

# Weeping for Philomena: Reflections of an Adoption Administrator

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**Abstract:** The author, a former adoption administrator, reflects on the movie, *Philomena*, the story of a birthmother's fifty year search for her son taken from her in Ireland and placed for adoption in the United States. Social Justice Issues related to adoption and the author's evolving views on adoption practice are explored. Birthmother and Birthfather rights are discussed, as are issues of sealed adoption records and issues of intercountry adoption. Recommendations for adoption practice and adoption professionals are presented.

**Keywords:** adoption; child welfare; historical reflections; open adoption; social administration; birthfathers; birthmothers

I recently saw the movie, *Philomena* (Frears, 2012), based on Martin Sixsmith's book *The Lost Child of Philomena Lee* (2009). I wept. The official homepage for the movie describes the film as follows:

Philomena is the true story of one mother's search for her lost son. Falling pregnant as a teenager in Ireland in 1952, Philomena was sent to the convent of Roscrea to be looked after as a "fallen woman." When her baby was only a toddler, he was taken away by the nuns for adoption in America. Philomena spent the next fifty years searching for him in vain. Then she met Martin Sixsmith, a world-weary political journalist who happened to be intrigued by her story. Together they set off for America on a journey that would not only reveal the extraordinary story of Philomena's son, but also create an unexpectedly close bond between them.

The film is a compelling narrative of human love and loss and ultimately celebrates life. It is both funny and sad and concerns two very different people, at different stages of their lives, who help each other and show that there is laughter even in the darkest places. The book *The Lost Child of Philomena Lee* was published in 2009. It acted as a catalyst for thousands of adopted Irish children and their 'shamed' mothers to come forward to tell their stories. Many are still searching for their lost families (*Philomena*, 2012).

I suspect that many people in the theater had tears in their eyes by the end of the movie, but my emotion came from a different place than that of many of my fellow movie goers that day. My emotions came from my experiences as a social worker, a former adoption administrator, and now a social work educator. At the end of the film, Philomena discovers that her son is dead. In one of the final scenes, she goes to visit the grave of her son who was taken from her so long ago. It took me back to the most difficult day I have experienced in a forty plus year career as a social worker.

I was the administrator of an adoption agency that had been in existence for over 100 years by the time I became its Executive Director. At the time, over 5000 children had been adopted through the agency. Over the years, the agency's adoption practice had moved to more openness, and part of our post adoption services was to facilitate reunions between birthparents and the children they had placed for adoption.

One day, the social worker responsible for post-adoption search and reunion cases appeared at my office door. From the look on her face, I knew this was not going to be good news. As we sat at my conference table, she began to tell me about one of her cases. She had been contacted by a woman who had placed her child for adoption through our agency twenty-five years ago. I will call her Suzan. After much agonizing, Suzan had decided that she would contact our agency in hopes of having a reunion with her child. When the social worker went into the ancient stack of adoption records, she discovered a terrible truth. The child had been

placed for adoption but had died at eight months old. Obviously, Suzan was never given this information. I felt sick.

We had to make a decision about how to tell her this terrible news that had been withheld from her for so long. We decided that I would go to Suzan's home and tell her the truth about her son. The only thing I had to give her was a small black and white photograph of the baby she had thought about for the last twenty-five years. The little picture was one of those that had an ink line border suitable for putting into the family scrap book. This picture had been buried in our files along with the secret of his death for over two decades. I would give the picture to his mother. Dreading hearing her voice, I called and asked if I could come to her home and meet with her. We agreed upon a time that I could come to see her.

My wife accompanied me as I drove the long distance to keep the appointment that I was dreading so much. We had set the appointment for 12 noon. As we pulled up in front of the small, well-kept frame house, we waited for Suzan to arrive. She had scheduled the appointment so she could come home on her lunch hour to meet with me. As she pulled into her driveway, I got out of my car to greet her. As my wife waited in the car, I sat down with Suzan in her living room.

We started with the pleasantries. Her work, how long I had been at the agency – small talk. I learned that she had never married and never had another child. The decision to search had come slowly to her. She said she had never wanted to cause any discomfort for the family or to disturb the stability of her son's family. The time had come. I had to tell her.

