

Relieved to finally have a plan my parents eagerly drove me the 3 hours to Melbourne on the agreed date, settled me in, said goodbye and drove the 3 hours home again. Communication was now via letter and weekly post cards from my younger sisters, regular spaced phone calls and a visit for my 19th Birthday.

Hartnett House was a busy place run by Melbourne City Mission as an unmarried mothers home and orphanage. Pregnant girls like me ranging in age from 14 to early 20's were rostered to work in the kitchen, dormitory or nursery daily and encouraged to go for walks in the surrounding suburbs during afternoon free time. Staff at the house were generally kind and spent time talking to us about the importance of family and the benefits for children of having a mother and a father. Stories about how many loving couples who could not have children were common, as was the reference to how 'lucky' we were that we were young, health and able to get married and have many more children in the future. Stories of 'poor little fellas' still in the orphanage because their 'selfish' mother who could not care for them at the moment would not sign the papers for them to be adopted therefore leaving them at risk of becoming too old and never having the chance to have a 'real family'.

I, like all the other girls, quickly became familiar with the house structure and rules. The absence of someone at mealtime, daily roster duty or free time meant their time had come. No further information was ever given and no questions were allowed to be asked. Their time in the house had ended, they had given birth and therefore no longer part of our group and not allowed to speak to anyone who was still waiting to give birth.

In line with these rules as my due date drew closer I was moved from the dormitory to a single room. At 3 am on the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] I woke having contractions. Fearful and unsure of what to do I went to the nursery knowing a staff member would be there. She asked a few questions, reassured me my time had come but it would be a while yet before I'd have to go to hospital. I was told to go back to my room, keep busy and let someone know when the pain became more frequent or too intense. Other than an occasional visit from a staff member I spent the day either alone in my room or walking around outside but within the boundaries of Hartnett House. At about 3 pm the decision was made that it was time to go to hospital. I was transported to the Royal Women's Hospital in Carlton and left in the care of a nurse who settled me into the almost vacant verandah ward telling me that the doctor would be around soon to examine me. The doctor arrived. He and his group of students/registrars took turns examining me to feel how dilated my cervix was. This was followed by a discussion about me, what was expected to happen next including that my baby was for adoption. I had never told anyone that and they certainly did not seek any input or clarification from me. It was like I did not exist. They soon left me there alone to carry on with their rounds. Shortly after they left I 'buzzed' the nurse telling her I thought my 'water had broken' although doubtful she took a look and exclaimed 'oh hell, we had better get you to the delivery room'. A frenzied level of activity followed to make sure I got there, was prepped, placed in the stirrup and a sheet put in place, so I could not see what was happening, the

nurse explained, before my baby arrived. My son was born at 6.45pm. The nurse told me he was a boy as he had been taken away without me seeing him. I asked to see him and she said he was getting cleaned up. She then stated 'he is going to be adopted isn't he?' I said I hadn't told anyone that he was and that I didn't know what I was going to do. She stated that she had been told he was and therefore I was not allowed to see him. I became distressed and insisted on seeing him, she agreed stating that it was against the rules and she would get into trouble if anyone found out. I was able to hold my son for about 15 minutes before he was taken away again. After that I could view him through the nursery window although that was very difficult as he was always placed at the back of the nursery. I was placed in a ward with other happy married mothers who had their baby's with them at feed times and during visiting hours. My parents visited and we walked to the nursery to look at my baby through the window. They left to go home and I was left alone to watch the happiness having a baby could bring others. I felt watched by those who shared the open ward with me and those who visited them knowing they were wondering why I was treated different to them. As the week when on I spent more and more time behind closed curtains in an attempt to block out what was happening around me, to have some privacy to cry and to create, at least, some sense of safety for myself. On day five I was well enough to return to the home, which I did with my son in the front seat held by a Hartnett House sister, me in the back seat alone.

On arrival back at the house I found my things had been packed up and moved to a room away from the other girls still waiting to give birth. I was told not to go to the nursery and not to speak to anyone about my baby. While I remained in the house I would be on kitchen duty only. My parents let the staff know they would be coming down on the weekend to pick me up, 8 days after my son was born. No one talked to me about what my plans were regarding my son, so I decided I would go home and take some time to think and plan my next steps. On the morning I was leaving, prior to my parents arrival, the sister in charge at Hartnett House (Sister ██████ requested I go to her office to finalise some paper work. When I entered she was sitting behind her large desk and instantly handed me a piece of paper saying 'I thought it would be a good idea if you signed this consent form before you leave. It is a long way for you to come just to sign a piece of paper if you decide to have your baby adopted. You know you have 28 days to think about it and we cannot do anything until that time is up. It will save you the long trip back down here if that's what you decide'. I had no reason not to believe her so I signed the piece of paper.

