

Barbara Kay: Adoption abuses have only been half cured

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Family photo  
Raymond Cave and Linda Dawe lost touch after the pain of surrendering their child as teenagers, but reconnected at their high school reunion in 2006 and found their daughter in 2008.

I am old enough to remember when an “unwed” pregnancy was a social scandal of matchless proportions. I vividly recall a girl at my Toronto high school – Florence – who abruptly left school one day, never to return. The rumour that she had “gone herself pregnant” flew through the corridors like wildfire. I received the news with horrified embarrassment on her behalf.

I never did find out what happened to Florence. She dropped off the face of the earth. I assumed that her life was ruined by the shame of it all, and it well may have been. I hadn’t thought of Florence in decades, but she sprang to mind as I began following the Post’s current feature series on systemic adoption abuses in the 1950s and 1960s. I’m fascinated and indignant as I read the distressing narratives that illustrate the scope of the heartbreak in that era.

We have learned about many other young Florences – girls not necessarily “fast,” as we used to call girls who were sexually active, just unlucky – being hustled into months of purdah lest respectable people see evidence of their moral turpitude in the flesh. In all cases they were urged, and in some cases coerced, into giving their babies up for adoption, often sight unseen, without being informed of their legal right to refuse.

In the March 14 segment, the series highlighted the iniquities of the system that were visited on the fathers of those babies. Several fathers recount their experience of being shunted aside, with no role or legal standing in the process. One father saw his baby only once before signing a “surrender document.” Another was told that there was no point in putting his name on the birth certificate since it would only be “whited out.” According to Raymond Cave, whose high school sweetheart Linda Dawe became pregnant at age 17 in 1966, when the couple was too young to legally marry, “No one was ever supposed to know who the father was, let alone come ask me for a signature. It was like I didn’t exist.”

It’s hard to believe that only 40-plus years ago, biological mothers and fathers could be so cruelly denied their rights to their own flesh and blood. It’s good to know that such insensitivity and indifference to natural human rights are now relics of the past, and that our society has opened its eyes to the sanctity of the biological- parent connection to children.

Actually, to make a point, I have deliberately led the reader astray in the above paragraph. What I should have said was that “our society has opened its eyes to the sanctity of the biological-mother connection to children.” For nobody nowadays would ever dream of tearing a baby away from its biological mother and handing it over to an adoptive family. Unfortunately, time has stood still for biological dads.

Take the 2007 case of Rick Frederickson, also known as “Saskatoon Dad.” Rick was involved in a brief relationship with a woman, who became pregnant with his child, but didn’t inform him of it. By chance he learned of the impending birth and presented himself as the father.

The mother refused to identify him on the birth certificate. After strenuous efforts on Rick’s part, DNA tests proved his paternity. But by then the mother had adopted the baby out to strangers with the collaboration of social services who stonewalled Rick every step of the way.

Like many resident fathers, and mothers for that matter, Rick had had alcohol issues and a chequered employment

history. But at the time of his suit for custody of his baby, he was sober, holding down a good job and settled into a thriving, stable relationship. He had a permanent home, his partner was eager to parent the child with him, and he was desperate not to lose his last opportunity to bring up a child. But no. In his “best interests of the child” decision, the judge ignored biological paternity as a compelling argument for custody and awarded the baby to the materially more advantaged strangers.

Former Justice Minister Martin Cauchon said in 2003, “Men have no rights, only responsibilities.” That is the ruling paradigm in our society. Recall what Raymond Cave said about his youthful experience: “No one was ever supposed to know who the father was, let alone come ask me for a signature. It was like I didn’t exist.” If you didn’t know, would you guess those words applied to 1966 or 2012? You’d be right either way.

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