I told her that her son was placed for adoption on the fifth day after his birth. The home visit records indicated that he was a healthy and happy baby but, at eight months old, died in his sleep. Crib death was the official cause of death. I handed her the tattered black and white photo of the most precious thing in her life and watched as the tears rolled down her cheeks. She did not sob but silently absorbed what I had told her. Once she could speak, she told me that she knew what I was coming to tell her. “The President of the agency does not come to

tell you good news,” she said. Of course, she was right about that. I told her that she had a perfect right to be angry with the agency and that I was so sorry for her loss and the fact that she had never been told of the death of her child until now.

Like *Philomena*, in the movie, she was not angry. I was. How could our agency with such a long history of service and compassion be so callous as not to tell a woman that her child had died? How could members of our profession based on principles of social justice not do what seems to be the only ethical course of action. The only charitable explanation is that it was a different time and place, a place of adoption secrecy, and they thought they were doing the kindest thing to keep this terrible news from her, in the belief that she would never find out the truth. I had to remind myself that when this adoption was completed, it was an era of closed adoption in an environment built on a fantasy view of adoption.

### **My Journey in Adoption Practice**

My own view of adoption evolved over time. When I first became involved in adoption practice, secrecy was the norm. All of us involved in adoption practices went to great lengths to be sure that birthparents and adoptive parents were unknown to one another and that the child would have no details of their birth story or their birth families. There was something about secrecy in adoption that kept gnawing at me. Where else in social work, or any helping profession, did we believe that secrets were a good thing? Adoption practice seemed to be the outlier. I did not see it as clearly then as now, but over time, I came to believe that the root of my problem with adoption practice was that it was based on secrecy and what I came to call the fantasy myth of adoption.

The change was slow. Adoption workers from other agencies began to share stories of “de-identified” letters being shared between adoptive families and birth families. Some were going as far as to facilitating meetings between birthparents and potential adoptive parents. Of course, names were not shared as it was thought to be important to maintain secrecy.

The final push toward openness occurred when my staff and I attended an informational meeting

presented by the Open Adoption Center of California. The Executive Director, Dr. Bruce Rappaport, talked about the factors at work in keeping adoption secret and his belief that adoptions should be open. In his definition, that meant that birthparents and adoptive parents were fully known to each other and, in fact, that the birthparents had the right to choose the adoptive parents for their child. Furthermore, he advocated that there be ongoing relationships between the adoptive parents, birthparents and the adopted child. Radical stuff! I was all in. I told my staff that we were going to change our model of practice to that presented by Dr. Rappaport. It was not a hard transition for the staff. They were on the same path as I in believing that there was a need for more openness in the adoption process.

It was not as easy for the board of directors. Many of the board members were adoptive parents, and the idea of open adoption was seen as a direct threat to their experiences with adoption in a very personal way. There was some strong opposition, and one board member resigned in protest. But in the end, the majority of the board saw the justice implications of a new way to think about adoption practice. I am proud that we were the first traditional adoption agency in the area to make the transition to a fully open adoption model of practice.

### **Closed Adoption and a Fantasy View of Adoption**

A great deal has changed in adoption practice over the past several years. In many adoption agencies, secrecy is a part of their past as they have, also, moved to open adoption practice where the birthparents, adoptive parents and adopted children are all known to one another. There were several predominant themes of the closed adoption era during which remarkable measures were instituted to keep the involved parties in a state of 'not knowing' (Watson & Granvold, 2008). For many years, I was a part of that system to keep the parties to adoption in a state of 'not knowing.' While adoption practice has changed, a veil of secrecy still exists in some adoption practice today. For change to occur in adoption practice, it has been necessary to challenge the fantasy myth of adoption. The fantasy view of adoption promotes the concept that all parties are abundantly happy. The young, beautiful couple adopts a beautiful baby who grows up happy and well adjusted. The birthparents go on

with their lives and put the unfortunate unplanned pregnancy behind them. The adopted person considers the adoptive parents to be the 'real' parents and never has a desire to seek out his or her birthparents.

The adoption experience is much different from the mythical fantasy view. For every couple overwhelmed with joy upon the arrival of a new baby, there is a birthmother, sometimes birthfather, birth grandparents and extended family grieving over the loss of a child. For many, it is a grief experience that can only be compared to the grief associated with the death of a loved one. Children adopted as infants often grieve for the loss of their birth families throughout childhood and as adults. Likewise, many adoptive parents who have endured years of infertility treatment and repeated disappointments in trying to achieve pregnancy grieve the loss of their dream of having a biological child (Watson & Granvold, 2008).

