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Coming of Age: Toward a Spirituality of Adoption - AAC - 1996

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Coming of Age: Toward a Spirituality of Adoption

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This presentation is entitled Coming of Age: Toward an Authentic Spirituality of Adoption. Through references to history and fiction, literature and legend as well as personal experience I hope to propose what I perceive to be the core issues in adoption: the experience of Loss, the nature of Belonging, the acknowledgement of Anger, and an evaluation of Dualism which I view as the philosophical foundation of closed adoption. In so doing I hope to invite you, triad members as well as adoption professionals alike, to consider where you stand on our shared journey and desired destiny for adoption reform. For can there be any doubt that we need to reform? A reform which has as its ultimate goal the dignity of the human person. A dignity which is born from an acknowledgment of truth, an openness to the facts of life in general, as well as an openness to the facts of an individual's life. A dignity born of an acknowledgment of the integral union of body and soul. Coming of Age in the adoption reform movement is really no different than any coming-of-age. It demands the courage to strive to embrace an authentic existence. We will have come of age, I would submit, when we can say with the likes of Thomas Jefferson: "there is no truth existing which I fear or (that I) wish unknown to the whole world."

By way of introduction my name is Tom Brosnan. I am a Roman Catholic Priest of the Diocese of Brooklyn, New York, where I presently live and work with Korean Catholics. I am no psychologist, pastoral counselor or social worker; in other words, I am no expert. My remarks come essentially from my experience concerning my own adoption. I offer these remarks as a 'confession' of sorts, as a glimpse of one man's journey which hopefully will resonate with some aspect of your own.

The theme of this conference is "Coming of Age." Now, doesn't that sound a bit titillating? Do you think there might be some sexual undertones here, or is it just the Brooklyn in me seeping out? Coming of age is about maturing, and at 18 years old (which the AAC is this year), the maturing process is profuse, not so much with sense and sensibility, but more I think with sex and sensuality.

I have to admit though I feel a bit threatened by all this talk about sex - after all, I'm a priest, and more particularly, I'm a good adoptee. I best call for support. I know, I'll invoke someone respected and noted for a more puritanical outlook. St. Augustine are you there? There's a name some associate with a repressive sexuality. But Augustine, if he was anything, was honest. Listen to what he has to say about his own coming-of-age in his Confessions of some sixteen hundred years ago: "During my sixteenth year one day at the public baths my father saw signs of active virility coming to life in me and this was enough to make him relish the thought of having grandchildren."[i]

I'm going to leave it to your imagination what Augustine could possibly have meant by "signs of active virility coming to life," but simply let you know that Augustine was able to give his father that desired grandson, illegitimate though the boy was. Augustine named his bastard son, Adeodatus, meaning given-by-God. And perhaps it was the boy's early death that caused what some have perceived as a deep restlessness to settle on Augustine. It is no doubt because of Augustine's desire to be truthful to himself that we know of his illegitimate son and of the boy's mother with whom Augustine lived for many years. Strange though, that in all his many writings, Augustine never mentions her name: birthmothers and confidentiality, it seems, have a long association. I'd like to suggest to you today that as hard as you might try you just can't get around the fact that both the process of coming-of-age and that of adoption are about sex.

A little background check might be pertinent here. The scenario I present is not an uncommon one, especially in this room, though it has its unique twists and what might be called tricks of grace:

A young woman leaves her widowed mother, who after her husband died had to support her two children by working as a domestic. Living with her strict mother in the servants' quarters of a physician's home in suburban Philadelphia, the young woman finally escapes, in a manner of speaking, and journeys to Baltimore where her older brother, the apple of her mother's eye, is a Jesuit priest. The young woman gets a job and is introduced to a boarding house connected with the Peabody Conservatory for Music. Since most of the students are male, the boarding house landlady needs another female boarder to even out room assignments. The young woman and her roommate, Sophia, become fast friends. During the academic year, in 1952, the young woman and her roommate are part of a group of friends from that same boarding house. The young woman falls in love with a handsome music student from Toronto. As the semester ends, after her boyfriend has gone home to Toronto, the young woman discovers she is pregnant. At first she tells only her roommate her secret. Later she travels to Toronto to ask, to plead, but the young man says he cannot, he will not marry her. She returns and confides her dilemma to another music student from the boarding house. This gallant young man from Virginia offers to marry her. No doubt very confused and very desperate, she says yes. The boarding house gang throw her a bridal shower, though no one knows she is pregnant, save her roommate Sophia. The young woman and the gallant Southerner, for some unknown reason, call the wedding off within a few weeks. The young woman confides in her brother, the priest, who arranges for her to go to a Catholic maternity home in New York City. On January 10, 1953 at Misericordia Hospital, then located in Manhattan, she delivers her baby into the world. Shortly thereafter the young mother relinquishes her son into the closed adoption system. Within a period of one year the young woman has left job and home, friends and family, she has given birth, courted, married, and become pregnant with her second of seven children.

