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This Child Is Mine

*The Mechanisms for
Delegating Parenthood*

"A lifelong experience for all parties"

The permanent transfer of a child from one parent to another has a profound and lasting impact on all three members of the triad: birth and adoptive parents as much as the child her- or himself. The child acquires a new identity, and the adults lose or gain parental status. In this chapter, then, I will discuss the mechanisms: how the transfer is made, how the right parent for a child is designated, and how parents experience the kind of kinship adoption entails. I will also demonstrate how complicated these issues are. Throughout the twentieth century, as both state involvement in child welfare and the professionalization of adoption grew, the ambiguities of a fictive kinship remained.

In American adoption, social workers have the daunting task of delegating parenthood. The task involves disqualifying some and qualifying other people to have children. That the criteria for a "good parent" are variable, changing with time, place, and situation, does not make the task easier. The task is further complicated by the awkwardness of the relationship between a person who wants a child and the

expert who intervenes in that decision. Consequently, next to social workers, the significant figures here are adoptive parents. During the twentieth century, adoption policy increasingly focused on the person petitioning for a child, as that person became not just a "caretaker" of the child but also an embodiment of notions of parenthood.

Yet techniques for selecting and approving an adoptive parent did not exclude the birthparent. The mother who had a child she could not keep represented traits that were considered undesirable in a parent; she was *unfit* to the adoptive parent's *fit*. At the same time, her "nature" was important; the genealogical parent presumably determined the child's personality and temperament. And that was important because, lacking any clear predictors of the outcome of a placement, social workers established a policy of "matching." The child should be like the people who adopt him, his "nature" in accord with theirs. If the child conforms to the adoptive parents, love and commitment will follow, or so the theory holds. Thus, social workers do attempt to "know" something of the character and material condition of the parents who will take a child and of the child they will take, in order to re-create a semblance of real kinship in the contrived family.¹

Reactions to the investigative efforts of social workers are an important part of the story. Adoptive parents are not passive, or silent, about the process by which they "get" children or about the social workers who "play god" while giving children. Nor do prospective parents always turn to agencies in order to adopt: independent adoptions are both a viable alternative and a source of pressure on agencies. As a rule, adoptions without agencies provide a way of transferring children that allows participants to have more "say" and to feel less "bureaucratized." The appeal of this alternative, combined with the consciousness-raising affecting adoption in general, has pushed agencies into changing their policies. In a blending of foster care and adopting that is a striking development of late twentieth-century adoption practices, the "client" is now a partner of the expert, the child to be adopted is no longer a "perfect match," and prospective parents are presumed to be as interested in helping as in having a child.

My discussion concludes with the apparent transformation of expert involvement in adoption, as people turn toward nonagency adoptions and, more radically, toward the unmediated exchange of a child in a completely open adoption. If adoption "constitutes a lifelong experience for all parties" (Cole and Donley 1990, 280), it is also an experience that participants are constantly altering.

"Skillful investigation by
completely trained persons"

Michigan was one of the first states to require the investigation of potential adoptive parents. In 1891, an opinion held that any "judge of probate with whom such instrument [of adoption] is filed, shall thereupon make an investigation, and if he shall be satisfied as to the good moral character and the ability to support and educate such child, and of the suitability of the home, of the person or persons adopting such child, he shall make an order, to be entered on the journal of the probate court." (Bremner 1971, II, 147). It is not clear who the investigators were; only marginally clearer was what they would look for: moral character and ability to educate, as well as a "suitable" home. But the course had been set. Trained workers were to assess the parents a child might acquire, and especially scrupulously when the change in parenthood was permanent.

A quarter century later, in 1917, Minnesota amended its adoption law to somewhat the same end. "Upon the filing of a petition for the adoption of a minor child the court shall notify the state board of control. It shall then be the duty of the board to verify the allegations of the petition; and to make appropriate inquiry to determine whether the proposed foster home is a suitable home for the child" (Bremner 1971, II, 147). The institution of inquiry is cited, but the criteria—a suitable home—are not more specific. The amendment, however, also did something else; it included a reminder that there were two sets of parents involved in the transfer: the parents petitioning for and the parents losing a child. Investigation involved a judgment of comparative worth, not simply a test of capability to care for a child.

A Wisconsin statute of 1922 made the possibility of parents competing for a child more explicit. The statute recognized the difficulty of assessing parental capabilities, even if a suitable environment could be determined. According to the judicial opinion, adoption involves a "human triangle: the child at the apex, the living natural parents and the prospective adoptive parent completing the figure." Natural and prospective parents might not agree on the best interests of the child; a third person then had the responsibility of placing the child in a suitable home. This, the statute proclaimed, was a solemn responsibility, given the deprivation that accompanied a permanent reassignment of

parenthood. As the statute described it: "Undoubtedly many children would be better cared for were the state to shift them to other homes than those nature gave them ; but to transform a temporary separation of the family, incurred by reason of misfortune, into an absolute severance of those ties so interwoven with human hearts, should, and can, be done only under due process of law" (Bremner 1979, II, 151).