Since our agency was associated with a religious denomination, I would often invite local ministers in to perform a dedication ceremony on the day that the child was placed with the adoptive family. In the closed adoption days, this was a matter of me, or the adoption staff, presenting the child to the adoptive parents. Once the change was made to open adoption, the ceremonies took on a much different flavor since it was the birthparents, not the adoption staff, presenting the child to the new parents. After one of the placement ceremonies, the minister was visibly shaken. "How could so much joy and so much sadness exist in the same space?" he said. His comments highlighted my belief that one of the things that open adoption does is trust the parties of the adoption with the reality of adoption and its associated grief and joy.

The motives undergirding the adoption myth were protective and based on the belief that it is best for all concerned that adoption procedures be closed now and forever. In this system of closed adoption, it was thought that birthparents could experience closure and generate a new beginning. Adoptive children could experience family life just as children born into families and adoptive parents could parent as if the child had been born to them.

Of course, this was not reality. Our agency operated

a maternity home and in the deepest days of secrecy (and shame) young women left their homes and came to the maternity home to hide their pregnancy and place their baby for adoption. Many birthmothers from that era have said that they were told, "Now go home and never think of this again. Get on with your life as if nothing happened." I would often speak at Churches around the state, and it was a common occurrence for a middle age woman to come up to me and tell me that she placed a child for adoption through our agency. One day as I stood at the back of the Church greeting the worshipers as they left, a woman in her 50s approached me to say that she had placed her child through us over 30 years ago. As she looked into my eyes, she said. "I have thought about that child every day of my life since then." I believe this is more likely the experience of birthmothers. Despite the admonition to do so, they cannot forget this significant event in their life and the baby they placed with another family.

Another conceptualization inherent in the propagation of the adoption myth was that the parties involved were flawed (Rappaport, 1992). As a consequence, these flawed parties needed protection from one another. The adoptive parents were seen as flawed because of their infertility. These 'barren' people were in need of the protection of an elaborate adoption system, where they could be studied and evaluated for their worthiness to have a child while being shielded from the emotional costs of adoptions. It was as if adoptive parents who had endured fertility should not be subjected to the reality of birthparent pain. Birthparents were considered flawed due to their 'immoral behavior' of pre-marital sex or their incapacity to care for a child economically or emotionally. Even the children of adoption were viewed as flawed due to their being labeled illegitimate (Watson & Granvold, 2009).

Not only did constituent parties promote the myth, professionals promulgated it. The task of the adoption system and adoption workers was first and foremost to protect the adoptive parents and the adopted child from the birthparents (Rappaport, 1992). To do less would have been an acknowledgement that there is not only great joy in adoption but also great pain, grief, and loss. Social Workers and attorneys played major roles as keepers

of the myth. Through a system of closed adoption, social workers created and maintained policies and practices based on secrecy and denial. In closed adoptions, most decisions were made by the professionals, not by the adoptive or birthparents. Power and decision making control were retained by the professionals. All information about the adoptive triad was held private and confidential, and contact between adoptive parties was disallowed before, during, and after the adoption (Rappaport, 1992). Adoption practice developed as a way to protect the 'flawed parties' in adoption from one another.

After the transition to open adoption, there was a joke that we didn't get flowers and cookies anymore. In the days of secrecy, it was very common for adoptive parents to send small tokens of their appreciation to the staff after their adoption was completed. It was as if, we, the adoption workers, had given them their child. In open adoption, the gratitude of adoptive parents was redirected to its proper place: the birthparents who had given them the child they had dreamed of for so long.

The fantasy view of adoption was maintained, not only by adoption practice but also by laws mandating that adoption records be sealed. In this system, birthparents were expected to legally relinquish their parental rights to the adoption agency. Agency professionals would then place the child with a couple deemed by the agency to be sound citizens, potentially capable parents, and a good match for the child. The agency maintained adoptive parent anonymity from the birthparents and safeguarded records that would reveal birthparent identity. This anonymity insured that birthparents would remain unidentified, unseen, and, most importantly, uninvolved. Adoptive couples typically had great loyalty to the agency from which they had received the child, not to the anonymous and unseen birthparents (Watson & Granvold, 2009).

In most states within the United States even the adopted person's birth certificate validates the fantasy. When the adoption was legally finalized, the original birth certificate was sealed by the court and a new birth certificate was issued with the adoptive parents listed as the parents. The fantasy had become, at a minimum, a *paper reality*. Subsequently, court records were sealed and agency

adoption records filed away along with the identities of the child and the birthparents.