I was placed in foster care with an Italian family named Vesciano who lived in Queens, New York. After six months I was placed in my Irish adoptive parents' home in Brooklyn and adopted within the year. I grew up in Brooklyn, an only child, living in a row house with my parents and my mother's parents. After 33 years I decided to search and was able to find my mother and her family here in Baltimore. My mother died two years ago and today I have returned to her favorite city of Baltimore to deliver this address to you. Maybe coming-of-age means something like coming-full-circle:
"We shall not cease from exploration,"
T.S. Eliot said so well,
"And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive at where we started
And know the place for the first time."[ii]

Reading about Augustine's coming to life in the public baths reminded me of a dream I had a while ago, which left a deep impression on me. In my dream I was in a bath house of sorts. It was steamy-hot and there were several whirlpools of hot, sudsy water swirling around. The floors were marble but slippery with a gloss about them. Somehow I knew if I entered the whirlpool I would be sucked right down through the vortex. I felt a sense of dread, but also adventure, a certain exhilaration, an excitement, as I decided to enter one of the whirlpools and felt myself going round and round, down and down, as if in a tunnel, speeding toward a veiled light. Then, I woke up, I came to. If you ask me what my dream was about I would have to say, at the risk of you thinking me a bit strange, that that night I believe I dreamt of my own conception. I witnessed through the detachment which dreams afford the wonderful workings of reproduction; the mysteries of nature and divine design, still incomprehensible. I saw my own self, somehow present in the sticky adhesiveness of the stuff of life, riding the whirlpool of physical generation through the intercourse of sperm and egg, exploring the complimentarity of yin and yang, the coincidence of opposites.

It is not so important in regard to this talk whether or not that was indeed the dream's objective meaning, if that makes any difference; but rather, to understand that this was my interpretation of the dream. It is significant because it was a counterpoint to my experience as an adopted person until then. Many adoptees often express difficulty accepting the sexual origins of their existence. As a boy I would watch Superman reruns everyday. It was a ritual of sorts, turning on the TV and secretly hoping they would replay the very first episode when the infant Superman lands on earth, ejected from far away Krypton, only to be found in an open field by the kindly Kents. Adoptees often feel to be literally alien-ated. We feel like aliens from another world because we do not see ourselves as born. My dream, or at least my interpretation of it, came as a great relief and a wonderful revelation. It confirmed that I was conceived, that I was the result of a real union of sperm and ovum, and that I was therefore born into this world. These two facts of life are precisely facts because they can be verified. For the non-adopted person, seeing similarities between himself and his parents is one type of verification. Being able to read your birth certificate is another. For the adopted person, these two fundamental ways to verify existence are missing or considered top secret, sealed behind impenetrable doors, thus fueling fantasies which can not be challenged by fact.

I would suggest to you that this need to hide the truth about conception, about birth, about one's origins - which are all the effects of the closed adoption system - have at their base a type of philosophy and thinking we might call dualism. Dualism is a way of perceiving reality as an either/or situation, everything reduced to black or white. It is especially in the area of human sexuality that dualism creates problems.

Permit me to digress for a moment into religious history, though the examples from Christian theology are offered only as a way to illustrate my point. We can see the influence of dualist thinking in the specific history of Christian spirituality in what are called the christological controversies. These were debates about the nature of Jesus of Nazareth. The orthodox position maintained that Jesus completely possessed both a divine and a human nature. He was both God and man, fully divine and completely human ("like us in all things but sin," Catholics pray at Mass). Dualist thought generated many nuanced disagreements with this position. Uncomfortable in trying to hold the tension between what seemed two contradictory statements, the dualists opted for excluding the possibility of Jesus being both. One group believed that while Jesus was fully divine, he only appeared to be human. In one of its scriptures the dualist author claims that "Jesus never blinked, and he never left footprints when he walked."[iii] Thus, dualism's inability to hold the tension forced a denial of half the truth. The humanity of Jesus was sanitized to the point where all bodily functions became suspect. The world of matter was considered either unimportant or downright evil. It did not take long for this kind of thinking to translate itself into the lives of ordinary people. Here, dualist thinking sought to denigrate the body in order to glorify the soul. Matter was evil, spirit was good.