At the same time, the Wisconsin Children's Code Commission emphasized the primacy of the child's interests and, for that reason, insisted that experts supervise all child placement proceedings. "Adoption proceedings are, for the adoptable child, next to birth itself, the most important single transaction in his life. It is imperative, therefore, that the child at this time have the benefit of the most thorough and careful work in the procedure that is to determine his whole future. Essential to this is the need that the court shall have for its guidance full and complete facts about the child and the adopting parents. This can be secured only through skillful investigation by completely trained persons" (in Witmer 1963, 35). Thus, by the 1920s, social workers were thoroughly in charge of the movement of children; on their word, kinship was made or unmade.

The state had turned to families to protect its children and then called upon experts to judge the suitability of families for this responsibility (Tiffin 1982; Grossberg 1985). The emphasis on "completely trained persons" reflected a growing sense that parenthood ought to be supervised—especially in the dramatic circumstances of removing a child from his or her "natural," biological, parent. Social workers, even with training, moved warily into the arena of designating a "fit" and disqualifying an "unfit" parent. They did not always trust the claims individuals made about their own "capability" for being a parent; stated motives could be misleading. In response to the uncertainties surrounding the evaluation of a good and bad parent, social workers embarked on the task of developing concrete and consistent criteria—a task that has been never-ending.²

Tiffin (1982, 271) has described the state's growing involvement in the delegation of parenthood. "Whereas previously any family that was neither immoral nor in debt was considered suitable, in the later years [1920s] much greater care was taken in matching parent and child. Progressive agencies rejected the notion that a child should be placed 'without regard to temperament or suitability just because physical conditions in a home may be good' [Illinois Children's

Home and Aid Society 1909]. To guarantee that an individual child was suited to an applicant, it was necessary that the prospective parents be investigated as thoroughly as the child had been." A home that was "suitable," then, included the characteristic of being suited to the child's nature. To the criteria for a good environment, social workers added the idea that a child could be matched with her or his new parents. And though this did not mean birth and social parent were exactly alike—after all, one was losing and the other getting a child—it also did not leave the natural parent out; the traits of the genealogical parent predicted (it was thought) the child's temperament and promise.

"Superiority" was another factor in the transference from natural to adoptive parents. Matching, for example, followed upon the selection of a home that was "superior" and an adoptive parent who was more capable than the birthparent. Truly to achieve the well-being of the child, social workers were exhorted to choose "adoptive homes that are of average or better quality" (Witmer 1963, 255). Exactly how to implement that choice, however, was no clearer in the early part of the century than it is now: could there be "scientific measures" of quality? Or should a social worker depend upon individual intuitions and feelings in the matter of selecting a parent? Professional judgment in child welfare cases continues to oscillate between those two poles. And whatever the form of evaluation, there is still no guarantee that the arrangement will work, that the child will be loved and nurtured into a productive, contented citizen.

Of course, one might learn guidelines for placement from what *had* worked. In 1924, Sophie Van Senden Theis's pioneering study of 910 adults who had been adopted as children tried that approach. As head of the New York Charities Aid Association, she assumed there would be a link between adult "adjustment" and the environment in the adoptive home. What was the background like? "What are those children who are adopted in babyhood like, later in life? How do the children and foster-parents who have gone through periods of difficult adjustments feel when the children have grown up?" she asked. Unfortunately, her findings were neither definitive nor predictive. What she found did matter, however, were the "human relationships" in the family. In an optimistic conclusion to a nonconclusive study, Van Senden Theis wrote: "In many instances, particularly in the case of the child who was placed young, the relationship appeared to be a complete substitution for the natural parent-child relationship" (in Brem-

ner 1971, II, 425). That has been the conclusion of most outcome studies since: a loving family will raise a well-adjusted child.

The implication of such studies is that good parents act like natural parents. Good parents, social workers said, "did not have to rely on intellectualized prescriptions; instead, they had a facility for understanding a child's feelings and needs and reacting in a positive, natural manner" (Witmer 1963, 157). The prescription for a suitable adoptive family has lasted—and been lastingly hard to apply, inasmuch as it relies thus on amorphous notions of "expressiveness" and "emotional attitude." Those who have tried to discover ways of predicting "adoption success" and "good adjustment" of the adopted child tend to conclude, like Van Senden Theis, that parental feelings make the difference. A crucial study by Alexina Mary McWhinnie (1967, 257), for instance, indicated that of the "many factors" that influence adoption outcome, "subtle emotional attitudes" were the most important. Yet how could subtle emotional attitudes, or parental love, be evaluated in people who had (usually) not had children? In the midst of such variables, the inadequacies of research become clearer. As Hoopes (1982) tells us, there are "difficulties in predicting functioning at a later time from early characteristics of adoptive parent and child. Knowledge of the qualities needed for good parenting is limited in the field of child development in general."