### Challenges to Secrecy and the Myth

For many who work in the field of adoption, including myself, the fantasy view of adoption could not be maintained. The pain and grief is all too real. Any illusions that I had about adoption were dispelled by the birthmother who told me that thought about their child every day. At one point in the film, *Philomena* says that she has thought about her son every day for over 50 years. She was expressing the view of thousands of birthmothers who have placed their children for adoption and many that expressed that same sentiment to me.

Another milestone in my evolving thinking about adoption practice occurred when I was listening to a debate between two adult adoptees about open records. One of the debaters took the position that the records should be sealed and that the secrecy of adoption was a good thing for all of the parties involved. The other debater who was on the side of openness and of open records looked into the audience and said, “who are you as social workers to keep my identity and my information from me?” I thought it a fair question. She was asking the question that other adult adoptees had started to ask in many different ways. It was this incident that made me question the validity of secrecy as the bedrock of adoption practice. Indeed, who did we think we were to keep people's life information from them? Who were we to protect people from the real emotions of their adoption experiences?

In the late 1970s and early 1980s adult adoptees began to speak out publicly regarding the impact of the adoption system on their lives. At the same time, many women and some men who had relinquished their children for adoption began to speak out against a system they had come to see as oppressive and unjust. These constituencies would no longer remain silent, and both adoptees and birthparents became more aggressive in seeking out one another. Birthparents also began to speak out and to organize themselves into advocacy groups. Adult adoptees and birthparents began to search for one another in record numbers.

The popular media has been a major influence in changing the social construct of adult adoptees and

birthparents. Search and reunion stories of adoptees and their birth relatives are common themes often featured in books, newspapers, magazines, daytime television dramas and talk shows. Movies in popular release also have been built on an adoption search and reunion story line. The adoption theme, particularly the theme of searching for birthparents, has emerged as a compelling human-interest story and has inspired myriad novels, plays and movies (Wegar, 1997). *Philomena* is the latest in this tradition.

In the early 1970s, the effort to reform sealed records laws and agency practices was spurred by two influential autobiographical accounts of the psychological effects of the sealed records policy: Florence Fisher's (1975) *The Search for Anna Fisher* and Betty Jean Lifton's (1975) *Twice Born: Memories of an Adopted Daughter*. The movement to open sealed adoption records continues on today. Alabama, Alaska, Oregon, Kansas, New Hampshire Maine and Rhode Island are the only U.S. states where adult adoptees have unrestricted access to their own original birth records (Bastard Nation, 2014, Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2007). The legislature in New Jersey is currently considering an open records bill.

The social construct of those seeking their birth information has changed over time. Seeking to find one's birthparents or offspring was often perceived as symptomatic of underlying pathology (Wegar, 1997). *The Adoption Triangle* (Sorosky, Baran & Pannor, 1979), written by a psychiatrist and two social workers, concluded that “taking a child from one set of parents and placing him/her with another set, who pretend that the child is born to them, disrupts a basic natural process. The need to be connected with one's biological and historical past is an integral part of one's identity formation” (p. 67). In a study of the effects of open adoption, Siegel (2003) emphasized those proponents of open adoption stress that knowledge of one's genealogy, ethnic heritage, and medical background are crucial to the adoptee's well-being both emotionally and physically (Campbell, Silverman, & Patti, 1991; Curtis, 1986; Silber & Martinez Dorner, 1990). In clinical and popular literature, the desire to search is no longer perceived as unreasonable or as symptomatic of underlying pathology. Today, a lack of interest in one's biological origins is often viewed

as a sign of repression (Wegar, 1997).

### **The Look of Secrecy**

I am very proud of in my work as an adoption administrator and that I was one of a team of professionals that transformed our agency from a system of closed adoption to a system of open adoption. Even many years after we had made the transition to an open adoption model, I was often surprised at the vestiges of secrecy that pervaded our environment. The agency was established in 1895 by the madam of a famous brothel in San Antonio, Texas. The founder, Mrs. Volino, was converted to Christianity during a revival and shortly after her conversion gave her house, the former brothel, to the Church as a refuge for young women wanting to leave a life of prostitution. Apparently, it was a short step from being a shelter for prostitutes to being a home for unwed mothers and then to becoming an adoption agency to place the children of unwed mothers.

