all this is said and done, I would still advise to do DNA.

It is ONE way of finding out a truth regarding what makes you the person you are.

It may not be the whole truth, but it can provide some explanation as to who you are; and also who you are not.

I believe the finding out of who you are not is much more relevant and meaningful to the adoptee.

I believe that this form of attrition is what underpins the felt experience of 'coming out of the fog'.

In many ways we are shedding our skin, or like the butterfly emerging from the cocoon.

I hope you enjoy your new wings.

Footnote..

PARC offers information sheets regarding commercial DNA, IS 47 ; as well as videos with search angels and DNA experts.

Each of these experts offer different opinions and perspectives as to the why and how of searching and the use of DNA.

I have found that opposing views often hold validity due to the level of variables with any individual's search and use of DNA.

I have found that in all things adoption, we commonly vacillate between extremes; I believe this due to the fundamental instability inherent throughout adoption.

I wish for anyone who decides to do DNA the very best outcome.

Links

1. Federal Apology for Forced Adoption Practices

<https://parlview.aph.gov.au/mediaPlayer.php?videoID=190367>

2. Why does my DNA estimate change?

<https://whoareyoumadeof.com/blog/why-does-my-ancestry-dna-ethnicity-estimate-change/>

3. Parc's DNA forum Part 1

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2328609350761991>

4. On Fathers

<https://www.facebook.com/benevolentsocietyNSW/videos/2741217056111258>

EBB & FLOW OF CONNECTION/REUNION

In the last newsletter I touched on briefly some of the complexity in regards to reunion while giving a more detailed perspective of what a DNA test result may bring.

So where to now?

And that's the big question really isn't it.

What is this thing called reunion?

What am I supposed to do or not do, as is often the case?

The simple fact is that there is no guidebook or simple to do list here.

In many instances we stumble blindly with thoughts and feelings outside our realm of experience and beyond our expectations.

We are in a brave new world where the maps we have previously been accustomed too, are now, not only irrelevant but can also be deleterious.

Every single adoption and reunion is unique and specific to the collection of humans entering into it.

Even though every adoption shares similar themes and phases it is not a lineal or rational progression, and here's the rub.

The actual start of the reunion may bring up a collection of unresolved emotions and unforeseen challenges. It is the proverbial Pandora's box!

Feelings of loss, shame and guilt sit right next door to feelings of happiness and relief.

The recognition of what has been lost and more critically what has been taken, forces an identity disruption with the integration of this new information.

This even doubly so if there is the knowledge that other family members knew and assisted in the adoption process or as in my case where no one knew; as I have been led to believe. This can be further complicated if a previous reunion was successful or not with the other parent. The only way I can describe this is if you can imagine a messy divorce, with 6 adults instead of the usual two; each competing for their own needs to be met; regardless of outcome.

Because I shared my story of search and rejection openly and the trauma involved, I believe this also scared people away. Each of my aunts (5) all stated if they had known they would have helped bring me up and that they believed that my grandmother, if she had known, would have done the same.

This was nice to hear in some respects but also extremely painful with a lot of questions to ponder and imagine their outcomes and consequences.

Would my illegitimacy be hidden from me (and the wider community) with my grandmother or eldest aunt acting as parent and caretaker?

Would I have grown up thinking that my cousins were my siblings and visa versa?

Would I still be in the role of family scapegoat and would I find out a history of untruth

upon doing DNA?

And then what?

Would I have been allowed to grieve the loss of my mother but more importantly would what happened to me be attended to appropriately?

Obviously I have no answers to any of these impossible scenarios and immediately recognise this is not unlike the ghost kingdom of my childhood. <https://pacer-adoption.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/47240532.pdf>

In contrast my maternal aunt stated that if my mother had returned home pregnant, her parents would have thrown her out. Poverty and intergenerational trauma make horrible bedfellows.

Though also painful, this knowledge allowed me to understand the lack of choice my mother had, coupled with removalist policy and practice of the early 70s.

No help was offered to her. I have a copy of the statement she wrote at the time detailing her abandonment by my father including his promise to financially support her. As she was living a state away from any family or support structures, her lack of finances forced her decision in this way with the choice of no choice.

I was open with my desire to have my fathers name added to my original birth certificate stating very simply this was to correct a historical wrong as well as him integrate the idea of taking ownership of the fatherhood he lost. This was not to be and was misunderstood as a legalized attempt to collect some form of inheritance.

This is a clear example of how the dominant narrative is so entrenched throughout the broader community and even in the adoption community itself.

Unfortunately this way of thinking is validated and supported within media and entertainment broadly with the damaged and malignant adoptee trope being so common .

Cue 'The Joker, Loki, Dexter or the real life Ted Bundy and Aileen Wuornos.

For me, what this illustrates is the cultural recognition of the damage done developmentally through the premature separation of mother and infant.

Problematically though these stories then double down on this anti-social individual who bears the consequence of the failure of society in the first instance.

The inverse of this is the 'chosen one' trope, cue Harry Potter.