To compensate for the lack of predictability in parent-child relationships, social workers developed two major strategies: matching and assessing the "stability" of adults petitioning for a child. Referring back to Van Senden Theis's 1924 study, social workers found desirable qualities for parenthood in the "self-respecting, self-supporting, kindly families who make up the large part of every community" (in Brenner 1971, II, 423). In effect, not simply happy families but adults who were content with their roles in life provided the best setting for a child. Increased professionalization of child welfare practice generally led to more detailed descriptions of "happy families" and contented women and men. In 1943, for example, in a book that became known informally as the "Bible" for homefinders, Dorothy Hutchinson wrote: "These people have made reasonably satisfactory adjustments to the demands of everyday life. They can hold a job, make and keep friends, marry and enjoy love, and meet the common stresses of life" (in Hartman 1979, 20).

The 1940s and 1950s saw efforts to systematize the notion of "satisfactory adjustment" and to measure psychological stability in pro-

spective parents. Recognizing the uniqueness of the situation, a social worker, Ruth Brenner, wrote in the 1950s: "In an adoption agency more than in most other case work agencies there is a heightened focus on the need to predict because of the irreversible nature of the adoption process and the fact that a child's whole life is at stake." In a self-reflective vein, she went on to bemoan the primitive state of adoption investigations. "To a large degree much of the work of the selection of homes has been left to the intuition of individual case workers because there has been no clear and definitive statement of the factors which might be prognostically reliable for the weighing and selection of homes growing out of observation, practice and research" (Brenner 1951, 18). Yet, in the end, this social worker, too, concluded that a good marriage was the best predictor of good parenthood. "A stable, satisfying marriage is basic to a child's growth; for family life is built upon a vital and meaningful marriage, the hub from which parent-child relationships radiate" (88). This is what the Child Welfare League told its member agencies in the 1950s and, without much change, for the next three decades.³

Emotional stability and contentment in marriage are still the main criteria for selecting suitable adoptive parents. According to a recent CWLA *Standards for Adoption Service* (1978, 60), "The study and evaluation of adoptive applicants should take into consideration the following characteristics that are presumed, on the basis of present knowledge, to indicate the capacity for adoptive parenthood: total personality functioning, emotional maturity, quality of marital relationship, feeling about children, feeling about childlessness and readiness to adopt, and motivation." Despite claims to the contrary, these imply that a good parent is the opposite of a bad parent and that "fit" can be drawn from "unfit."⁴ Married, stable, thoughtful about child-bearing: these individuals contrast with the (stereotypical) unmarried, emotionally volatile, and impulsive birthparent. Moreover, even when agencies accepted single adopting parents, they were distinguished from the single relinquishing parent. "The stability of the marriage of a couple or the stability of a single applicant" plus "handling of earlier life situation [*sic*]" qualified potential parents in one agency (personal communication). In the shadows stands the unwed mother, unstable and inept at handling crisis.

These standards of selection are also continually debated.⁵ The difficulties of measuring contentment in marriage and emotional stability are real, and no social worker wants to determine a suitable parent

solely on the basis of lack of "unsuitable" traits. Walking the fine line between scientific measures of parenthood and intuitions about a loving parent, social workers retreat to a policy of matching. The round peg in the round hole may be the best guarantee of a successful placement: the late nineteenth-century phrase can stand as well a century later. "It is of real value to fit the right peg in the right hole. A child that may be a torment in one family would be a blessing in another. And for children of promise, promising parents should be sought" (in Hartman 1979, 19).

