

Reporting back – Tamara’s story – August 2018

Some time ago I reached out to Adoption NZ desperately needing help navigating the circumstances I found myself in. Amongst their help and wisdom, they asked me if I would like to share my story.

I have searched for this opportunity for a very long time and yet when it finally came, I was for once in my life bereft of words and didn’t know where to begin.

After several rough starts, many cups of coffee, a lot of angst, pain, sadness and anger I followed my auntie’s advice and I wrote for 20 mins a day and somewhere along the way my words came out.

This is the story of Adoption. Or specifically in my case, a step-parent adoption which I now understand some people may call a half-adoption. I have another new term to use since starting this journey two years ago, and that term is “late discovery adoptee”.

My mother gave birth to me in 1975; her heritage is Irish/English and French and my dad is French—he had immigrated to New Zealand from France with his parents and older sister when he was a young boy.

My mother and father lived together and had a relationship that both families knew of – however they had separated by the time of my birth. My mother had been raised in a very strict religion and her relationship with my dad caused great consternation within the religion and her family.

By the time I was two I had lived in 5 different places; Invercargill, Riverton, Australia, Christchurch and then finally on a farm at the bottom of the South Island in a tiny community called Oreti Plains.

My dad had no idea where I was or who I was with. He only knew that he trusted my mum to take care of me and he had a lot of respect for my maternal grandmother. Keeping in mind that fathers had very little rights in those days, he was also treated as an ‘outsider’ or ‘someone who didn’t know the truth’ by my mother’s deeply religious family. My dad had also by that time married another woman and had another daughter – my half-sister.

My mother married my step-dad when I was one and a half. I know because I was in their wedding photos. Up until I was 12/13 years old I believed my step-dad was my dad. I didn’t know any different and I guess when they got married I was told to call him dad.

I remember clearly sitting in our lounge room in I think 1988 being told a story by my mother that felt like fantasy but was in fact my reality. That the person I thought was my dad wasn’t. Apparently a family member had said something to me recently about my ‘real’ dad and my mother was put in the position of having to tell me that my ‘dad’ was not my dad.

At the same time my mother told me my step-dad had adopted me when I was one and a half. I didn’t understand what adoption meant at that point; in fact, I never understood the legal ramifications of adoption at all until I reached my forties. That my step-dad was actually my ‘legal’ dad and my dad was not legally recognized as my father.

When my mother and I had this conversation I remember very clearly being told: “you were chosen” and I was expected to just accept this information and act as if nothing had happened and to be ‘grateful’ that I had a dad. She did tell me my dad’s name and where he was from but that was it – this information however was hugely beneficial as I was able to look my dad up in the phone book myself as a teenager and write to him.

As an adult I questioned my mother and I was told “that’s what we were told to tell adopted children – that they were chosen”. Or; ‘they’ thought it was best if you didn’t know”. I’ve never yet figured out who ‘they’ were.

To this day I wonder now if my dad hadn’t been mentioned by a family member whether or not she would have ever told me. I do know that certain family members did not believe I should have been told and that I should have been raised believing my step-dad was my father. On the other side once word got out there were other family members that took great pains to tell my brothers that I wasn’t their ‘real sister’.

Fast track to age 15 my mother and step-dad were on their 4th separation heading for divorce and I had tracked down my dad; written him a letter – discovered that he had been searching for me and that when he found out by chance where I lived in Invercargill he used to sit outside our house hoping to see me and what I looked like. He also never knew that I had been adopted by my step-parent.

By age 16 I had moved to his home town where he had returned to (from Invercargill) and I was living with him. Nothing was going to keep me apart from my dad. I refused to go home after visiting him the first time so he enrolled me in college and took over my parenting financially and emotionally.

Looking back, I was a wilful tenacious teenager but I think fundamentally I had always known I didn’t really fit in properly in the family dynamic. I was always the ‘different’ one. I fitted in with my dad. There was a connection and bond with my dad that I never had with my step-dad. I don’t say this to be hurtful to the man that raised me from 1½ till age 12-15 – it’s a fact based on my own experiences. I don’t believe you can break a genetic bond. In fact I spent the next 18 years in my dad’s home town where everyone knew me as his daughter and he as my dad. I also started using my dad’s last name hyphenated with my given legal name.

When I was 41 my dad passed away and due to several legal issues relating to his death I was asked to prove my identity and my relationship with my dad. It was at this time that the legal and social ramifications of being adopted really hit home. Up until this point because I knew my dad, had lived with him and been involved in day to day aspects of his life, I had not felt the need to look up my pre-adoption birth certificate or my files.

It was the search for these that led me in desperation to Adoption NZ’s website for help and support and to numerous government organizations in New Zealand. It was also the search for these that exposed the lies I had been told over the years and really showed me how adopted people are treated in New Zealand.

The first shock was discovering I was adopted at nearly 5 years old – not one and half as I had been told all my life. And the actually reasoning behind my adoption was not what I was told either – it was because my last name was different to my younger brothers and mother, and I was about to start school.

I remember getting my pre adoption birth certificate and sitting there with my heart racing thinking ‘this isn’t right’ ‘this wasn’t what I was told’. I had had a different last name for five whole years. Was I ever taught to write this name? Was it ever acknowledged? What was I called around other

people? As a baby/toddler my first name was changed to Tammy because certain family members couldn't pronounce Tamara. So my identity was changed twice by the time I turned five.