Less than a week after returning home I made the decision not to give my son up for adoption. I would bring him home and somehow raise him myself. I told my parents of my decision and rang my eldest sister who agreed to drive me to Melbourne to pick up my son. I then rang Hartnett House to tell them I was coming down to pick my son up on the weekend.

The voice on the other end of the phone replied, 'he is not here, you knew that we had an outbreak of chicken pox in the house when you left, so it was decided that we should get as many babies out of the home as we could, we had a couple who wanted to adopt your baby so we let him go'.

Numbness, horror and disbelief overwhelmed me. I remember her asking me if I wanted her to get him back for me. Yes, I said. She said she would ring and let me know when I could pick him up before hanging up the phone.

It was Saturday before she did ring back, stating, 'we have not been able to contact the adoptive parents but we spoke to their maid, who said that they were so excited about finally having a baby they have gone to her mothers for the weekend to show him to the rest of the family. The father is a barrister and the mother is a nurse and cannot have any children of her own so you don't have to worry about him having to compete with their own children. Do you want me to keep trying to contact them?'

Tears rolled down my face as I listened to Sister [REDACTED] Powerlessness, despair and an overwhelming feeling of insignificance engulfed me as I mumbled something along the lines of 'no, let them keep him' before I hung up the phone.

Post forced adoption impact – a lifetime experience:

Again reality of what had happened and how it would change my life was not immediately apparent. I felt devastated and overwhelmed, yet the naïve country girl was still present on some level. I believed what I'd been told by the sisters at Hartnett House, I trusted them and believed that they cared about me so would not do anything to hurt me. I even convinced myself that it was probably for the best. Those stories told to me in the house were hard to forget or not believe. I was an unmarried mother who had no job, money or income, I was unsure how my parents felt or even if they would let me live with them or help me look after/care for my son. The messages about being young and healthy, can marry and have many more children dominated my thinking. My 'mistake' had been taken care of and I had a fresh start. It even felt like I would be being selfish if I didn't make the most of this opportunity.

So my life based on lies and silence began, the naïve county girl soon got lost in the reality of life as a shameful women. An 'unmarried mother', who give her child up to adoption. My identity was now dominated by shame, guilt, powerlessness, fear, secrecy and isolation. The fear of people finding out my secret and the constant wondering what they would think of me, took over my thoughts and actions.

In April 1972 I got married. My husband know about my adopted son however insisted that no one else be told. Our son was born on [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] and I was not allowed to tell any one he was my second child. Doctors, nurses, in-laws, friends were all told the lie. He was my first child. Over the next 4 years we welcomed two daughters into to our family. I had what I'd been told would make me happy, I was married had 3 gorgeous healthy children, financial security and was respected in my community. Yes, I should have been happy but I wasn't. As things unraveled in my marriage, pressure from internal and external sources grew. This pressure led to a joint appointment with a Psychiatrist who requested

that she see us separately for the follow up session. She commenced the session with me by stating that what I was experiencing was emotional blackmail and she believed that I had already left / disconnected from the marriage. About 12 months later I put my 3 children and a few belongings in a car and drove away.

The threats (suicide and homicide), intimidation and controlling behavior continued only coming to an end following a very difficult court process. He had most of the money, our family home, business and all the contents. I had custody of the children and a small amount of money. He had regular access, which I had to contribute half the transport needed for as I had taken the children to another part of the state.

NB. Emotional Blackmail would today be called cohesive control as defined within the context of domestic and family violence.

In August 1983 I married for the second time. Following difficulties related to an ectopic pregnancy we were very happy and excited to welcome our gorgeous health daughter to our family on the ■■■■■. Finally I felt happy and secure in the belief that I had what I had always wanted. A normal happy family, consisting of mum, dad and the kids. However my internal struggles made it harder and harder for me to believe in and maintain this happiness.

The significant difference between this marriage and my previous one was that I was not silenced or controlled. The mistake I'd made at 19 was no longer held over me as a threat or a thing I needed to feel ashamed of. Nor was I reminded of how grateful I should be given he had married me `ever after what I had done ' as my 1st husband did. Sadly, I was now the person maintaining my silence having internalised all the judgements and fear related to others finding out my secret and what they would mean for my family and me.