There are many examples of dualist thinking in Christian morality. In the early church, Origen, brilliant and balanced in so many ways, fell victim to this dualism when he castrated himself to avoid sexual sin. In the 13th century the Albigensians of southern France taught their followers that the material body was the devil's work and denied belief in a bodily resurrection. And Puritans, the forefathers of American culture, were not named as such because they had any great esteem for the body either. Hawthorne captures the effects of this moral dualism so vividly in The Scarlet Letter. Hawthorne, himself a direct descendent of the Puritans, was clearly repudiating the effects of this dualism in his own life. And if you had the opportunity to see the beautiful film a few years ago, Babette's Feast, about a great French chef who finds refuge with religious fundamentalists in a small fishing village in Denmark, you might agree that it is the same theme told again, but now through the metaphor of food and drink.

Dualism infects adoption from the beginning and hinders a healthy coming-of-age. It lies at the core of the closed adoption system, at the heart of sealed records. It necessitates secrecy: keeping a person's name secret even from himself. It is told that such a practice is done "in the best interests of the child." But how can any honest person see it as anything other than a subtle oppression? It tempts all members of the triad to enter into its dual universe, separating and compartmentalizing the world of flesh from the world of spirit, it seeks to divorce the body from the soul, it undermines the integrity of sex and love, it seeks to exert control of what is essentially not meant to be totally controlled, namely the creative forces of the human spirit which find their most powerful expression through the marvelous workings of human reproduction. Secrecy and sealed records impose a schizophrenia of sorts upon the adopted person, virtually separating him into two people: one, the product of an unmentionable sexual union; the other, the result of a hopefully loving environment.

To all of you here at this conference of the American Adoption Congress today, I make this decalaration: if the institution of adoption is truly to come-of-age it must combat this virus of dualism. Like those who destroyed the Berlin Wall which separated a city for a generation, like those who dismantled the statues of Lenin throughout the Russias, we too must seek, now more than ever, to abolish the closed adoption system and repudiate with our whole being the scourge of secrecy in adoption! Open records for everyone now!

(Having said all that about sex, let's get to the good stuff).

Adoption is the story of Loss and the desire to Belong. Just the other night, trying to put these thoughts on paper, I turned on the TV to escape a bit, and wouldn't you know it, a synchronicitous event occurred. I like to think of it as a trick of grace. One of my favorite movies of all time (I have many favorite movies of all time), but one of them did come on the screen: Shirley Booth and Burt Lancaster in Come Back Little Sheba. I remembered this movie so well because the first time I saw it was on a New Years' Eve night. I was 14 or so, my parents went out for the night and I was alone and lonely. Watching the movie I remember how I could not control the sadness I felt, especially toward Shirley Booth, Lola Delaney in the movie. (What a great name Lola Delaney - it says it all right there. But more about names later). So the other night, watching Come Back Little Sheba, it all came back to me, feeling again the experience of Loss and the desire to Belong.

Because the movie is about the experiences of Loss and Belonging. Its unspoken premise lies in the nature of Lola and Doc's relationship. Lola never calls Doc by his given name but alternates between Doc and Daddy. He in turn calls her Baby, except when he is drunk with rage and about to kill her, or enduring withdrawal in the city detox. There's a mystery though: she calls him Daddy, but they are childless. We learn through Doc's drunken rage that he had to marry Lola. But we are not told what happened to the baby. Did Lola miscarry? Or did she relinquish the baby to adoption, to the closed adoption system, at its zenith in 1952 when the movie was made? This missing piece of their lives is no doubt the reason why Lola is so keen to rent a room to the young college coed. Young and vivacious Marie sparks those feelings of loss and desire in both Lola and Doc. And then there is the title of the movie: Come Back Little Sheba. Little Sheba is Lola's beloved dog who has run away. Though the dog is long gone Lola makes a point to call Little Sheba every day, she runs to the door every time she hears a distant bark.