In the late 1960s, the agency moved from Mrs. Volino's house to its current location on a 20-acre campus. Even years after moving to an open adoption practice, there were still remnants of the age of secrecy. Often the loud speaker throughout the campus would blast the announcement, "attention residents – there are visitors on campus from Lubbock" (or any town). After several years of enduring this annoyance, I thought to ask some of the senior members of the staff why we did this. The answer was that it was to alert the women in the facility that there might be people on campus from their home town and that, if that were the case; they were to go and hide in their rooms until the visitors had left campus. Young women in residence were also confined to their quarters when there was an adoption ceremony taking place on campus. It was of paramount importance to protect the identity of the adopting parents. Secrecy and shame were closely related concepts.

Another incident was indicative of the lengths to which the staff would go in days past to maintain complete secrecy. The architecture of the main building was such that there was a side entrance to the adoption program area. Just outside the side door there was a parking space with a sign that said, "Reserved for the Director of Adoptions." One day I teasingly said to the Director of Adoptions, "So

why is it that the Director of Adoptions has a reserved parking spot while I, as the Executive Director, do not have a reserved parking spot?" The answer was that it was not, in fact, his reserved spot but in earlier days, new adoptive parents were told to park in that spot so they could be near the door on adoption placement day and could get out of the building and off the property quickly. In fact, for many years they were told to cover the license plates on their car (perhaps with a corn chip bag), to avoid being identified.

### **Where is the Birthfather?**

Where was the birthfather in Philomena's story? She speaks of him, but there is no mention that he had any connection to his child. This is not surprising, especially fifty years ago when Philomena's child was born. Even today, birthfathers are often viewed in negative terms. Stakeholders in the adoption process, including social workers, sometimes see birthfathers as a "nuisance to be avoided and seek to minimize or eliminate the participation of the birthfather in the adoption decision and process" (Finley, 2002, p. 2). Too often birthfathers are the "forgotten fathers" of the adoption process (Clapter, 2001). An example of this negative view of birthfathers is evidenced in the following statement on an adoption agency website. The Lifetime Adoption Center website (n.d.), characterized birthfathers as follows.

Birthfathers who stand in the way of what is best for the child, be it adoption or being a true father, are nothing more than "sperm donors." They just want to have a good time, and then when a woman becomes pregnant and tries to do what is right in her mind by choosing adopting, he puts up a road block. A woman in this position is fearful and often faced with a birthfather that is simply not going to cooperate. Most of these men are not working, have a history of abuse or substance abuse and have no intention of supporting the child. They want to know the "kid" is there if they want to see "it" someday, maybe someday, often never. They see kids from different women as trophies, validating they are able to produce, not realizing it takes so much more than sperm to be a Father and Dad to a child.

Mason (1995) stated that "the birthfather continues to be the least represented, least considered and least

heard in adoption literature, conferences and advocacy efforts” (p. 29, cited in Freundlick, 2001, p. 87). The consensus seems to be that birthfathers are uninvolved and unconcerned about planning for their children. Research, however, indicates that multiple factors determine the level of birthfathers' involvement in planning for their children. Deykni (1988) found that just over 50% of birthfathers did not participate in the decision making for their child and that 64% had no contact with the child prior to the adoptive placement. The sample for this study was birthfathers identified through post-adoption support and advocacy groups. The factors found to be associated with an absence of birthfather involvement were pressures from their families, a poor relationship with the birthmother, financial issues, and the attitudes of adoption agencies (Freundlick, 2001, p. 89).

In *Out of the Shadows: Birthfathers' Stories*, Mason (1995) stated that perceptions of birthfathers have been influenced by several myths. A common popular belief is that birthfathers are not as connected to their children as are birthmothers. Mason's interviews revealed not an absence of connection but a feeling of uncertainty regarding their role. Birthfathers also expressed the belief that biologically, they had fewer rights to the child than the mother. The second major belief she identified was the belief that birthfathers are uniformly unaccountable, irresponsible, and absent during and after the pregnancy. Her findings were that birthfathers had ongoing thoughts and concerns about their children. She found that to some extent a lack of involvement was associated with the practice of adoption agencies to discourage birthfathers' involvement (Watson & Cobb, 2012).

In recent years, there has been legislation to limit the rights of birthfathers in planning for their children. The movement to establish putative father registries is done under the guise of protecting birthfather rights.

