

Mothers of Loss (to Adoption)

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By Dr. Lee Campbell, founder of CUB (Concerned United Birthparents) on "Philomena":

Many of you are asking if I saw the movie "Philomena" and what I thought of it. My reactions are so bittersweet, I interviewed myself so I could see what I really did think. If you "share" this "interview" and/or send to the publication of your choice, please copy it in its entirety and include the copyright info at the bottom.

For Immediate Release:

An American "Philomena"

Dr. Lee Campbell, 68, a retired social science professor, wants viewers and critics to know this about the movie "Philomena:" "Philomena's experience is not just an Irish phenomenon, one that is prompting an investigation of Ireland's adoption practices. And the experience of birthmothers is not just limited to Australia, either, which has formally apologized to birthmothers after its own investigation. The exploitation of birthmothers has also been — and in too many cases remains — an American tragedy.

In Campbell's recent memoir, *Stow Away*, she points to the time frame in which Philomena's baby was torn from her. "In the United States, we refer to the years 1945-1962 as the 'Baby Scoop Era.' In the sixties alone, more than two million mothers lost their newborns to adoption. And, I was one of them."

Campbell, who in 1976 founded Concerned United Birthparents (CUB), asserts it was standard practice at the time for authorities to kick unwed mothers out of school. She explains "It was hoped if mothers' sins were nowhere to be seen, their peers wouldn't copycat the immorality." Campbell recalls that parents of the young women marched in lock-step. "Many middle class parents made the evidence disappear even further from sight. If there was an available and affordable bed in a 'home for unwed mothers,' their daughters were ferried to it — under an oversized coat or in the dead of night, if necessary. But if a bed in a Home wasn't available or affordable, their daughters were instead hidden away at the back of the house or shipped to the spare room of some far-flung relative."

Campbell claims that wherever these mothers did their time, "the outcome of adoption was pre-ordained." As she describes it: "Usually, the mothers' dispatch occurred at such a dizzying pace and was so disorienting that they didn't realize — often for many years, even decades — that, like Philomena, they had been deposited at the opening of a slick, well-primed chute. Along the mothers' way to their inevitable bottoming-out, agents of the church, the state, and the law trumpeted a good news/bad news scenario.

The bad news was that these agents said they didn't know of any specific resources that would help the mothers raise their babies, if they wanted to. Then the agents heralded some good news. They said everyone was a winner in adoption." Campbell describes the closed adoptions of the Baby Scoop era a "strange but haloed place where baby's names were changed, birth certificates were falsified, and mothers were told to "simply forget and build a new life as if their experience hadn't happened." She says "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was not something to be avoided in those days; it was a remedy, a prescription."

"I drank that Kool-Aid for ten years," Campbell admits, referring to the November 1978 Jonestown Massacre, where members of a religious sect followed a leader's edict to commit suicide by drinking flavored cyanide. "Then I started CUB, which got some authorities riled up, and the media's attention. Campbell says she was on "Donahue" four times and that parts of her and her members' story were published in local and national publications. For evidence, Campbell suggests the "History Channel" on CUB's website or the women's activist center at Harvard's Schlesinger Library, which also houses CUB materials.

Blaming the media for its short attention span, Campbell adds she is also disappointed that individuals and groups did not rally around birthmothers and adoption reform, the way they have for other minorities, like African-Americans and gays and lesbians. "They could have helped us to achieve staying power but they did not. Even the feminists discouraged us. At the time, feminists were focused on women's success in the workforce. Without others' support," Campbell says "CUB's growl has become more like a mew. We do what we can to help birthmothers. But we're pretty worn out."

Campbell hopes the movie “Philomena,” on track for an academy award nomination, will re-ignite interest in birthmothers and adoption reform, and that this time, others will join the band wagon. But she worries Americans will dismiss its significance. “It’s too easy to say it happened in another country in another time. And, after all, Philomena forgave those whose actions tormented her on a daily basis for over 50 years.”

For Campbell, “Philomena,” is bittersweet. She thinks Philomena’s forgiveness was too quick, too pat, too Hollywood. “I’m a big fan of forgiveness,” she asserts, adding that she has often discussed the value of forgiveness in her college classes and in other speeches she has given. Campbell says she has worked with hundreds, if not thousands, of birthmothers, and, citing a popular model of grief work, she says many do arrive at “acceptance.” But in Campbell’s experience with birthmothers, “Acceptance and forgiveness can be a torturous and complicated journey. Anger is a naturally occurring road block for a while. After all, when you think deeply about it, it’s rather an outrageous practice to unnecessarily sacrifice one family in order to create a new one.”

Campbell says she only saw “snippets of spunk” in the movie’s portrayal of ‘Philomena.’ Martin Sixsmith, the journalist who took Philomena’s story as his own, “had most of the guts, which proves just how important others can be.” Campbell does wonder if the real Philomena by-passed anger as easily as the movie suggests. “But even if the real Philomena did do an end-run around anger, the movie could show something else that is important, if viewers think about it.

The movie could also show just how much Philomena’s trauma had stifled her spirit.”

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