I suppose I react with such strong emotion to such a story precisely because I need to acknowledge the fact of loss in my own life. I think all of us, members of the triad or not, find this aspect of life one of the most difficult to handle. We do not like to see the effects of loss in others' faces. We want to make it go away, put a bandage on it, we do not want to be reminded of its presence in our own lives.

There's a beautiful scene at the end of James Joyce's short story, "The Dead."[iv] Gabriel and his wife Gretta, married a number of years, have attended a dinner party. It's time to leave and Gabriel is about to call his wife whom he sees at the top of the stairs. Her expression seems melancholy as she listens to the music coming from the next room. Gabriel knows that something profoundly important is taking place within Gretta at that moment. Observing her from the shadows kindles a renewed passion in Gabriel, for he assumes that he is the cause of her wistful look and tearful eye. Later in their hotel room Gabriel is keen on renewing that passion. He confidently asks Gretta what she was thinking about when he saw her as she listened to the old Irish ballad. It is then that Gretta breaks down and begins to sob uncontrollably. She tells her bewildered husband how long before she met him she was courted by a young man named Michael Fury who sang that same ballad to her beneath her window in the drenching rain the night before she was to leave for a convent school. Young Michael Fury caught his death that night, and she knew he died for love of her. This poignantly sad yet beautiful memory was Gretta's, but it was not Gabriel's. The cold reality that Gretta had had a history before him is like a slap in the face to the middle-aged Gabriel. It was the tune of the ancient ballad that triggered the memory, and Gabriel realized he had no right to transgress such sacred space.

All members of the triad know the experience of Loss. Although not all, many adoptive parents come to adoption via the loss suffered through infertility. The painful loss of the hope and dream of having your own children - flesh of your flesh and blood of your blood - is a devastating loss. The instinctual desire for children is evidenced by the desperate measure to which couples will go to conceive. The horror and humiliations of the fertility clinics are testimony of the import we instinctively place on procreation. This devastating pain of the loss of future children is hard to acknowledge, and it is hard for others to acknowledge, and so adoption is the bandage we offer. The bandage is expressed in different ways, like: adopt this child and you'll be just like everyone else, this child will be just like your own. Dualism raises its ugly head here. By mid 20th century it had already infected the psychology of adoption which held that it was environment, not heredity, which played the dominant role in human development. If a social worker could more or less match the physical traits of adoptive and birth parents, the result would be what today we might call virtual reality. The child would be as if born to you, the crucial words here are as if. My obligation today is to inform you, if you do not already know, that adoption is a lot like horseshoes, almost doesn't count. Virtual reality and reality are separated by one very important difference - the truth. But this does not mean that adoptive families are not real families, or that adoptive parents are not the real parents of the child. Adoption can indeed be a wonderful blessing, it has countless times been the best solution to a difficult problem, but adoption can not do the impossible. It can indeed make an infertile couple great parents, it can even make them the best of parents, but it can never make them fertile. That infertility is the loss they must acknowledge and deal with the rest of their lives, raising its unpleasant head when the adopted child reaches puberty and his sexual awakening reminds parents of their own youth and desires. Again the fact of infertility must be faced when adopted children have children of

① their own and the now adoptive grandparents must acknowledge their lack of genetic connection.

Statement on abortion

Loss is suffered by the birth parents, but especially the birth mother when she relinquishes her child. I believe there is no closer relationship than a mother and her unborn child. Perhaps you saw the movie Loosing Isaiah. Whether or not you liked the scenario, perhaps you would agree with me that even a crack-addicted woman feels that powerful bond with her child. The act of relinquishment is so wrenching an event that young women have told me that they chose to abort their babies rather than relinquish them to adoption. Some of us may judge this to be the height of selfishness, but I wonder if there is not some instinctual response involved in making that drastic decision. No matter what the reasons for relinquishment might be, however, the emotional response to the act of relinquishment is analogous to abortion, an unbloody abortion if you will, but as Dr. John Sonne had pointed out in his workshop yesterday, "a psychological abortion"[v] nonetheless.

