

Anonymous Storyteller 18

Following the Adoption Information Act (NSW) of 1990, which for the first time allowed people adopted under the closed-record adoption system in NSW access to their true identities, I was able to obtain hospital records from St. Margaret's Hospital for Women in Darlinghurst, the place where I was born. These noted that, each night for the week I was held there in January 1972, after my immediate removal from my mother's body, I 'appeared satisfactory', although most of these entries were qualified by comments that indicate a certain level of distress in my infant being. On the third of January my entry read 'not sucking well', on the fourth, 'remains slow to feed', on the fifth, 'unsettled and screaming all night – glucose offered with little effect' and on the sixth, 'appears satisfactory although extremely difficult to settle during the night.' On the eighth of January I 'cried most of early night – not relieved by glucose water. Small amount only taken at am feed. Appears satisfactory'. On the ninth, one week after I was born and removed from my mother, I was discharged to St. Anthony's Home for Unmarried Mothers, into the same taxi as my birth mother. 21 days later, the revocation period over, I was adopted out to strangers.

I have often felt that a very modern metaphor for the adoptive experience in Australian society is provided by genetic engineering, as if my body is a cell which has been spliced out of a string of DNA and grafted elsewhere, with completely new connections to which I had to adhere and grow. For this reason I collapse the two terms '*adaptive*' and '*adoptive*' gesturing at an experience much larger than that defined by the legal process of adoption.

For the first twenty or so years of my life I was, but later my original birth certificate informed me my name is, *unofficially*,, my biological mother is and my biological father, as named by, is I discovered that my biological mother had been twenty years old and studying science at the University of Sydney, and my biological father, twenty-two at that time, was studying medicine at the same University, when I was conceived in 1971, in the absence of 's parents at their regular game of Bridge.

The kind of 'accelerated identi-kit' that this unleashed in my life, experienced with the quality of revelation, precipitated a psychological revolution, not the least because I had to reconstruct my whole racial identity. The subject adoptee is not suddenly 'cured', suddenly 'unadopted', but must work to reintegrate all the new elements that spiral out in all directions from these snippets of information, reevaluating their experience of truth and fiction, recasting truths as lies and silences and silences and gestures as truths. The changeling body must start again, from the beginning, a second 'ado/ptive' life, as they reorganize new relationships, and new concepts of relationships, to society and its members, for a second time begin grafting itself onto and into someone new. If this psychological labour of the suddenly self-aware subject adoptee is not managed well, then the result will certainly end up somewhere between confusion and total breakdown. This experience of psychological collapse has been described by such closed records adoptees, as the writer Robert Dessaix, the actor Ian Smith, who plays Harold on Neighbours, Suzanne Chick, the daughter of the writer Charmian Clift, and Shelton Lea of the Darrel Lea family.

My experience as an Australian closed records adoptee meant my subjectivity moved on from the sense of being cocooned within a kind of suspended scaffolding of discourses designed to control and protect me, an unarticulated and thus *invisible* structure around me that yet acted like real walls to reinforce my 'I' as an isolated cell, and worked to detach and keep me detached from any depth of involvement with other human beings, existing as an ego dictated by the wishes of others in control of knowledge about myself, as if the adoptive phenomenon were *part* of my psychological body:

we find little to fear from the biologically decontextualised adoptee,
whose body, in the absence of any known - or, rather, any legally
knowable – origin, can be chopped until it fits a Procrustean fantasy space,
the dimensions of which are shaped by other people's self-delusions.[1|^{#_ftn1}]

From being defined by 'other people's self-delusions', suspended in a 'fantasy space' dictated by society so I seemed to float in stasis, my psychological body is suddenly switched so that I lose all this definition and find myself adrift as an unmoored amorphous subject, in a panic frantically grabbing at the bits and pieces of truth suddenly allowed to me, as a way of 'hanging on' for dear life.

The adoptive phenomenon as part of my identity changed from an interior isolating scaffolding to an exterior spoken, written, and *publicly discussed* aspect of my adult identity, connecting me to other adoptees and, in increased self-knowledge, to other human beings. Is it any wonder the Australian changeling has had little time to do anything else in its motivation to achieve the most basic sense of self?

Is it any wonder the Australian changeling becomes a writer, an actor, an artist, to forestall the madness provoked by the absurdity of growing up within the confines of the closed record adoption system, and then being 'freed' from it?

Just as they had to accept the absurd nature of being declared 'illegitimate', then 'legitimate', then 'illegitimate' and 'legitimate' again, a bastard, or adopted? 'I' am none of these things.

Those who participated in removing newborn babies from their mothers participated in cruelty. But then cultural cruelty is passed down, so one may surmise that those who participated in the widescale removal of babies had been treated cruelly in their own lives within Australian culture. My own baby only ever cries when she feels pain. She is breastfed and I'm always there when she needs me. I'm amazed even today that Western society still insists that its normal for babies to cry. When a baby cries, it is crying for the breast of its mother.

[1|^{#ftnref}] Leonard, Gary. (2001). 'The Immaculate Deception; Adoption in Albee's plays' in Novy, Marianne (Ed.). (2001). *Imagining Adoption; Essays on Literature and Culture*.