Slowly, and with the support and encouragement of my husband, I was able to break my silence and began to talk about my experience and stated the long process of unraveling and understand how that experience had changed me and my life journey. This process resulted in me returning to study as a mature aged student to undertake a Bachelor of Social Work Degree at La Trobe University. My first public telling of my story of forced adoptions was when writing an assignment for my Loss and Grief Unit in 1995.

Although very different and much more supportive than my first marriage, my second marriage ended in October 2004.

Finding my son

Throughout the years since losing my son to adoptions I followed the changes that continued to occur in government policy related to accessing information regarding past adoptions. In response to changes made under the 'Adoption Act 1984' and the establishment of the Adoption Information Service I started the process to access information about my son on the 18 December 1987. Hope soon turned to despair on receipt of a reply letter stating,

'Once registered with the agency (Adoption Information Service) my request for information would be dealt with in turn. I would be notified when my turn comes however due to the extensive number of people already register it will be around 7 years before they could attend to my enquiry'.

On the 28 April 1989 I received a letter from the Adoption Information Service letting me know that Community Services Victoria (DHHS today) had arranged for people waiting for assistance to be able to now receive this from the Mission of St James and St John. If I still wished to pursue my enquiry I had to complete the attached form and my file would be forwarded to them. As they indicated the waiting time for a service could be within a month from receipt of my advice I quickly took up this option.

At an interview with a Counsellor on the 24 July 1989 arranged by the agency, the reality of the lies I had been told by Hartnett House staff were exposed. I was given a piece of paper with The Adoption Information Service letterhead, that read:

Information for Suzanne Robbie

Your son, whom you named [REDACTED] [REDACTED] was born on the [REDACTED] at the Royal Women's Hospital in Carlton.

His adoptive parents named their son , which was also the name of the adoptive father.

The adoptive father is a linesman and the mother was engaged in home duties.

The family lived in the South Eastern suburb of Melbourne.

The adoption was finalized at the County Court in Melbourne on the [REDACTED]

The adoptive family are still listed at the 1970 address and will be contacted in the near future.

Even now I have no words to describe how I felt that day. Having my legs ripped out from under me, or being sucked into a large black hole of powerlessness, insignificance and worthlessness, goes some way to describe the feelings present in that moment. Over the years that have past since that day there have been many occasions when the intensity of that moment have been present however I have learned ways to keep it at bay.

Although feeling lost and overwhelmed I did no give up. It started me on what I now call an out of control roller coaster. A roller coaster that bought both hope and despair. Hope when informed that the adoptive father had indicated that further exchange of information and ever photos may be possible. Despair on receipt of a letter from a Social Worker at The Adoption Information Service, stating:

'I have had a letter from (son's) adoptive parents' solicitors. They have passed on two letters for you. One from (son), in which he very briefly stated his situation. Reading between the lines, I think that he is having to cope with his adoptive parents who are feeling very threatened by your interest.

I suggest that perhaps a letter be sent to ..(son) in five years time, after he has been living away from home for a while. He may then find it easier to consider his own needs at that time.

As the years passed the roller coaster continued and emotional detachment became my survival strategy. I would contact the relevant government department, discuss my situations and express my request for contact with my son. Then wait, sometimes days, often weeks, for a response to my request. Sometimes there was no response and I had to pick up the phone and start again.

Finally in September 2014, almost 27 years after my first contact, the years of despair turned to hope. Contact would be made with my son on my behalf I was told, and I would be given copies of file documents such as his original birth certificate, court records pertaining to his adoption and Hartnett House records related to my time in hospital and in the home. All documents that I should have been given in 1989 as part of the counseling interviews I attended then.

Contact was made with my son as both his adoptive parents had passed away and it was felt that the legal request put in place via his adoptive parents many years earlier was no longer a barrier. Thankfully he agreed to contact commencing with the exchange of information via email followed by phone contact and finally a meeting. Seven years later we continue to have regular contact and try to overcome the enormous impact that separation at birth and years of disconnection and hurt has had on our relationship and that of our family members. Emotional detachment is helpful for surviving trauma however it is not unhelpful for developing connection or intimate relationships with family, friends or loved ones. I am still working on this.