Maybe you remember the scandal that broke a few years back about the Irish Bishop, Eamon Casey, who fathered a child some twenty years previous with a young American woman named Annie Murphy. Annie's family had sent her to the bishop to straighten out her life but she ended up having an affair with the bishop and getting pregnant. The bishop arranged for her to go to a home for unwed mothers. When the time for delivery came they had a heated argument. Annie told the bishop she wanted to keep their child. The bishop was furious and said she must give the baby up for adoption. "The child was a mistake," Annie remembered the bishop saying. "He made it clear, " she said, "that through the (relinquishment) of the child she would be cleansed."[vi] The bishop no doubt believed, as do many religiously-inclined people still believe, that relinquishment is tantamount to the purifying fires of purgatory - a notion I would suggest not far removed from the response of those young women who chose abortion over adoption. There is of course another possible reason for the bishop's insistence on relinquishment. Once placed in the closed adoption system, his son would not be able to identify the bishop as his father.

For the adoptee too, there is the experience of Loss. The loss of genetic connection, of ethnic heritage, of siblings, and most profoundly, of father and mother related to him by blood. For the adopted person, life and love are intimately connected with the experience of Loss. I believe this to be true whether an adoptee admits it or not. There is always either an active curiosity about where you came from, or a strong denial of any desire to know. If anyone asked me while I was in my teens or twenties if I wanted to know who my birth mother was I would have vehemently said "no, of course not." It took me over thirty years to realize what I needed to do. This is the adoptee's dilemma of belonging and not-belonging, struggling between the need to know and misguided loyalty and gratitude.

I can never forget the experience I had when I began my search for my mother over ten years ago. Before I found her I discovered that her brother was a Jesuit priest who had died rather young at Georgetown University. One day I got in the car and drove down to Georgetown. I visited my uncle's grave and decided to ring the bell of the Jesuit residence. The priest who answered turned out to be not only my uncle's classmate but his best friend, having grown up with him in Philadelphia. Fr. Dineen was a very kindly man and I spent the entire day with him listening to the many stories he longed to tell of my uncle and their friendship. After dinner he invited me to his room, "to see some old photos," he said. As we were about to open the album, it suddenly dawned on me that this would be the first time in my 33 years of life that I was to see someone related to me.

Just last week I had that experience repeated when I met with my mother's roommate, Sophia, the roommate she was living with when carrying me. This was our third meeting since my mother's death and Sophia said she had brought me a present. She took out a photograph she had found she said, "quite by accident." It was a picture of both my mother and father, cheek to cheek, posing in one of those quick-picture booths. I secretly wondered as I studied their faces whether I was there too, still unseen, or perhaps about to enter the vortex of that whirlpool I had dreamt of, but forever a part of their lives. The losses suffered in adoption are also always there, whether we acknowledge them or not.

Those of you not adopted no doubt take for granted the importance of growing up with people related to you, who look and act like you. Adoptees miss that very primal experience. I would suggest it is at the heart of the dilemma of the adopted person who feels on some level that he does not belong in his adoptive family. This does not necessarily have anything to do with either the abundance of love the adoptive parents feel for the child, or the lack of it. It exists quite apart from the material well-being provided by the adoptive family. In adoption groups you often hear adoptees classify themselves as 'good-adoptees' or 'bad-adoptees'. The good ones never searched while their parents were alive, the bad ones were always running away somewhere. But when the adopted person does decide to search, he is acknowledging this not-belonging. The adoptee feels himself to be a literal misfit, not quite fitting in, misplaced somehow. In another manner of speaking, he feels himself to be an exile. Belonging and identity are synonymous for the adoptee, but he must initiate his search, or at least acknowledge the desire to search for his identity, in order for the healing to begin.

A priest friend of mine once told me of his jarring experience when visiting a home for emotionally disturbed adolescents in Brooklyn. The priest walked into the home as a young man was singing the Irish ballad, Danny Boy. The young man had his back to the priest. When he finished, the priest went over and tapped the young man on the shoulder, thanking him for such a beautiful rendition of the sad song. The young man quickly turned, revealing an Asian face. The priest instinctively laughed: "I'm sorry," he said, "I thought you were Irish." The boy's eyes filled with tears and he angrily shouted back: "I am Irish, my name's Michael O'Brien."[vii]

The American Jesuit, John Courtney Murray, considered by many one of the greatest Catholic theologians America has produced to date, wrote this about identity:

"Self-understanding is the necessary condition of a sense of self-identity and self-confidence...the peril is great. The complete loss of one's identity is, with all propriety of theological definition, hell. In diminished forms it is insanity."[viii] Let me repeat that provocative insight: "The complete loss of one's identity is, with all propriety of theological definition, hell. In diminished forms it is insanity."