In simple terms Harry is entered (without consent) into a kinship care adoption agreement after the death of his parents. His maternal aunt and uncle were not only neglectful and hostile but lied to him regarding his origin, his parent's death and who he actually was. They were resentful and envious of Harry's parents and treated him with the same contempt.

I see the comparison to what an LDA (late discovery adoptee) has to go through that's all too painfully similar. Gut wrenchingly so.

Problematically, neither narrative illustrates clearly the intersection of policy and practice of removalist policy and the real life experience of the child in care. The child in this case has no agency or choice and is simply the receiver of the choices made upon them. While the development of Harry in his hero's journey, integrating his history and newfound knowledge is beautifully written' we must pay particular attention to what was hidden from him in the first instance. 1 million points to Gryffindor I say

So why enter into a reunion?

Even if you had asked me, I probably could not have given a definitive answer beyond the simple truth in knowing why I was abandoned in the first place.

Most importantly the actual, real bare bones and ugly truth.

In all instances the truth is always better than fiction when it comes to the lives we live.

This is even more important when the truth is horribly painful.

Difficult conversations are nothing in comparison to the lived experience of being so.

In many ways I did not know what my needs were as this pattern was a default throughout my other relationships experiencing Narcissistic abuse.

I recognise now my difficult honesty also activated their own unresolved trauma.

I found that the emphasis and focus was more on where and how I may fit (or not) within the family structure as opposed to what my needs were.

The important thing was to maintain an appearance of the status quo with the communication with others staging he never knew. This was not true and I simply shared the truth upon being asked.

The desire to manage the narrative and resulting conversation ultimately brought things to a standstill. I was given the ultimatum to talk and communicate specifically to immediate family members only or else.

I calmly responded saying that by its very nature there will be a natural attrition rate here and the majority will return to their life unchained. This has proven to be correct. In addition, the facts as I saw them, was that we would not be where we were if it was not for my Aunt and our DNA match. I grew up without the knowledge of family and would not reject anyone wishing to communicate.

This has proven to be correct. That these changes were brought on quicker with arguments and (perceived) insults playing out over facebook only added to the mix is something to consider.

Social media is a great tool for connecting with others and in some instances it may be the only way you are able to ascertain relationships.

Obviously this information alongside DNA may be the only way that a putative paternity be confirmed if the father is unnamed as in most cases.

Communication is critical and messenger is a great way to chat when there is distance

between individuals.

The option of video chat can add another dimension to communication, being able to see others and especially for us as a cohort see and respond to family likenesses; in some cases the first time in your life.

As with all communication there can be issues. Unfortunately social media may exacerbate arguments or misunderstandings. The adoptee is at a disadvantage here not knowing anything about who talks to who, and who doesn't.

Unfortunately, my arrival (and consequent departure) was affected in this way.

In doing DNA and my results going live, so to speak; i was met with the shock of not only finding a paternal aunt and cousins; but also receiving a message from my fathers eldest sister, who was the eldest of the 9.

I had not thought of any possibility of a 'match' because in my mind both my mother and father had distanced themselves entirely. It just didn't cross my mind that my father would have siblings; I don't know how to explain this as I knew my mother was the eldest of four sisters. I can only think that in my mind my father was not as real as I did not have a lot of information (especially his last name) about him.

What I did know about him was that 'he was mad about music', this little bit of information meant the world to me as I had always been enthralled and entranced by music beyond the norm. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree in this respect.

In doing my DNA , what made sense to me was to use my birth name for the account and result. I think this also makes sense genealogically speaking in attempting to have true and correct identity documentation, with the option of entering a date for an adoption. My thinking and hope was that if I appeared in someone's results who shared the family name somewhere it might lead to a possible breakthrough; and it certainly did.

Aunty's first message was simple enough stating we have lots of matches and that she was very excited giving me her email to communicate directly; her second message stating she believed I was either a grandson or nephew much to her excitement.

I know that neither of us slept that night, with me responding the next morning.

It was a whirlwind of emails going back and forth with many questions and ultimately photos, finally seeing where I got my nose from.

Finally I made contact with my father, and also his wife.

At approximately the same time my arrival was announced to the other family members. This led to multiple friend requests over facebook and adding me to a cousins and grandchildrens group. The issue here was that some cousins had made contact first before some of my sisters had the opportunity to do so. This was not handled well and added another level of anxiety to an already difficult situation; ultimately with my cousins being asked to take a step back. What I didn't know was the history of difficulties between my fathers siblings and also competition and disagreements between my cousins. This was to have consequences later on.

During this time we communicated over the phone, via email and messenger with us having a video chat with all the family, including my sisters.

I was totally floored. I could not believe how beautiful they were; and told them so through my tears. I have always worn my heart on my sleeve, much to my detriment.

Jan 04 2018 my father and his wife flew to Sydney to meet us, with them staying at his brother's place an hour's drive away. They bought a large photo album with photos, dates and names; including my nieces and nephews. Not surprising, I was extremely emotional throughout the day together.

In all of this the adoptee is generally at a great disadvantage having to manage not only the expectations and relationships within their adoptive family but also the expectations and assumptions with the family entering reunion.