A round peg-round hole prescription was easier to follow when an older child was being adopted, the usual case before the 1920s; an older child's temperament and promise showed and could be "suited" to the new home. Infant placement, which became popular after that period, posed a different challenge: what could be known about a newborn baby before placement?⁶ How could the fit be ensured? One could know the biological family and, specifically, the birthmother and use her traits to judge the child's promise. As this premise increasingly dominated practice, relinquishing parents were asked to provide full "medical and background history,"⁷ aspects of which were conveyed to the prospective parents. An alternative was to find out as much as possible about the infant her- or himself. The latter led to a program of testing babies, a parallel to the effort at developing "scientific measures" of a good parent; both peaked in the 1940s and 1950s. Infant testing, of course, delayed placement of the child.⁸

In the 1960s, influenced by the theories of the psychologist John Bowlby, social workers did away with prolonged infant testing. Bowlby had condemned such practice: "The third argument against early adoption—that there is less opportunity to assess the baby's potential development—is commonly used by psychologists but is the weakest of the three. It rests on the assumption that the various tests of development available in the first year of life have predictive value for the child's later development." Better place the child right away than wait six to twelve months, Bowlby instructed, "and adoptive parents like natural parents must be prepared to take a normal biological risk" (Bowlby 1963 [1951], 436-437). No time was to be lost between the child's birth and her placement into her new, and permanent, home. Adoptive parents understood they were taking a "normal" risk—or perhaps not quite normal.

The risk for adoptive parents was (presumably) minimized by careful evaluation of the birthparent. The adoptive family had a choice

about genes. According to the director of the CWLA in the early 1960s, "Agencies were convinced and attempted to convince the public that they could guarantee them a perfect child; that by coming to an agency, adoptive parents could be sure that the child was without physical, emotional or mental defect, that his heredity was sound and adopting a child was a far less risky procedure than having one normally" (in Cole and Donley 1990, 277). The best children would be placed: the blond-haired, blue-eyed infant of adoption mythology represented all that was perfect in a child—health, intelligence, a good temperament. Yet so powerful was the belief in "matching" a child with his or her new family that the myth weakened in the face of the diverse looks and "temperaments" of adopting families. (It did not disappear: the image of the perfect baby—blond and blue-eyed—persisted, to be criticized in the 1960s and 1970s with growing concern about the exclusion of non-white parents and children from the adoption triad.) As long as matching controlled practice, the child could be as dark, as "promising," and as delicate in constitution as the adopting parents. The round-peg and round-hole philosophy continues to guide placement policy, with its expectation that a child would blend indistinguishably into the family.

The adopted child was the child the adoptive parents *could* have had. The child should resemble them in physical features, intelligence and habits, and, too, in race and religion (Huard 1956). Fitting a family, as a CWLA Task Force report proclaimed in the late 1980s, was a child's right. "Children who need adoption have a right to be placed into a family that reflects their own racial or cultural heritage and preserves their connectedness in history." "Of course," the report continued, children "should not have adoption denied or significantly delayed when adoptive parents of other races or cultures are available" (Watson and Strom 1987, 8). Likeness, the theory went, increased the chances that an adoptive parent would truly love and incorporate the stranger.⁹

For most of the twentieth century, infants were placed into families where they would fit, presumably to be given the love and care that went with belonging fully to a family. In the 1970s, however, adoption changed: the pool of adoptable infants diminished and adoptive parents could no longer be guaranteed a baby—let alone the kind of child that would grow up "as if begotten." Two consequences followed: prospective parents began to consider "special needs" children, and agencies developed mechanisms for placing special needs children

in suitable homes.¹⁰ Widening the definition of adoptable children had a counterpart in stretching the criteria for acceptable parents. The state still depended on families to fulfill its responsibility to the children, but by the end of the twentieth century these were not the same families they had been for the past fifty years.

They no longer so surely represented the average members of a community: some were single, some less than prosperous, and a few quite willing to care for a child temporarily. As the number of available infants decreased, adoption lost its family-building emphasis and once again incorporated the elements of charity and "civic responsibility" that had historically guided child exchange in the United States. By the 1970s, adopting and fostering were not absolutely distinct ways of having a child.

"The permanence and continuity of a caring relationship"

"Again, it's hard to come by clearly documented national data, but adoption professionals are seeing a tremendous increase in the number of foster parent adoptions. Roughly 60 percent of all special needs adoptions in this country appear to be such 'conversions.' In 14 of 17 states studied by the Office of the Inspector General in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in 1984, foster parent adoptions accounted for almost 50 percent of finalized adoptions" (J. Anderson 1990, 44).

Over the course of the twentieth century, adoption as a way of creating families had diverged from fostering as a way of caring for needy children. The divergence reflects the dual character of child exchange in the United States; a distinction between "child saving" and "child having" is less surprising, perhaps, than the earlier blurring of those motives for taking in children. Out of law and the professionalization of child welfare practice came two categories: in *foster care* a needy child finds a home, while in *adoption* loving parents receive a child. Both involve contracted parent-child relationships; neither family is the "natural setting" for a child. A foster family, however, is not supposed to be like a biological family, whereas an adoptive family is its facsimile. The differences tell a good deal about the notion of "parenthood" in American culture.

