

# Evelyn Robinson

My son was born in Scotland in 1970 and I was persuaded that it would be in his best interests if I agreed for him to be adopted. We were reunited when he was twenty-one years old and continue to enjoy a close relationship.

Although my son was not born or adopted in Australia, I believe that I have a valid contribution to make to the *History of Adoption* project, as I have lived in Australia since 1982 and have been closely and actively involved with the adoption community in Australia since 1989. I know from that interaction that my experience as a single, unsupported mother in Scotland in 1970 was very similar to the experiences of many mothers in similar situations in Australia.

Unmarried women who became pregnant at that time were often encouraged to keep the pregnancy a secret, in order not to bring shame upon themselves and their families. There was a general belief in the community that children would be more likely to reach their full potential if they were raised by parents who were married to each other. Adoption, therefore, was presented as the ideal solution, to remove the shame and disadvantage from both mother and child. It was felt that both mother and child would be given a fresh start by the adoption process.

Like many mothers, I never forgot my son and thought about him often after he was adopted. I always hoped that he would be able to be part of my life again when he became an adult. For many years I did not talk to anyone about the fact that I had had a child who had been adopted, because of my fear that my experience would not be understood. My feelings of guilt and inadequacy affected my relationships and my self-esteem in a negative way.

It was in 1989 that I first contacted a support group for mothers who had been separated from their children by adoption. Sharing my experience with others who had had similar experiences was very therapeutic. I also undertook a period of counselling with a social worker employed there. The counselling was of enormous value and significance in my life. From 1989 until 2003, I worked as a volunteer with the support group. During that time, I also completed a degree in social work. Since completing my degree in 1996, I have been employed as a post-adoption counsellor and educator. I wrote my first book about the long term outcomes of adoption separation in 2000, my second in 2004 and my third in 2009. I know from the contact I have had with those who have read my books that they have been enormously useful to family members who have been separated by adoption, to professionals who work with them and to members of the general community who either have a close association with adoption or who have a general interest in issues of social justice.

Throughout the last twenty-one years, as well as publishing my books, I have been a member of various adoption support organisations around Australia and have presented conference papers, seminars and training and information sessions in every state and territory in Australia (except for the Northern Territory) as well as in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and Romania. I have contributed many articles to a variety of publications, formal and informal, and have been interviewed on many occasions by the media. My aim in all of this work has been to assist those who have experienced adoption separation in their lives and to help to educate the community around the issues which arise from it. Because I am very aware of how much I have been helped to manage the issues which arose from the adoption of my son, I know how important appropriate support and counselling are. I am also aware of how reluctant many mothers are to acknowledge their experience because of the lack of understanding in the community. The secrecy and shame which have accompanied adoption over the years have discouraged many mothers and fathers from acknowledging the children they lost to adoption. I believe that increased community education around the history of adoption and the impact it has had on people's lives is vital to assist all those family members who have been separated by adoption to heal.

I have been involved with many members of the Australian adoption community, as well as professionals working in post-adoption counselling. I have learned from all of them the depth of the loss that is created by adoption separation and the ways in which that loss can be managed. In 1997 I presented a paper at the Seventh Australian Adoption Conference in which I made the connection between disenfranchised grief and adoption. For me, this has been the key to working with those who have experienced adoption separation and I know how useful this concept has been in counselling those who grieve an adoption separation loss. For many whose lives have been affected by adoption separation, the concept of disenfranchised grief as it relates to adoption has assisted them to understand their experience and to find a place for it in their lives.

The conclusion I have reached, after many years of sharing the experiences of those who have been separated by adoption and applying my professional knowledge to the question, is that adoption is not in the best interests of children and should be replaced by more child-centred strategies, to provide the best outcomes for children who are unsafe living with their families of origin.

I believe that the history of my work and the progression of my ideas have contributed to the history of adoption in Australia. I am hopeful that the *History of Adoption* project will contribute to community awareness and understanding of the outcomes for family members separated by adoption and of the need for specific, appropriate services.