This can be further complicated if the reunion was successful or not with the other parent. The only way I can describe this is if you imagine a messy divorce and there is no communication; now just imagine there are six parents in this picture.

I now have one sister and one cousin who still communicate with me on a regular basis, which I am extremely grateful for.

We share bits and pieces of our lives, and continue to do so; and it is really special.

Clarification - I categorically never use the grateful word, after being labeled an ungrateful little bastard throughout my life.

They are both traumatised by what has happened not only to me and themselves but also the actions of others throughout the family. Their lives and relationships are markedly different now because of this. Every now and then we will video chat and debrief and often laugh and cry together.

The majority have largely returned to their pre reunion failure lives, with intermittent contact over social media.

Some family members will like and comment on a post on social media, some when it is not about adoption and some will like most of what I share.

And that is perfectly ok.

My reunion did not turn out as i wanted or how i thought it may.

It has happened as it has and I can only manage the rest of what comes as it does.

If you have survived reunion and continued to make a considered effort in holding space and allowing honesty and a growth mindset, my hats off to you!

Doing this deep emotional, psychological and biological work is painful but i think crucial.

It may seem trite but we can only heal what we feel.

Denial and suppression leads ultimately to illness.

In bringing light to the darkness of this part of or shared family history and dysfunction we do the work to stop its continued legacy.

As parents now we owe our children this freedom.

Obliterating these family curses is the work, I believe; we are here for.

For those of you who have had a reunion, and it has faltered or failed; I am so very sorry. Like most things in adoption words fail us as there is nothing close to describing this experience.

I would urge you to not give up and not give up on yourself because in the end whatever that may be, you are truly worth it.

Regardless of the outcome.

Poetry published in 2022 WestWords Living Stories 'Things unsaid' writing
Winner Camden Council Region for Poetry for Goodbye! Hello?

<https://www.westwords.com.au/product/living-stories-things-unsaid/>

Goodbye! Hello?

We never got to say hello, before you said goodbye.

We never got to live in truth, before you lived a lie.

Decades long of searching, have been my life's refrain,
and when I finally found you, you were simply gone again.

The child that was unwanted, forsaken and denied,
disallowed a mother's love or a father's pride.

Sorrow stained and broken down, moored in a sea of pain,
Left to drift as dead, clinging to my mother's name.

You choose to quickly flee, and deny your promises,
Packed them amongst your things and left everything unsaid.

What you failed to understand, to fathom or to see,
was that you left your son behind, with a pain mythology.

The story I was given, and so adamantly told,
was part of the exchange, with what was bought and sold.

This never settled with me, because it wasn't true,
It left me with a heart of hurt because there wasn't you.

My role was now a product, to fill a social need,
To hide a bastard born and an infertility.

A mother is not replaceable and neither is a son,
A father's not exchangeable, or maybe I am wrong?

I am currently writing a memoir detailing my experience of Forced adoption as well a supplemental poetry for this project.

Unpublished Poetey

Why I write poetry (unedited)

Because of 3am questions that storm through my mind, attempting to find the truth or a picture of it,

Because of of the Bass Strait and it's crooked distance,

Because of dropped phone calls and returned letters,

Because of custard tarts and many false starts,

Because of rabbit shaped easter biscuits,

Because of what was told,

Because of what was shared and what was taken,

Because of institutions filled with children, innocent and alone,

Because we are running out of time,

Because it is write or die,

Because of bent and broken backs,

Because of Bushy Park cemetery and what is buried there,

Because of paranoid people in positions of power,

Because of David,

Because of Geoff,

Because they are gone.

Mother (Unedited) by Michael Grenfell

Where did you go?

I thought you would be here?

You've left me alone in the midst of this fear

I do not understand and this doesn't feel right, you've taken all my love and left only fright.

Mother is a question that I need to ask, even if there is no answer.

You said, 'I thought you dead! And you didn't want to know, not then and not now.

History past - history present, Living barely and barely living

The socially removed and labelled anew with a fresh new name and taxes due.

Generation trauma of mental distress, an ECT for grandma at the doctor's request.

No time for mothering is the familiar refrain, when there is poverty to be done with the convict stain.

Your house looks over the Derwent cresting up hill.

With a million dollar view you are hidden from your lie.

Husband doesn't know you have a bastard son.

I wonder how he'll feel when the funeral is done.

Tumours and lies plague your mind - at the end of life what do we leave behind.

INFANT RAGE

The scream of rebuttal spat in a howl of rage.

Thrashing limbs against polished concrete , turning red, turning white and finally blue.

Incandescent with grief.

So Alone.

A Simple Piece of Paper

I was born into paper

Not into my mothers arms

Two parents divided

One who sang the psalms

Two families unknowing

Have lost one of their kin

But with a piece paper

Get told to begin again

A new name is chosen

An old one then denied

Another piece of paper

An identity to hide

A father unnamed

No accountability

A blemish removed

From the family tree

Another piece of paper

Finally tells the truth

A damning piece of evidence

That finally tells the truth

The story i was given

Was missing crucial parts

It left out all the history

And removed all the hearts