In the acknowledgment of the truth about Loss and the need to Belong, a word must be said about Anger. The anger of the infertile couple at the loss of their dream - their intended children. The anger of the birth mother at the loss of her child - the relinquishment. And, thank God, in recent years we have seen the anger of birth fathers whose rights are so often violated in the adoption process. And most significantly perhaps the anger of the adopted person who feels the extraordinary loss of parents, heritage and genetic connection; who feels this, it must be remembered, as the primal experience of life.

For some adoptees, anger remains suppressed; for others, it becomes destructive and even violent. I can never forget the day I went to the Catholic Home Bureau in Manhattan to see if I could get any information regarding my adoption. The social worker-nun sat calmly behind the desk reading from the papers in front of her. She read me an account of my adoption and gave me the non-identifying information I had requested. I knew she was not supposed to tell me my mother's name but I asked just the same. She said, of course, she could not give me the name but then asked in a tone of voice that triggered in me a cascade of rage: "Why would you want to know, didn't you have a good adoption?" I realized at that moment if I had had a gun I would have killed her. I am not exaggerating here, I know with certainty I could have killed. Perhaps that's what happened to Moses the day he saw the Egyptian beating the Hebrew, an event which triggered a cascade of rage in him, an anger that had been welling up all his life, intimately connected with his struggle of identity and belonging, an event pivotal in the history of western civilization as we know it, and central to what believers call salvation.

Psychologists tell us that anger is a reaction to being hurt. Since adoption always involves loss for each member of the triad, and loss is a deep hurt, is it any wonder that there is a lot of anger permeating adoption. But anger can be a catalyst for positive change. It can wake us up to the adventure of living. In that great classic of western literature, The Odyssey, Homer gives us Odysseus, a man who is struggling to return to his home, Ithaca - to the place he belongs. Indeed the theme of the Odyssey could be summed up in one word: nostalgia, literally meaning, the pain for home. The etymology of words here is interesting. The root of nostalgia is nostos, meaning home. It is also the root of noos, which may be translated as consciousness. At the end of the saga Odysseus confronts his enemy, Antinous, who was conspiring to rob Odysseus of wife, home and property while Odysseus was on his journey. The bloody scene in which Homer describes how Odysseus kills Antinous is quite powerful. And what does the name Antinous mean? It means anti-noos, anti-consciousness, against consciousness; it means oblivion. It is Odysseus' anger, his brutal rage, that enables him to slay Antinous, to awake from oblivion and seize the life he was destined to live. Odysseus rejects the state of unawareness, and comes to consciousness - he regains home and family. Anger can be the catalyst which brings to consciousness the acknowledgment of the deep Loss the adopted person has experienced, and so let him begin the healing process, his odyssey towards home.

A word of anger must be raised then against what might be called the mark of illegitimacy. Society labels those born illegitimate, bastards. You might think it strange that I, as an illegitimately-born individual, remain ambiguous about this designation. On the one hand I disdain the state and the church for creating such a designation because of its repercussions. In order for me to be ordained a priest I had to request special dispensation because bastards could not receive Holy Orders. That has recently changed but the psychological effects of such a designation, I would submit, always remain. On the other hand it is argued that the closed adoption system was created to protect the child from the mark of illegitimacy. If that is true, though I am not convinced it is the real reason for sealed records, then I would prefer to be labelled a bastard and be able to see my birth certificate than continue to be denied that fundamental right. At any rate my parents were not married, and so I am born in different status according to the law. But I am in good company - I am in very good company, especially among many here today - and feel a certain kindred spirit with other bastards of history. Erasmus, Pope Clement VII, Leonardo da Vinci, and many more.

"I'll tell you something," a famous American once wrote a friend in strictest confidence, "I'll tell you something, but keep it a secret while I live. My mother was a bastard, was the daughter of a nobleman so called of Virginia. My mother's mother was poor and credulous, and she was shamefully taken advantage of by the man. My mother inherited his qualities and I hers. All that I am or hope ever to be I got from my mother, God bless her. Did you never notice that bastards are generally smarter, shrewder, and more intellectual than others? Is it because it is stolen?"[ix]

So wrote Abraham Lincoln of himself and his mother Nancy Hanks. But wait, there's still more to the story. Lincoln always feared that his mother never properly married Thomas Lincoln. This of course could have had serious political consequences. President Lincoln died before the marriage certificate he had requested years before had been found, though the license that was eventually found is now thought by some to be a forgery. But wait, there's still more. Many people, and according to his closest friend even Lincoln himself, believed not only that Nancy Hanks never really married Thomas Lincoln, but that Thomas Lincoln was not his biological father. A few years back I was touring the South with a friend who was visiting from England. As we were visiting the home of Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederacy, I remarked to my friend that I couldn't believe they had the gall to hang a picture of Abraham Lincoln in the hallway. The guide overheard me and said, "Oh, so many people say the same thing, but that's not Lincoln, it's Jefferson Davis." The resemblance was uncanny, and indeed some say that it was Samuel Davis who fathered both

Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln. How does the radio commentator put it: "Now you know the rest of the story."