A less charitable view suggests that (Franklin, 2009):

Putative father registries are clever little devices designed by state legislatures to avoid notifying single fathers when their children are about to be adopted. That

way, adoptions proceed more smoothly without the inconvenience of a father asserting his parental rights. Basically, a single man must file a form with the state claiming paternity of any child he believes may be his. He has to do so within a certain time frame, usually within 30 days of the child's birth. Failure to do so waives his right to notice of an adoption or the right to contest same (p. 3374).

### **An Intercountry Adoption**

Philomena is a story of the intercountry adoption. The child, born in Ireland to Philomena, is adopted by an American family. She wonders if he has any knowledge of his Irish heritage. In the story, she sees a picture of her son wearing an Irish lapel pin on his suit jacket. She learns that her son had always been proud of his Irish heritage and, in fact, requested that he be buried in Ireland. This scene highlights the importance of preserving an adopted child's birth culture. Some critics claim that children adopted internationally are denied their rights because intercountry adoption fails to protect the child's right to a nationality, to know and be cared for by his or her parents, and to preserve his or her identity (Smolin, 2007).

Intercountry adoption is a big part of the environment of adoption practice in the United States today. Scholars stress the importance of the Second World War in taking U.S. adoption in the new direction of intercountry placements. After 1945, denominations, including Lutherans, Catholics, Seventh Day Adventists, and others formed organizations including the League for Orphan Victims in Europe (LOVE) and the American Joint Committee for Assisting Japanese-American Orphans. International adoption grew slowly until the 1990s, and then it increased rapidly in many western countries. Placements peaked worldwide in about 2004 and have since declined due to changes in international and domestic law and to political controversy in some countries (Watson & Cobb, 2012; Selman, 2012)

### **Lessons from Philomena**

Adam Pertman (2014), Executive Director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute reflects on the movie in his blog column *Big Lessons that Transcend the Movie: There Are Philomenas All*

*Around Us* and states that Philomena is more than a glimpse in the past. There are thousands of women (and men) who have lived the life of Philomena after placing their children in closed adoption arrangements. It is sad but true when Pertman says, "Perhaps most unsettling, both because some of the stigmas remain and because adoption policy and practice have not yet progressed sufficiently, more Philomenas are being created every day." He goes on to list several "takeaways" from the film. The film makes the powerful point that "shaming or coercing parents into parting with their children or, worse, removing their children without consent, inflicts profound and lasting psychic wounds." Adoption decisions should be informed decisions. "Women and men who consider adoption for their children should be able to understand all of their options beforehand, so that they make genuinely informed decisions and should receive pre- and post-placement counseling and support. Adopted people have the right to know from where and from whom they came."

### Conclusions

As adoption professionals, as social workers and social work educators, we must do more than weep for Philomena and the thousands like her and her son. We must resolve to continue on the path to combat the fantasy view of adoption and the myths that persist around adoption and adoption practice. In short, we must take seriously our obligation to promote social justice. The following principles from the code of ethics are of particular import when considering social workers' ethical responsibilities (NASW, 2008):

Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers' social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice. These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people.

Social workers practicing in the area of adoption have a tremendous responsibility to provide the best possible services to their clients. Few areas of social work involve relationships as complex of those relationships among the parties in the adoption triad.

Weeping is not enough. We must promote openness and transparency in adoption practice. We should join the fight with adult adoptees to open their birth records and we should be as concerned with birthfathers' rights as we are for birthmothers' rights. In the area of intercountry adoption, we should advocate for children to know and value the cultures of their birth countries and to assure that birthparents in other countries are not exploited but are protected in making informed and voluntary decisions for their children. Our first obligation should be to provide the support that birth families need, both in the US and abroad, to stay together and when that is not possible, we should do all we can to assure that social justice is the guiding principle in adoption practice.

Suzan had only one final request from our agency. Like Philomena, she wanted to visit the grave of her son. One of our adoption workers stood with her as she said goodbye to her son for the second and final time. Like Philomena, she showed us poise and grace in the face of the injustice that I believe our agency had inflicted upon her.

My reflection is the story of my evolving view of adoption within the context of changing adoption policy and practice. I am an adoption advocate. I believe that it is the best and wonderful option for many children and for many birthparents. It is a joy for the thousands of families that have built their family through adoption. I also believe that it must be done with the best interest of all the parties of the adoption in mind and that social justice, not secrecy, must be our founding principle. Weep with me for Philomena and Suzan, but work for justice so others will not suffer the injustices that they and others have suffered.

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