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A Search for Authenticity

**An Adopted Adult's Autoethnographic Account of the Search for
Authenticity: Through an Adult Education Lens**

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This thesis is dedicated to him.

Abstract

This thesis explores an adopted adult's search for authenticity using autoethnography as a methodology. It explains a shift in my ontological and epistemological approach to inquiry following a group supervision session. I examine how an epiphany took me in a different direction to my original intended research topic. Using personal archival documents, reflections and vignettes as educational aids I embark on a journey of contemplation using the lens of adult education. I will consider how adult education gave me the tools to examine my fractured life as an adopted adult and the possibilities for authentic connections.

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Chapter One

17.4.19

Dear Jacinta,

Today, I went to an exhibition that made me think of you. It was a powerful experience and it made me think of my visit to Bessborough in 2005 to see if I could find you and therefore me. Naively at the time (can a person be naïve at the age of forty-one?) I guess they can because I went there thinking I would get a sense of my (our) Mother. It was a very strange experience, do you remember this photograph? My daughter took this at the gates of the former Mother and Baby Home. This was the day before and she came with me to find where I was going to meet the Sister in charge the following morning.



Figure 1

My reason for making this visit on my own was the fact that I wanted to experience how it felt for our Mother to walk that long driveway by herself. Of course, I don't know how she felt, I can only imagine that it was a feeling of dread, unease,

loneliness and fear. We both know that this was not a place of refuge or compassion rather it was a prison of sorts. Women went in and were given a haircut, a new identity and a uniform. It was not a place where a woman waited happily for the birth of their child. Strolling through those gate pillars on a cold and bright March day I felt hopeful that I would get a sense of myself in the building where you and I were born.

Well, you were born there and left as me with a brand-new identity, witness protection for babies.

1.1 Introduction

At its inception this thesis was intended to take a very different direction although the phenomenon of student placement was always at its core. Originally my intention was to build on my 2013 undergraduate dissertation which explored the experiences of early childhood education students on teaching placement supervision. This topic became important to me during my degree as it was the subject students spoke about most frequently usually at breaks or whenever we gathered as a group. Fears were addressed, concerns shared in this informal space and I felt that this needed further exploration as it was clearly a collective preoccupation. It is suggested that “Though fortunately rare, negative placement experiences can lead to profound student discouragement” Doyle and Lalor (2009, p.167). The placement element was a compulsory part of the BA Hons in Early Childhood Education therefore it needed to be completed successfully to complete the programme.

Among themes emergent from my previous research was one of fear caused by the power imbalance between student and supervisor. This presented as a generative theme as findings returned from questionnaires distributed to forty-two final year early childhood education students. Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of placement supervision. I wished to examine their experiences under three main headings, induction to placement, supervised feedback sessions and perceived skills developed on placement.

I compiled a semi-structured questionnaire which allowed for quantitative and qualitative findings. The number of questionnaires returned was high, I note that I received thirty questionnaires from forty-two distributed. This is an indication I feel of students’ desire for their experiences to be heard and shared. Research participants spoke of their reluctance to address issues that arose on placement due to the power of their placement supervisor to pass or fail them. I note that among reasons cited for reluctance to address issues arising for the student were

“I was afraid that it would affect my pass/fail” and

“I am only a student and did not want to cause a negative response towards me” Conlon (2013 p.25)

On completion of this dissertation and my acknowledgement of its limitations, namely that it was presented from the students’ perspective one of my recommendations was:

Further research should be carried out in order to ascertain the views of other parties involved in placement namely the supervisor and college tutor to allow a complete picture of the placement experience.

Conlon (2013 p.40)

I also recommended “changing the term supervisor to mentor suggesting a more supportive than power-based interaction” Conlon (2013 p.40)

Students shared their perceptions, among them their vulnerability in an environment where they were separated from their group peers and tutors. My intention when applying to participate in the Masters of Adult and Community Education programme was to build on my previous inquiry. The notion of exploring the concept of teaching placement supervision from the perspective of the adult educator was my intention at this juncture. However, what happened next changed the direction of my thesis when we gathered a group with three of our tutors for group thesis supervision.

Following the group supervision, a realisation began to surface that to explore my intended topic would render my proposed research rationale inauthentic. During this session I heard the term autoethnography for the first time in relation to research. The reason for and the context of this topic change will be discussed and explored in this research.

Chapter Two

2.1 A Disorienting Dilemma

In order to explain why and reveal how autoethnography became my research methodology it is important for me to frame the background to what has now become the focus of my thesis Denzin (2017) suggests that our lives are formed by “key turning point moments” (2017, p. 12). The idea of an epiphany he maintains is central to these turning points and this became my experience.