I can't fail to mention Jesus himself in this regard, because I believe Jesus knew the mark of illegitimacy. I think there is ample proof in the gospel texts to suggest that many believed Jesus to be a bastard, as is asserted in later Jewish apologetic works written to refute Christianity. For those of you who are christian and have a hard time accepting the account of the Virginal Conception, that is, the belief that Jesus' father was God Himself, and thus easily accept Joseph as Jesus' real father, I would submit that you are on shaky ground. For the gospels suggest, for some unmentioned reason, that it was obvious Joseph was not Jesus' biological father. This poses a dilemma for the believer: either Jesus was Son of God, or he was the bastard son of a Roman soldier as the later Jewish texts assert. In either scenario Jesus would have known what it felt like to bear the mark of illegitimacy.

A word of anger must also be raised against the closed adoption system and sealed records. Closed records, while purporting to insure confidentiality for the birth mother, means that I as an adopted person have no right to my own name. Sealed records rob me of my name, my heritage, my medical history and any connection to those related to me by blood. My question is this: is the practice of closed adoption, which separates child from parents without consent, suppresses the knowledge of the child's heritage, and refuses to reveal the child's birth name even to the child himself - is this in any way different from the practice of slavery? Can anyone honestly doubt that sealed records constitute at the very least a psychological slavery?

Please be patient, I'm not finished yet, a word of anger must also be raised against the myth of confidentiality. Lawyers, social workers and church officials assert that confidentiality was promised to the birth mother, and a promise given can not be breached. But then, I ask, why was my name, that is, the name given to me at birth by my birth mother, that is, my birthmother's surname, why was that name printed on the very adoption papers given to my adoptive parents, if indeed the state promised my birthmother confidentiality? Why? Because, I would submit, confidentiality for the birth mother was not ever really intended. It is a myth.

When I testified some months ago before the New Jersey Legislature in favor of a bill to open records, the most vocal and powerful opponent was the New Jersey Catholic Conference, representing the Catholic Bishops of New Jersey. Yes, a word of anger must even be raised against the hypocrisy of the Catholic Bishops of New Jersey who testified that the "dark secret" (these are their words not mine) the "dark secret" of the relinquished child's birth must remain so, because confidentiality was promised to the birth mother. Thus the bishops argue that a woman does indeed have a right to privacy from her own child. I wonder if Planned Parenthood and the abortion-rights' movement realize they have such powerful allies in the Catholic Bishops of New Jersey?

Further, maintaining that "dark secret" permits church officials to release false baptismal certificates, misleading the adopted person either into believing he was baptized twice, or misleading him to believe that the name he now uses is indeed his baptismal name, while in many cases it is not. How do church officials, particularly the Catholic Bishops of New Jersey, justify such hypocrisy and outright lies? Because, they argue, a mother has the right to privacy from her own child.

If the adoption lobby gets its way and the proposed Uniform Adoption Acts are enacted across this country, virtually anyone will be permitted to contract adoption with little or no supervision. Vacant wombs will be advertised and rented. Babies will be contracted for, children bought and sold. All protected under the guise of confidentiality. Sadly, the case of a Lisa Steinberg may not be the exception, but the rule.

There are many more words of anger which shout to heaven to be heard, but time is running short and I should say a word about The

Search. The Search is the antidote, as I see it, to the virus of dualist thinking that creates a chasm between an adoptee's genetic heritage and its interaction with his environment. Dualism emphasizes the importance of spirit to the detriment of body, environment over genes. But all true spirituality seeks to do just the opposite, to bridge the chasm, to rejoin what was divided, to do the work of true religion defined by the theologian von Balthasar as the "renewed bonding of previously separated parts." [x] Or as St Teresa of Avila, the great Spanish mystic of the sixteenth century once put it: "For never, however exalted the soul may be, is anything else more fitting than self knowledge."[xi] The adopted person's search for his origins is then a religious experience. It is a spiritual journey, a pilgrimage of self-knowledge, a holy endeavor.