As an expert on foster care, Robert Holman (1973, 79), recognized: "On the one hand these private foster parents develop the attitudes and behavior appropriate to a natural parent. They give great affection, may be determined to keep the child whatever happens, integrate him into the family. On the other hand their actions and attitudes are not compatible with natural parenthood; they take payment for the child, and in many cases, as will be shown, accept—even encourage—visits from the natural parents." Those characteristics—accepting visits from the child's natural parents and, more especially, receiving payment for taking care of a child—make a foster family "different from" a real family in which, presumably, there are no "other" parents and conduct comes out of love, not for money. Confirming this strangeness, individuals in a foster relationship have been found to experience a "sense of falseness" (Triseliotis and Hill 1990).

A large part of the sense of falseness comes from the money involved. "There is evidence," for example, "that younger children do want from surrogate parents the love and commitment they think natural parents should provide, and that some of them are dismayed when they learn of the financial side of the [foster care] arrangement" (Bush 1988, 188–189). But the temporary character of the arrangement may be equally dismaying, to parents as well as to children. Foster children are never fully *there*; they can be re-placed—and both connotations are antithetical to notions of natural parenthood.¹¹ Foster children perceived an "unnaturalness" that legally adopted children did not, inasmuch as they *belonged* in the family. "While adoptees perceived themselves as growing up 'like any other child in a family,' many of those fostered were aware of differences in their situation in spite of most foster parents' efforts to make them feel secure and one with the rest of the family" (Triseliotis and Hill 1990, 112). Foster families also lack the conventional signs of "oneness" that establish security and compensate for the impermanence of the arrangement. The child keeps his or her birth name,¹² and probably does not look like the foster parents: matching is not a part of foster care policy. Foster parents are "resource" rather than "as-if-real" parents.¹³

But they are *parents*. They are expected to give the kind of nurture and education that is familial rather than institutional; their care is given with affection and commitment—if not for the child's lifetime. Foster parenting requires that one be a parent fully if not forever; performance does not presume enduring solidarity, but it does presume commitment. Like Diana, who distinguished "parent" from "mother,"

foster parents distinguish loving care from an exclusive bond of love. "It is hard to distance yourself and not be possessive of these children," a foster mother said to me. "Even the babies I have now, it's tough. You've had this baby for 3, 6 months and uh, oh. So it's real hard to get across to these people that I really, really love them but I can let them go."

Foster parents expect to share parenthood with others. The child's birthparent is supposed to be a part of foster family life, her—or, more rarely, his—existence recognized in a way that would be unfamiliar (and probably discomforting) to those involved in conventional adoptive arrangements.¹⁴ The idea of sharing evidently violates cultural ideas of parenthood even more radically than does the temporary quality of foster parenthood. At my training sessions we were given a short article by a social worker (Horejsi 1987, 77) reminding us that "not all foster parents are eager to have the bio-parents visit their child in care. Perhaps these resistant foster parents do not understand why it is so important. We need to remember that the parent-child bond is amazingly powerful. Its power cannot be denied or erased."¹⁵ We also learned that each one of us, whether potential adoptive or potential foster parent, would have to recognize the importance of the "bio-parent" in our families. Fostering blurred with adopting, then, not only because adoption might not be an option while fostering was, but also because the conditions of a "contrived" parent-child relationship now link those ways of having children. With changes in the adoptable population in the past two or three decades, issues raised by foster care become appropriate to the (likely) adoptive situation: the child may not be an infant; he or she might have strong ties to a birthparent; the chances of the child blending perfectly into the new family are not great. Thus, even those able to adopt a child legally cannot count on replicating a natural family.

Members of my training group were aware of the changes that had begun in the 1970s and led to, among other things, the creation of a "fostadopt" category. The term referred specifically to parents who fostered in the hopes that the child would eventually be "freed" for adoption, but it also confirmed the lack of boundary between fostering and adopting. Now not only might prospective adopting parents choose to foster, but foster parents might choose to adopt. The latter marked a substantial alteration in policy: until the mid-1970s, in most states foster parents did not qualify as adoptive parents, even for the children in their care (Meezan and Shireman 1985, 13). The very

terms of foster parenthood had disqualified them: they agreed to take a child temporarily; their (presumed) motive was charitable and not "reproductive"; their commitment was conditioned by the likely replacement of the child; and they were paid.¹⁶

This policy collapsed for both ideological and practical reasons. Concern about a floating population of foster children—drifting from family to family—contributed to the passage of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Funding Act (U.S. Congress, Public Law 96-272) in 1980. The Act was designed to restructure the foster care, adoption, and child assistance program, and its main theme was the importance of permanency planning.¹⁷ Under its provisions, foster parents could adopt or petition for permanent custody of the child (Derdeyn 1990). Simultaneously, "permanency" became the watchword for the CWLA: "The permanency philosophy seeks, first, to preserve and support the child in a biological family as the most natural environment and, when this is not possible, to secure an adoptive family. If neither of these alternatives is beneficial or possible for an individual child, then services should be directed to insure the greatest possible continuity of relationship with nurturing parents or caretakers" (Cole 1985, 69). The result was not only to encourage foster parent adoptions but also to ensure permanency to "all available" children. Under the 1980 Act, those who adopt "special" children can receive a subsidy.