Social work practice and personal experience

As stated above I commenced a Bachelor of Social Work Degree as a mature aged student in 1990. I undertook this on a part time basis, worked full time while also being a wife and mother. I successfully completed my degree in 1998. While studying I was fortunate enough to gain employment as a counsellor in alcohol and other drug and sexual assault services. On graduation I continued to work in sexual assault & domestic violence services across NSW for many years before moving to Victoria and taking up positions with Child Protection, Child First and Family Service and various roles within counselling teams based in Community Health Centres. These roles were either as a counsellor/practitioner or as a team leader/manager. For the 10 years prior to my retirement in 2017 I was employed as a Counsellor with Open Arms (previously VVCS), a Department of Veteran Affairs counselling services for veterans and veterans families who have been impacted by their military service.

During my more than 25 years of work as a social worker/counsellor in the mental health and wellbeing field, I had the privilege of hearing many stories of adoption. These stories came from people from all walks of life and were told by individuals both male and female, children, younger people, adults, couples and families. Although their experience of adoption was never the primary reason

for seeking help it quickly became identified as a significant issue or event that had and continued to have, an impact on many areas of their life such as; child birth, parenting, intimate relationships, family conflict or mental health issues i.e. depression, anxiety, stress, alcohol and other drug issues.

My extensive training in interventions focused on addressing the impact of trauma i.e. Cognitive Processing Theory (CPT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Schema, Narrative and Emotion Focused Therapy to name a few. Highlighted and helped my understand my trauma experience of forced adoptions and led me to question the adequacy of government and service providers response to adoption.

As a worker I was also able to explore the knowledge, understanding and individual views of my colleagues in multi disciplinary teams, which highlighted what I already thought. That there was a significant lack of knowledge or understanding of adoption practices. And even less understanding of the impact that result from people's adoption experience. Not just for birth mothers but anyone who had experienced adoption.

My personal and work experience has led me to the belief that forced adoption was government-sanctioned abuse of vulnerable, powerless young women and that the response, to date has been totally inadequate and in fact has contributed to the serious social and mental health impacts experienced by those affected by these policies.

The inadequacy of the response to date is, I believe, two fold. Firstly, is has mostly focused on the detail and practicality of access to information. Who owns or holds the information, who has or hasn't got access to that information and who should or shouldn't have access, consent and confidentiality issues and who is most in need of protection from this information. Secondly, it has lacked or failed to recognise the significant trauma that has been experienced and the impact that trauma has had on people's lives. The process of addressing the traumatic loss experience of birth / natural mothers has to start with an acknowledgment and validation that loss has occurred. The many women like me who were told and had reinforcement the false beliefs that;

1. Parental attachment only occurred at birth therefore denying a mother contact with a child at birth would alleviate the loss experienced.
2. If pregnancy was unplanned or a mistake a loving/caring connection with the child was not real or valid therefore unworthy of a grief / loss experience

Healing can only happen after there is recognition and validation of loss and the associate trauma that has taken place. That recognitions and validation need to also applied to the trauma experienced following the forced adoptions not just to the initial birth event.

This secondary trauma that occurs after the initial birth event is often continuous and ongoing for those experiencing forced adoption. Something that I believe is an associated, compounding lifetime experience of abuse. Trauma that is based in the values, norms and belief held by the society at the time of the initial event / trauma, often generated and perpetuated by society institutions and governments. These norms, values, beliefs and judgement are reflected back and reinforced by the community onto the person seen to have stepped outside what society deems acceptable. Getting pregnant and being a single mother was definitely deemed unacceptable behaviour and therefore worthy of intense judgment, character assassination based around ones worth, value and credibility. This judgement resulted in shame, isolation, a loss of self-esteem or sense worth and an increase in serious mental health issues. How this context contributes to the ongoing trauma experience of forced adoption needs to be recognitions as it also can profoundly impact a persons ability to seek out relevant support services, better understand the impact of their experience, both past and present, and to integrate and recover from the traumatic events – initial and secondary.

Today the importance of societal context is understood in relation to many distressing and traumatic events i.e. sexual assault, domestic violence, child abuse, yet this has not been recognised, knowledge or validated as relevant to the practice of Forced Adoption.

The recent public practice of saying sorry for past wrongs, (Julia Gillard 3/2013) has been helpful to validate individual experiences and challenge the validity of societal beliefs, which sadly continue to be held by some sections of our community however it is only a starting point not an end one. I believe that real healing from the hurt caused only happens when all voices are heard, not silenced. When the true level of hurt, pain and suffering is acknowledged, validated, publicly stated and documented. And those responsible take all steps necessary to right the wrongs, offer reparation and ensure that such practices can never be repeated in the future.