

Erasing a paper trail to the natural mother in adoption is a modern phenomenon. Up until the middle part of the twentieth century people who were adopted had access to their original birth certificates. Accounts of earlier adoptions clearly show that when adult adoptees— or their mothers— came back asking for information about each other, the agencies complied.

But though there have always been people who understood that cutting off the past of a person is not in his best interests, the attitudes changed as adoption became more prevalent.

Yet the legalization of total and final separation of mother and child would never completely banish the sense of our human and innate need for connection to one's natural family.

The Personal Becomes Political July, 1972 “Adopted Children Who Wonder: What Was Mother Like?” is the headline that rivets my attention when I turn the pages of the Times one morning. A woman named Florence Fisher, I read, had an awakening after an accident when the doctor in the emergency room asked for a family medical history— and she had no information to give: She was adopted. Assuming she wasn't the only person who felt this way, Florence ran an advertisement in the classified section of a newspaper, and the response was overwhelming. The Adoptees Liberty Movement Association, known as ALMA, was born. There were already more than a thousand members.

You have a child, you owe them an identity, you owe them at least this— their place in the chain of life.

The right to know one's origins was found in the First, Thirteenth, and Fourteenth Amendments. In brief, adopted people were denied the right to useful information and ideas (First Amendment); adopted people bore a badge of slavery, just as slave children were sold before they were able to know their parents and were forever denied the right to know their parents (Thirteenth); adopted people were made a “suspect class” by being deprived of information that the rest of us have; and their right to privacy infringed, by not allowing them knowledge of their own origins (Fourteenth).

They could not acknowledge that despite the break in the bond, blood had its own inimitable claim and connection. You could denigrate it, you could downplay it, you could even swear at me, but

still it was there, relentless as the pull of the tide. You couldn't make it go away.

There can be no legally protected interest in keeping one's identity secret from one's biological offspring; parents and child are considered co-owners of the information regarding the event of birth... The birth parents' interest in reputation is not alone deserving of constitutional protection.

Adopted individuals were never asked if stripping away their identities and histories was their choice, or in their best interests. These infants and children grow up into adults with all the rights and obligations of the rest of us, yet— due to a contract made by others— they are denied basic facts about themselves. Sealed birth records of any kind, with any restrictions that apply to the person whose record it is, codify the same kind of appalling thinking that allowed slavery to flourish in centuries past.

Anything other than full autonomy— which surely includes the right to know who one was at birth— is wrong morally, wrong legally, wrong anyway it can be interpreted.

Only in a Kafkaesque hell would someone grant anyone the right to erase the past history of another and sentence him to a state of genetic ignorance.