But here a distinction emerges: "natural" families are not paid, and the provision of subsidies to adopting parents has caused a good deal of controversy. In my training group, we were told we would receive "reimbursement" for care of a child and "other kinds of 'paychecks' or rewards," like "the opportunity to develop new parenting skills." Real parents do not receive money for taking care of a child. Nor maybe, in the end, do real parents share a child or love a child "temporarily." Despite a congressional act and ideological shifts, foster parents are still not quite the "same" (Derdeyn 1990; Cole and Donley 1990). "And you know how foster parents are perceived. I mean, I can't tell you," a foster mother said to me in 1990. "One guy said to me, 'Oh, you have a farm!' A farm? He said a farm, with all these little babies crawling and working. But you know the stories. Even the agency, I'm not sure they understand why we do it."

My training group was probably a good example of the fading of such views of foster parenting. The participants were all prepared for what it might mean to have a child temporarily, to know the child's

biological parent, and to begin parenthood with an 8- or 10-year-old child. As the social worker who conducted our meetings said to me, "There will always be 'the rescue people.'" But in her agency, the rescue people were likely to be the applicants for adoption as well. Faced with the merging of child-saving and child-having that potential parents had effected through their actions, agencies began to modify their policies. Although the guideline for placement is still "best interests," social workers are less likely to separate altruistic from narcissistic motives than to look for people who can make a lifetime commitment to a child.¹⁸ With this in mind, too, agencies no longer examine applicants, following a list of desirable criteria; rather, they train people to be good parents.

"Nowadays we prepare
families rather than study them"

An applicant for adoptive parenthood in the 1980s was not likely to be offered a blond and blue-eyed baby, ready to be taken home forever. That applicant was more likely to be asked to think about a "waiting" child, a child not yet freed for adoption, or a "special" child. Furthermore, that applicant was likely to find her- or himself being considered for parenthood along with people who came in planning to request special needs or foster children. Finally, given the policies embraced by many agencies, an applicant for adoptive parenthood would be "trained" along with those who meant to parent temporarily or in order to help a disadvantaged child. By the late 1970s, training became a mainstay of virtually every child placement agency, replacing the inquiries and screening techniques that had been popular in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. The intake interview gave way to meetings at which feelings about becoming the parent of a "stranger" were elicited. As one social worker put it, agencies shifted from "interrogation" to "group education."

Petitioners for a child have always been confusing clients for a social worker. They do not have problems and failings; they simply, and "naturally," want a child.¹⁹ Ruth Brenner, a social worker especially concerned with the selection process in agencies, in the 1950s voiced a distrust of this client that can still be heard today. The client in an adoption, she wrote (1951, 98), has "a stake in withholding whatever problems he may see within his situation. He is eager to get the child

that he wants."²⁰ Such clients do not request treatment, but attention, respect, and generosity. Making it even more difficult, there are two other clients: the parent who is relinquishing a child and the child. But these two are easier to deal with; birthparent and baby fit the classic profile of the client in a social service agency: at risk, vulnerable, and in need of help. For some years, the very recalcitrance of the petitioner for parenthood as a client turned the professional spotlight on that member of the triad. And the focus fell on his or her, or most commonly their, relationship with a social worker.

This relationship tends to be awkward at best and hostile at worst. As one self-conscious social worker tells us, "The Them-Us Syndrome is quite simply the view from the client that the social worker is to be feared and the view from the social worker that those who are seeking to adopt are somehow different from the worker him/herself" (Hermann 1983, 22). Prospective parents cannot help but feel uneasy with and irritated at the person who can decide, or not, to give them a child. "After all, how many natural parents would take kindly to having their potential to be good parents assessed by someone who held the power to prevent them having a child?" asked one prospective parent, quite reasonably, given a culture in which natural parents are not evaluated (in Timms 1973, 7). "We had to meet all these criteria," an adoptive parent said to me, "when everybody else just has babies."