The Search is undergone in order to taste the experience of integrity, of wholeness, of health. The Latin root of the word salvation is salus, meaning health. And the English words wholeness and holiness are more closely related than simply their shared sound. In the adopted person's search for origins, in his drive for the truth, and through his desire to belong, he becomes the paradign, the sacrament if you will, of Everyman. "You have made us for Thyself, O Lord," St. Augustine wrote, "and our hearts are resltess until they rest in Thee."[xii]

You remember, perhaps, the movie Filed of Dreams, where a farmer builds a baseball diamond that magically transcends time, and players from the past mysteriously emerge onto the field from the nearby corn stalks. Then at twilight a young player appears and magically turns out to be the farmer's own father, now younger than the farmer himself. Although appellations of father and son are not permitted here, a certain recognition occurs, a sense of profound joy is felt, which sparks the father to ask the son in utter sincerity: "Is this Heaven?" "No," says the son, "it's Iowa." It seems at first comical but the answer is told in complete humility; it is a moment of revelation when words notwithstanding, the viewer realizes that Heaven, at that moment, is indeed Iowa. Even the glory which is heaven must make its vestige felt through earth. And why not Iowa? Why not this body as the corporeal expression of a spiritual reality? To dismiss the necessity of the body is to dismiss the possibility to experience in a sensual way the reality of the transcendent. It is to dismiss the possibility of the experience of joy, of heaven here and now.

Permit me a final example:
When I met my birthmother she told me that she had named me for her brother Tom, who coincidentally had also been a priest. (I have come to learn that coincidences are dubious things in adoption). I was thinking of my name a few weeks ago, the Sunday after Easter, when we read at Mass the story of the appearance of the Risen Jesus to his apostles, but Thomas was absent. It's from his refusal to believe the story he is told by the others that he is forever known as Doubting Thomas. "I'll never believe it," Thomas tells them, "without probing the nailprints in his hands, without putting my finger in the nail-marks and my hand into his side."[xiii] That story resonates within me. It is a graphic story. It could, I suppose, be considered vulgar: after all to want to probe the wounds of someone else's body... But I think it's meant to be so. Thomas, you see, doesn't want to settle for a belief in ghosts, he's telling the others that if they want to settle for disembodied spirits, that's their business, but he'll have nothing to do with it. When Jesus appears again he indeed invites Thomas to explore his body, 'thrust your hand into my wound,' Jesus says. "Do not persist in your unbelief, but believe."[xiv] Thomas, the one whose faith is born of doubt, demands evidence. He wants a hands-on experience. He's tired of believing in ghosts. I would submit to you today that the American Adoption Congress, at age eighteen, will not settle for a belief in ghosts either. We want evidence. We want to see with our eyes what has been long kept secret.

But coming-of-age means to risk. It demands courage. And in this Thomas is a wonderful model. Thomas is filled with courage: the courage to doubt, the courage to question, the courage to search for real bodies, bodies with scars that signify real wounds, the real experiences of Loss and the desire to Belong. Coming-of-age in adoption has a lot to do with claiming the missing. We too are searching for missing bodies, alive or dead. We need a hands-on experience.

In the gospels, whenever Thomas is mentioned by name, he is given the epithet "The Twin", in Greek, "Didymus". Since I am an adopted Thomas, always wanting to find out more about who I am, I looked up "Didymus" in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, for the times when "Didymus" appeared. It appears only once, in the Book of Deuteronomy, where it is used not as a nickname of a person, but as a euphemism for a man's genitals, specifically his testicles, or as the old Catholic translation rendered it, a man's secrets. It then occurred to me that the name, Thomas the Twin, could indeed be translated as the one with balls. Too graphic? Perhaps. Vulgar? Maybe...

But sometimes, in order to fight the influence of dualist thinking that views the body with such abhorrence, we need to exaggerate, so that we might arrive at that proper balance of body and soul, matter and spirit, thought and being, heredity and environment. Coming-of-age in the world of adoption perhaps then means to view the adopted person as a sacrament, if you will, of Everyman's search to find the holy ground wherein the fusion of nature and grace is manifest, that sacred place where sex and love have intercoursed.

Thank you for your kind attention.