

Submission to the Inquiry on Forced Adoption in Western Australia
02/06/2023

I am writing to tell my story, as an adopted child of the forced adoption policy. I was raised in a good family, by loving parents and an older adopted brother. My parents were kind enough to tell us we were adopted, I don't remember learning the information, I felt as if I always knew, so they must have told us very young. My parents and my brother looked alike, even though my brother was adopted and they seemed to think alike too. I looked completely different to everyone else in my family, with white blonde hair in a family of brunettes and I seemed to think differently too.

It's hard to describe, being the odd one out, the "black sheep" in the family, but everyone else seemed to just "get" everyone else, whereas I always felt lonely, misunderstood, quiet, emotional... just different. As I grew older these feelings turned to teenage angst and developed into depression, which led to self harm [REDACTED] and soon after, at 17 years of age I decided to try to find my biological parents. I had always had an interest in who they might be, but the drive to find someone who looked like me and thought like me was overwhelmingly important to me. I contacted the Adoption Registry who said I needed my adopted parents' consent before the age of 18 to go on the registry. I didn't feel comfortable asking for it, as my dad had never been comfortable discussing my adoption and I didn't think he would want me to find my biological parents.

The Adoption Registry sent me paperwork on my 18th birthday and as I read through it, the full weight of what I might discover descended on me. What if my mother was raped, do I want to know that? What if she was crazy? What if she still didn't want anything to do with me? Suddenly, faced with the opportunity to find out why I was given up, the fear overtook me and I filed away the paperwork for 3 years, until at the age of 21, I felt ready. Over those 3 years I had moved to another city, studied Buddhism and learned to meditate. Although I was still suffering from depression (which ended up lasting 10 years, from the age of 14 through to 24), I now felt grounded enough to face the truth, whatever it may be.

So I completed the paperwork and returned it to the Adoption Registry, they replied, letting me know it was a lengthy process and may take up to 6 months or more to find information on my biological parents. Two weeks later I received a call back, they had the information I sought, my biological mother had been on the registry for over a decade and had been trying to find me. Panic arose, WAS she crazy? What was I opening my world up to? They asked, "would I like to give a phone number for her to contact me on?" I decided on a safety net and provided the phone number of a friend, and a day and time to call me there.

I went to my friend's house and waited for the phone to ring, it did. I don't remember much about the call, except my biological mother and I were both in tears, we laughed and cried together. She was living in Perth and I had moved away, but we were "peas in a pod" from our first conversation. Buoyed by the experience, we began conversing more regularly and arranged to meet when I next came home to Perth, for Christmas. We met briefly, perhaps only for an hour or so and measured each other up, comparing noses and hands, hair and height. I could see myself in someone else for the first time in my life, finally at the age of 21.

She and I wanted to get to know each other better, but with us living in different states in Australia it wasn't easy. We decided to book tickets to Bali, as it was cheaper for us each to fly there, than it was for either of us to fly to see each other. I took two weeks leave and we found a little fishing

village on the north of the island. We were the only white people there and the locals were bemused by this mother and daughter pair who came to Bali to get to know each other.

Two weeks turned to four, I called my employer at the time and lied about flights back being cancelled and none being available for another two weeks. I wasn't ready to return home just yet, we discovered on our trip that we played with our hair the same way, had the same thoughts and ideas on morality, religion, politics, I had finally found someone who looked like, thought like me, felt like me and I finally understood my place in the world, why I was who I was.

She opened up to me about my adoption, she had fallen pregnant at the age of 17 and her boyfriend, my biological father did not want to keep the baby. Her mother also did not want to keep the baby even though my biological mother did, she was never given this option. The adoption papers were signed by her boyfriend and her mother, never by herself. At my birth I was taken away immediately and she never saw me or held me. She carried the guilt and shame of the adoption with her for the rest of her life (and still does to this day).

I also contacted my biological father, however he had a wife and family and didn't want them to know about me. We met in secret but I didn't enjoy being his shameful secret, so lost contact. Eventually he contacted me and said he had told his wife and family about me and wanted me to meet them, which I did, but I never felt a connection with him and so decided not to remain in touch and lost contact again.

On receiving paperwork from the Adoption Registry I discovered that I was discharged from King Edward Hospital in December 1975, nearly six weeks after my birth. I don't know what those six weeks were like, but I assume I wasn't held much, "touch therapy" didn't exist in those days so I was most likely held to be fed and then left in my crib again for those 6 weeks until my adoption. I will never know how that experience has affected my personality or my development because I don't know any differently.

Similarly, there is no way of knowing how different my life would be if I had been raised by my biological mother. There would have been different difficulties of course, but she and I were never given the chance to find out. I was stolen from her at my birth and grew up feeling alone in the world. I am one of the luckiest adopted people I know, I was raised by loving parents AND found a biological family who helped me feel at home in the world. However that "what if" of what could have been, will always haunt me, as it does her.

What I'm hoping comes from this inquiry is not only an apology, but recognition of the damage done to lives that cannot be undone. A lifting of the shame put upon unwed pregnant mothers and recompense for the lifelong damage done to our collective mental health.