Social workers are aware of the difficulties that lie in requesting a child from a professional and, as well, of the combination of roles they are expected to play in the process of "transacting" kinship. A social worker described her job in the third person: "First, she is a professional. She has expertise in adoption, and can assess, teach, and counsel. Second, she is a supportive friend. She is a mature adoptive parent. . . . Finally, she is a someone parents can safely bounce ideas off. . . . Finally, she is a mature human being who has a basic liking for and understanding of her people. . . . In fact, parents are probably looking for the quality in her that she is looking for in them—the ability to be a good parent" (Ward 1979, 103).²¹ In the exchange of a child, applicant and social worker each do best by acting parental—an equality disrupted by the fact that the social worker ultimately decides who is to have a child.

Social workers, say parents, "play god." And social workers admit to being humble before their "awesome" responsibility.²² Applicants are petitioners, pleading for a child; social workers designate those "worthy" to be parents. In the 1970s, complaints by clients, as well as the disappearance of the infant that formerly constituted the adopt-

able population, led agencies to review their practices. The result was that, for a petitioner, adopting became less a matter of "meeting criteria" than of examining one's ability to "parent a stranger."

"The process begins with an adoption worker getting to know you," one agency brochure explained. "A series of group or individual meetings are held to help you to learn more about adoption and the children who wait. You and the adoption worker will come to know one another and can work to find the child who will call your family 'mine.'" To this, the director of another agency added, "Nowadays we prepare families rather than study them" (Bush 1988, 120). In practical terms, this meant that the social worker no longer sat behind a desk, trying out criteria on the clients before him or her. Now the social worker, like the prospective parents, was part of a group in which feelings were expressed, memories elicited, and opinions about a child's future exchanged. Group meetings, however, do not seem entirely to dispel a prospective parent's sense of being tested: "I've been to funerals that are livelier," a social worker said about such meetings. Exploring notions of parenthood at a meeting does not fit cultural understandings of becoming a parent any more happily than an interview does.

With all this attention to the adoptive applicant, the child seemed to disappear—as did the birthparent who could not decide whether to keep or relinquish a child (Ingilis 1984; Elise 1991). In the 1970s, one adoption agency distinguished itself from this apparent trend, asserting: Our approach "contrasts with that of many other adoption programs which may proclaim the child to be their major interest but continue to act in the best interests of parents who are seeking children" (in Unger 1977, xiii). The assertion reflected a growing sense that in half a century of professionalization, adoption had become a service for infertile couples. In response, child welfare workers called for reform and with significant results. As Hartman (1979, 13) recognized, "The most important shift in adoption practice in recent years has been the slow and halting change from viewing adoption as primarily a service for childless couples to redefining adoption as dedicated to finding families for children who need them."²³

Agencies reinstated the child as primary client, but these children were different from what they had been before the 1970s. After *Rae v. Wade*, a woman with an unexpected pregnancy could have an abortion; welfare policies and a changed cultural climate meant she could also decide to keep the baby. Thus came the decade of the "baby

principles of a market that may be appropriate to the exchange of a child, even in American culture. The point was made, in 1978, in a deliberately provocative article that argued: "Willingness to pay money for a baby would seem on the whole a reassuring factor from the standpoint of child welfare. Few people buy a car or television set in order to smash it" (Landes and Posner 1978, 343). People do value what they have invested in, and payments can be "legitimized as symbolic expressions of sentimental concern" by adoptive parents (Zelizer 1985, 207).³⁰ Those who are about to relinquish a baby may also appreciate the sense of value implied by a transfer of money. As the article I quoted suggests, willingness to pay indicates a commitment to care for that which is acquired at cost; such commitment is not, of course, antithetical to adoption principles. Simultaneously, and paradoxically, by referring to a market the article also reminds a reader that babies are not "products" but human beings, not to be bought and sold or distributed according to a cold calculation of worth.

Reference to a market offers another lesson for adoption, one that is relevant to the upsurge in independent adoptions. For, as the authors also note, a market evokes free choice and leverage: the control over a transaction that some birth and adoptive parents claim is missing from agency-arranged adoptions. People turn to independent adoptions not to sell and buy babies but to have a say in the "awesome" transaction of a child. In an independent adoption, birthparents have more say about the recipient of their baby and adoptive parents can "shop around" for the ideal parent of their child (Meezan, Katz, and Russo 1978). Birthparents and adoptive parents who choose independent adoption told me, "social workers never listen" and agencies "distribute babies as they see fit." From this point of view, agencies are the markets, providing "good" babies for those who can afford them—if not for profit, then without regard for feelings and love.

