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Stepping Out of the Shadows Birthfathers Speak Out

by Mary Martin Mason

At best, he is viewed as a mystery man; at worst, he is seen as a villain. But in almost all cases, contends Mary Martin Mason, author of *Out of the Shadows: Birthfathers' Stories*, birth fathers are deeply misunderstood.

"The emotional cost of the birth father is just now being explored," says Mason, a Twin Cities writer and adoptive parent who herself was adopted and who knew her birth father growing up. One man who was a primary care-giver for his son before losing custody of him says, "I try to take it day by day. A lot of people wouldn't call it death, but it feels like he's dead 'cause I can't get to him."

Mason defines birth fathers as "men who have fathered a child whom they are not parenting." Her in-depth interviews of birth fathers include those of various ages, races and backgrounds. One birth father is from Korea; the others from the Midwest. Some are homeless; others own their own businesses. While most have no contact with their children, a few are participating in open adoptions. Three of the men married the birth mothers after relinquishment of their children, but most have lost contact with the birth mother and child.

Despite their differences, Mason found surprising similarities.

Each man cared deeply about his child, so much so that his life was altered by losing his child. Relinquishing a child affects future relationships, intimacy, marriage, self-esteem and even, career choice.

- Kit tends to date women who have a son, typically the age of his birth son.
- Kevin's girlfriend, whom he started dating long after his son's birth and adoption, is uncomfortable with the pictures and updates he receives from the adoptive family. Her discomfort is an ongoing problem in their relationship.
- Randy has been married for five years to Kim. His son's birth mother is also named Kim. When he first began to date his wife, he told her, "I do have this little extra baggage. And someday I hope to meet him, and someday I hope that he's part of my life in one way or another." The two Kims have managed to become friends, but not without some "tense, difficult moments."

A surprising number of men have chosen careers that put them in contact with teenagers dealing with such issues as unplanned pregnancy. Others have pursued professions in music, art and writing, allowing them to give creative expression to an experience they have not otherwise made public.

Men who physically cared for their children before an adoption or losing custody mourn differently from those who never saw their children. But both mourned and continue to mourn.

- During the interviews, many of the men address their "incomplete grief" for the first time. One birth father, for example, reveals that with every girl who looked to be within the same age range as his birth daughter, he'd ask, "Is that Sarah, my daughter?"
- The Korean birth father spoke through a translator, saying, "I wanted to tell everyone what I felt, but Korean people don't say such things. Instead they have inward thinking. I even more so than most. If you hurt the body and skin, there is healing with medicine. If you hurt the heart or feeling, you don't have medicine. The best medication I had was to heal myself.... The feelings are the best method."

Shame has always piloted the birth parent experience. A common assumption is that the man, glorying in the pregnancy as proof of his machismo, feels no shame. Each of the men who were interviewed admit to feeling deep regret for causing pain to the birth mother and for not being able to "do the right thing."

In past eras, "doing the right thing" meant marrying. In fact, many of the men discovered that their parents' marriage had begun with an unplanned pregnancy. Today, with less pressure put on pregnant couples to marry, "doing the right thing" is more ambiguous, particularly if the couple's relationship dissolves during the pregnancy.

- Don and Andrea are no longer a couple. The night before his son's birth, Don reveals, "I see that Andrea's in pain. Her emotional pain has been much, much harder than it would be in normal circumstances. I've dealt with guilt and anger. When she's not blaming me for what I did and not telling me what situation I've put her in, then she can see that I'm trying to be supportive. At those times, it's easier to be supportive."

- Terminating parental rights also carries a burden of shame. Paul describes the year of his daughter's birth and adoption as one in which "I felt that I lost membership in the human race by giving away my own flesh and blood."

Because the birth father experience is an unknown to most people, few support systems exist.

- Despite the existence of millions of birth fathers as a subculture, these men continue to stay "under wraps." One of the reasons that many of them keep their experience a secret is that to speak about it publicly can result in baffled silence or worse, criticism. Even well-meaning friends and co-workers are perplexed as to how to respond to a birth father.
- When Damian returned to work, his co-workers gave him a party honoring the birth of his daughter, Kaitlin, even though they knew she was already with her adoptive family. Damian says, "it was very nice of them, but I felt awkward."
- Eighteen years ago, Randy found a very different reaction among his friends. He complains, "nobody knew how to approach me. They all knew we were pregnant. They all knew we were giving the baby up for adoption, so nobody came down and understood how to say...." — Randy chokes on the words he needed to hear — "Congratulations, and I'm sorry."

Despite some pioneering programs that foster involvement of young fathers, men continue to find that they are encouraged to drop out of the pregnancy and decision-making process. One man, for example, found out only after his son's adoption that he was a father. Another learned of the pregnancy just as his girlfriend was going into labor.

The cost of shutting fathers out, Mason believes, is detrimental to adoptive parents, birth parents and child.

- "A child will be denied access to half of his or her genetic, health and family history," she says. "Millions of adopted children already grow up hearing their story without any mention of their birth father. So often is the birth father missing in adoption that researchers have found adopted persons who have never imagined their birth father, as if they had been born to only one biological parent."

Adoptive parents who move beyond the stereotype of uncaring birth fathers can tell the adoption story more sensitively and more completely to their child. Even when that information is sketchy or missing, the inclusion of the birth father as a participant is vital to the child's sense of self. Otherwise, the child may assume that, because the birth father is not mentioned, he must be a "dead-beat dad" or someone who exploited the birth mother.

Older children can learn about birth fathers by reading *Out of the Shadows* or by meeting men who are non-custodial fathers. Certainly, adoption conferences, organizations and support groups should make an effort to include birth fathers. Of all the voices in adoption, the birth father voice is most resoundingly silent.

As for the birth fathers, as in any grief situation, healing can occur if they are given the opportunity to address and then process their pain. Mason says, "Some men found healing by breaking the silence with their parents regarding the 'lost grandchild.' Others found that by taking an active role in the adoption community, both they and the adoptive families benefit. Therapy has helped some men; choosing a helping profession has assisted others."

Seven years after the adoption of his son, birth father Daryl from St. Paul, Minnesota no longer feels shame. A letter written to the adoption agency, updating the adoptive family about his life, quickly moved Daryl into an open adoption. Last year, Daryl began what has become a close relationship with his son and his adoptive family. "Being a birth father has come to be a thing of pride," Daryl says. "As we come out of the shadow, we can say we are men who have gotten into difficult situations and considered the best option for our child. We should take pride in that."

*Mary Martin Mason is the author of *Miracle Seekers* and the soon to be published *Out of the Shadows: Birthfathers' Stories*, and *Designing Rituals in Adoption*. She creates videos on adoption through her company, *AdopTapes*. Mary, an adopted person raised in an open adoption, is an adoptive parent.*