The second shock was how I was treated when I requested my birth certificate. In NZ, adopted people need to apply to Births Deaths and Marriages and nominate a designated counsellor who receives your birth certificate first before handing it to you. They are charged with providing you counselling and support. The adoptive person pre-arranges this with the designated counsellor. My counselling session lasted 5 minutes while I'm sitting there in shock looking at the adoption dates because my designated counsellor had arranged to hand over my birth certificate right before an important work meeting she had. I drove home in shock barely registering where I was going.

The third shock was discovering, when I asked for my adoption files to uncover the truth of the dates of the adoption, that I didn't exist in the system. CYF's could not find me and neither could BDM.

In all credit to CYF's there was one lovely adoption lady who searched for 3-6 months for files on me. In the end I had to apply via an affidavit to Invercargill District Court in essence laying out my life story to the Judge stating why I 'deserved' or needed my own personal adoption records/files. I was completely at the mercy of the Judge's decision. My files were eventually granted and the accompanying written words from the Judge hit me to my core. There was no empathy or understanding with them, nor any explanation as to why they were buried in a back room in the Invercargill Court House.

There were no Social Welfare files on me at all, I tried to request these and was told there were none. My mother and step-father simply hired a lawyer and between them the lawyer and a judge my fate and identity/heritage was severed and finalized. Nobody questioned whether this was the right thing for me – my mother and step dad were not interviewed or assessed by social welfare. They simply signed me over to a new 'dad'. With one stroke of a pen my French identity was gone. My right to my French passport was gone. My family in France were gone.

These discoveries have all happened whilst I've been grieving my dad – it has been incredibly difficult as, with all I have uncovered, I feel as if I have lost my dad twice; once in death and once to adoption. He also isn't here to answer the questions that the legal systems have raised for me and I've lost the only bond I've ever felt with a parent. My only consolation is that nowhere on any papers did my dad agree to my adoption or sign me away.

To add to all of this, I have a genetic abnormality or mutation that is a direct 50/50 result of my parents' DNA. This genetic mutation has affected my whole life, resulting in my undergoing open heart surgery. This genetic mutation runs parallel to my dad's hereditary medical history. There are concerning hereditary medical risks within my dad's family – when adoption is not open or files unable to be recovered there is a loss of medical history of the adopted person. In my case, my genetic mutation was life threatening and the hereditary signs of two illnesses are being directly monitored with my daughter through our doctors.

If I had never known about my dad as I think was my mother's plan – these medical hereditary conditions would have never been known about. My birth certificate shows no sign anywhere of an adoption and I would have blindly carried on in life never knowing this information.

NZ birth certificates are changed to reflect the adoptive parent/step-parent as if they are the legal AND biological parent. Everything is set up in the adopted parents favour. Yet it is the adoptee's life

that is affected the most. They are the ones that are severed legally from their true families for life. As are their children and so forth. It creates a legal generational lie.

After undergoing counselling with a psychologist and a counsellor, I learned that the general belief (and one that I agree with having lived it) is late discovery adoptions can create a traumatic shift in the brain, in my case a cataclysmic shift that as a 12-year-old I had no idea how to process. In essence, the axis of my world was turned upside down but the psychological damage wasn't to be apparent for a few years yet.

My life has been sliced in half by decisions that I didn't ask for nor agree with. Very literally the weight and the heaviness of other people's decisions have sat on my shoulders and affected my entire life.

An entire life following me with every step, a life of lies and cover ups, a life of confusion, sadness and questions, this life of course has been intercepted with amazing moments and laughter and fun times – but always, always in the background is the biggest lie and loss – the lie and loss of my heritage. The loss of being able to claim what is rightfully by blood and DNA my history and ancestors and the lie that another person's history and ancestors are my heritage.

I have had no say in my adoption and unlike a marriage/divorce there is no way for me to reverse this, so that I belong to my dad again. I cannot understand a legal system that is happy to have my legal identity tied to someone who is not my blood nor my family. I do not belong to Scottish ancestors I belong to French ones.

For me Adoption was and still is traumatic; it has caused confusion, sadness, unnecessary pain, depression and anger. I have lost my identity and heritage and I have no idea how to get it back.

Adoption has legally stolen my history my heritage and my future descendant's history and heritage.

To borrow the words of the late adoption scholar and activist, Reverend Keith C Griffith:

“Adoption Loss is the only trauma in the world where the victims are expected by the whole of society to be grateful.”

At the moment my daughter and I wait in limbo – every single day – waiting for New Zealand's adoption laws and adoptee's rights to be changed. We research and question, hope and pray for ourselves and other adoptees; so that we can move forward for the rest of our lives free.

Free to belong to my dad, her granddad – free to belong to our blood family and our rightful heritage and legacy – free to breathe knowing we are re-attached to our family and that OUR descendants have their rightful truth, family and heritage.

Together let us make NZ/Aotearoa – The land of the Long White Cloud – one of the most progressive countries in the world with adoption. Let our adopted people breathe under this Long White Cloud free to have the curtain lifted on the secrecy of their adoptions and stories. Free to know their heritage – to not have it denied to them by bureaucracy – to be able to embrace ALL their families present and past and to move forward without the stigma, shame and guilt. Let us be proud of the changes that need to occur and know that we in NZ/Aotearoa are for family preservation.