The Reunion of Adoptees and Birth Relatives

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An increasing number of adult adoptees are insisting that they have a constitutionally based civil right to have access to their "sealed" birth records which would reveal the true identity of their natural parents. This study investigated the outcome of 11 cases of reunion between adoptees and birth mothers. The majority felt that they had personally benefitted from the reunion even though in some of the cases the adoptees were disillusioned and disappointed in their birth relatives. There are many reasons why an adoptee feels a need to search for more information on his birth parents or to seek out a reunion; in many cases, the true purpose remains unconscious. It would appear that very few adoptees are provided with enough background information to be incorporated into their developing ego and sense of identity. Feelings of genealogical bewilderment cannot be discounted as occurring only in maladjusted or emotionally disturbed individuals.

INTRODUCTION

In both psychiatric settings and adoption agencies, we have been encountering a number of adopted adolescents and young adults struggling with iden-

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tity problems and an urgent need to find out more about their genealogical background. In some cases they are requesting information that had been denied to them by their adoptive parents, whereas others are already in the process of searching out clues and facts that might eventually lead to a reunion with their birth parents. Some have been adamant in their requests to the adoption agencies about their rights to specific identifying data. The majority of the adoptees have a primary interest in their birth mother, a lesser number in their birth siblings, and an even smaller number in their birth fathers. There has also been an increasing number of birth parents returning to the agencies requesting information about their relinquished children.

In the case of the adoptees who are already in psychotherapy, it is often difficult to dissociate their adoption-related conflicts from their basic emotional problems. There is a consistent pattern that emerges in many of these adoptees, however, which cannot be overlooked. Furthermore, after many of the underlying neurotic conflicts or behavior problems have been worked through, the curiosity about their hereditary background remains unchanged in many of the cases, although perhaps somewhat less intense.

The unanswerable questions these young people ponder over include “What kind of person is my birth mother?”; “Why didn’t she keep me?”; “Does she ever think about me?”; “Did she have any other children?”; “Do I look like her?”; “Are there any hereditary illnesses that run in the family?” A number of adoptees describe how they look about in crowds and social gatherings for anyone resembling themselves, hoping to find a lost blood relative. Others have expressed a fear of an incestual union with an unknown relative.

An increasing number of adult adoptees are insisting that they have a constitutionally based civil right to have access to their “sealed” birth records which would reveal the true identity of their natural parents. The flames of interest are being fanned by the increasing publicity being given to the subject by the media and the imminent possibility of court cases to test the legality of the present policies.

The adoptee activist movement was pioneered over 20 years ago by Jean M. Paton, an adopted social worker who searched and found her original mother when she was 47 and her mother 69. Since then, she has written and lectured regularly on the subject (Paton, 1954, 1960, 1968, 1971) and heads an organization called “Orphan Voyage” with its main office in Cedaredge, Colorado. She feels that “In the soul of every orphan is an eternal flame of hope for reunion and reconciliation with those he has lost through private or public disaster.”

Paton feels that adoptees are always seen as “adopted children” and never attain a true adult status in the eyes of society. Her organization is prepared to assist adult adoptees seek information and in certain cases to locate their natural parents. She has suggested the concept of a “reunion file” whereby information