For those who chose it, independent adoption took child exchange out of the realm of commerce and into that of family. Without the red-tape and questions, the classes and training groups, adoption, people said, seemed "more natural." It was "more like childbirth," an adoptive father claimed. It also had the character of kinship: giving and taking a child can be seen as acts of generosity and of solidarity. But, opponents say, such sentiment is risky: for the child, the relinquishing parent, and the adoptive parent. The round peg may end up in the square hole. In this regard, "[1]t is clear that the possibility for

the placement of a child in a home that cannot meet his/her needs is greater in independent adoptions than in agency adoptions" (Meezan, Katz, and Russo 1978, 223). On the other hand, there is little evidence that independent adoptions result in bad placements. The children grow up as "well adjusted" as might be expected, the same authors add (232).³¹

The number of independent adoptions is rising,³² and this way of adopting evidently appeals to birth and adoptive parents. Agencies have responded by increasing their trust in clients and placing a greater part of the decision about child placement in parental hands. At the same time, too much choice is not comfortable: contingency and whim are not compatible with cultural notions of parenthood. However much relinquishing and adopting parents resent the "playing god" aspect of social work involvement, the resulting sense of the "rightness" of the placement suits interpretations of a parent-child relationship. Concepts of destiny and inevitability appear in descriptions of independent adoption and underline its resemblance to "natural" ways of having a child. Fate conveys the idea that a child "really" belongs. The same language appears in discussions of open adoption.

"Is it well with the child?"

Open adoption is an extension of the "free choice" that independent adoptions offer. It is also a response to the arguments against sealed records and secrecy made by adoption reform groups—and by adoptees, birthparents, and adoptive parents. In open adoption, "the birthparents and the adoptive parents meet and exchange identifying information" (Baran and Pannor 1990, 318). They may or may not continue the relationship (Lindsay 1987, 33). More thoroughly than independent adoption, open adoption allows individuals to make their own decisions, construct their own families, and work out their own understandings of kinship. Few have rushed into this form of adoption, but agencies and individuals are certainly moving toward it.

The first step toward openness, for an agency and for individuals, is usually an exchange of letters without identifying information. That may be followed by photographs, then names and addresses, and ultimately a meeting between the child's several parents (Silber and Speedlin 1982). In a genuine open adoption, a relinquishing parent

selects the child's family; prospective parents receive a child from a person they know. Birthparents claim they feel less like they have given their child to a "complete stranger" (Lindsay 1987) or into the "great unknown," as one experimental agency put it.³³ Adoptive parents learn about their child through familiarity with the child's other parents. Open adoption does away with the distant and impersonal character of closed adoption, but it also collapses the conventions that have upheld a fictive kinship. If a biological and a social parent are present from the beginning, there is no "as if" or "juridical parthenogenesis." As Katz (1982) rightly explains: "Open adoption is controversial because it challenges the basic goal of adoption—to accomplish a complete transplant of a child from the birth family to the adoptive family." An adoptive parent shares with rather than substitutes for a birthparent; a birthparent is kin but not parent to the child. Because this is confusing, the arrangement demands creativity about the rules of being related and the meanings of "mother," "father," and "kin."

Why do people choose open adoptions, an uncharted and certainly challenging way of surrendering and taking on parenthood? The benefits for a birthparent are more immediately obvious than those for the adoptive parent. The birthparent knows where the child is and can follow his or her development; the birthparent does not have to suppress one whole chapter of her life. But the adoptive parent also benefits, knowing the adopted child better by knowing the child's other parent. Yet neither parent has a script for such sharing or a map for this kinship. *Are* birth and adoptive parents in fact relatives? "I don't know how our birthmother is related to me. She isn't my niece or my cousin, sister or daughter, but somehow, some way, we have a relationship. There just isn't a name for it" (in Lindsay 1987, 48).

Whatever its difficulties, open adoption is spreading—if not in its pure form, then through its impact on adoption practice in general. As individuals show themselves "open" to contact, agencies eliminate the strict application of confidentiality.³⁴ And, as with other changes in adoption, this one is assessed in the light of "best interests." "Through their growing years, children need a sense of their birth heritage, as well as an understanding of the transfer to their present family. Only then can they attain a congruous sense of identity," one agency wrote about an "openness in adoption pilot process." Staunch advocates of open adoption say the same thing as cautious social workers: it is an "inescapable conclusion that adopted persons not only have two families but that they need contact with both families" in order to achieve

a sense of well-being (Baran and Pannor 1990, 330). Yet in the end, as one writer insists, "we must never cease to ask the basic question: 'Is it well with the child?'" (Katz 1982).

Open adoption accords the birthparent a lasting identity as parent, a status the birthparent loses in a closed adoption. With openness, too, a birthparent "makes a plan for" rather than surrenders her child: in such an arrangement, the birthparent can feel less the victim of circumstances—or coercion—and more the actor in a course of events. But whatever the specifics, it is the birthparent who initiates an adoption. Thus the birthparent, and the moment of surrender, begin my account of an experience of fictive kinship for its participants.