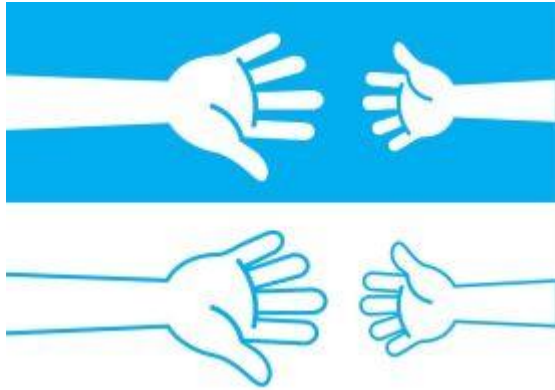


Help adoptees reach first parents

May 12, 2011 by LORRAINE DUSKY



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Ask the man on the street if people who were adopted as babies should be able, as adults, to find out the identities of their original parents, and the typical answer is: Sure, isn't that their right?

Only for the fortunate few. In all states but six -- and New York isn't among that half-dozen -- individuals adopted at birth are still denied the unrestricted right to even look at a copy of their original birth certificates. Without that piece of paper, it's hard to have that longed-for mother-and-child reunion.

Even for infants adopted recently under rules that enabled the surrendering mother to meet the adoptive parents, the right to obtain the original birth certificate is crucial. Yet that all-important document remains locked up because of laws written long ago. The thinking then was that individuals would be secure in their new families and wouldn't need to know where they came from. And with the records sealed, their mothers -- their first mothers -- wouldn't be able to interfere in their lives. Those mothers would grieve in silence and then "forget" these children.

But that simplistic idea of how people are hasn't stood the test of time. Stories about reunited mother and child, or siblings, are in the news precisely because the heart understands what the law ignores: Neither does a mother forget, nor can questions of identity be stilled. They ring deep in the breast, and neither time, nor the love of an adoptive family, can erase them.

In New York, a group called Unsealed Initiative, made up of adoptees and first parents, are lobbying to repeal the 1935 law that sealed the original birth certificates of anyone adopted in this state. I'm one of them -- a woman who relinquished a child in 1966 -- and we've been at this battle for decades. We get so far, and then the bill gets lost in the morass of Albany when the session comes to an end.

This week, New Jersey's Assembly passed a bill giving adopted people the right to know who they are; it has passed the Senate and awaits a decision by the governor. In New York this year we have an energetic sponsor in Assemb. David Weprin (D-Queens). In the Senate, [Velmanette Montgomery](#) (D-Brooklyn) and [William Larkin](#) (R-Newburgh) are sponsors. We have dozens of co-sponsors and, it seems, even enough votes to get the bill passed -- if we can get it to the floor of the legislature before time runs out once again.

It's not that the legislators are mean-hearted people who would simply deny adoptees the right to know who they are. But they persist in thinking that they somehow must "protect" the women who surrendered their children when having a child out of wedlock was coated with shame and humiliation. Even if the state never promised anonymity to these women -- and it did not -- the understanding is that it was an implied promise back then. But that puts government in the untenable position of protecting one group by trampling the rights of another.

The great majority of us not only welcome meeting our children, now grown, but we anxiously hope for it. While some women would choose anonymity, their temporary discomfort and embarrassment are hardly reasons to keep the records sealed in this day and age.

Further, this position doesn't address the issue that all women, whether they wanted anonymity or not, were made party to this unjust pact with the state. If we had to surrender our children to the care and keeping of strangers, we had no choice but to be anonymous. And we have no choice today to undo what has been shown to be hurtful to our children, who are now adults and want medical histories and answers to questions of ancestry.

Another argument for keeping the records sealed is that abortions will go up if mothers cannot relinquish in secrecy and count on it forever. But data from states that allow adoptees to claim their original birth certificates proves this to be false. Abortions do not increase. Nor do adoptions decrease.

Yet no matter what happens to those numbers, they are side shows to the main issue: People adopted as children should have the same rights as the rest of us, that is, to fully answer the question: Who am I? It's only human to want to know.

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