It was a Monday morning and I was running late about ten minutes or so, I messaged the Whatsapp group that I wasn't far away and would they please make my apologies. Replies of “will do” and “no problem” came back and I thanked them. I really need to start staying over again in Maynooth to avoid being late I messaged. My friend Ciara text to say that we had been assigned our supervisors and that mine was to be a Dr Jerry O'Neill. We commiserated with each other that we wouldn't be in the same group and promised to meet up at lunch time.

I was in the group that were meeting on the ground floor and I arrived just as the group were having a check-in. I tried to come in the door as unobtrusively as I could and failed miserably most faces I recognised with the exception of two new faces. They welcomed me and introduced themselves, I was anxious because I had never met Jerry before but he was friendly and I began to feel at ease. Following the check-in where we all spoke briefly on how we were feeling we each began to explain what we hoped to research. I listened intently as each research topic was put forward and each group member explained how they hoped to carry out their research.

One group member began to speak about their previous research and how they intended to carry out their thesis. They spoke earnestly about their intended topic and then I heard the word autoethnography. I had never heard the word before, was I the only one who did not know that it meant? My fellow group member described how they had used this methodology for their previous thesis and that they now hoped to use an alternative methodology that would allow them to maintain a personal distance from the research. When she was finished speaking I asked what autoethnography was and what was the purpose of distancing herself from her research? She replied that because she had written herself into her original thesis that this time she wanted to write more academically,

My experience of researching for my undergraduate dissertation was the understanding that objectivity was expected from us all. Who puts themselves in their own research I wondered and why would you do that?

Adams, Ellis, & Jones (2016) state that if an author writes to “show how the aspects of experience illuminate more general cultural phenomena and/or to show how the experience works to diminish, silence or deny certain people and stories then the author writes autoethnographically” (p. 23). This should not be confused with writing autobiographically which is relating a story outlining a personal experience and the emotions that arise yet ignores the cultural “phenomena” and “practices” (p. 23)

My epiphany came about during a discussion with my thesis supervision group changed the course of my thesis. Listening to the experiences of that group member I realised that although the rationale behind my upcoming research seemed valid to me, I had begun to recognise that there was a hidden reason why this topic had a significance to me and it was deeper, underlying and hidden. I also began to see that my life experience had a cultural significance and historical context and could be a valuable tool for others with similar experiences to reflect upon. To share my narrative could also inform others who had no experience of the phenomena I would explore. This became increasingly important to me.

At first questions began to seep to the surface and then they flooded me until I could no longer ignore this deluge of introspection. In the days that followed the group discourse my thoughts were consumed with questions about my intended research and its methodology.

Should I be creating a distance between myself and my inquiry?

Why was I trying to create this distance from my research?

Would my work be valid if I ignored the true rationale behind my interest in the phenomenon of placement?

Was it appropriate for me to explore the actual reasons or would that create a bias?

Did I really want to look at these subconscious reasons and what impact would that have on me?

Did that mean that autoethnography was a subjective method of social research?

Had my previous research methodology removed me from the depth of my inquiry?

Was autoethnography a valid method of research or just an opportunity for self-indulgence?

The introduction to my research was due and I agonised over what I was going to write. I could not put words on the page, the call to be honest was all-encompassing. I was concerned that if I did give voice to the real reason behind my interest in placement experiences. What would my supervisor and my group think if I honestly addressed my preoccupation? Would I be dismissed, judged and told that my research was self-indulgent and not academically sound? Instead I was greatly surprised at the understanding and support in addressing real reasons behind my thesis and my need to take it in a different direction. In short, I was met with the human face of academia. Throughout my life I had been expected by society to live the fabricated identity I have been given without question. Being encouraged to actively question and explore in a reflective way had been introduced to me when I was part of the Higher Diploma in Adult and Community Education.

My feeling at that moment was as suggested that epiphanies imply “an initially ill-defined sense or awareness that something was missing from the academic writings and communications we were studying and accessing” Douglas & Carless (2016 p.85). An awareness was arising that my rationale for this research was not authentically examined and therefore not completely formed. Following on from this period of reflection and discussion with my supervisor Jerry, I queried the consequences of not considering and naming the real reason behind my research topic in research methodology class. I became anxious that if I did not reveal the underlying motive for exploring the idea of placement and its significance in my psyche then I would render this thesis incomplete and inauthentic. Denscombe (2003) contends that “The idea of validity hinges around the extent to which research data and the methods for obtaining the data are deemed accurate, honest and on target” (p. 301).

Allowing myself to be part of my own research contradicted everything I had learned so far about being a researcher. As mentioned I was encouraged to maintain an objective stance in my undergraduate dissertation. It was imperative I was told that to avoid bias the researcher must distance themselves from the inquiry and therefore avoid contaminating the data. The term autoethnography was very new to me and I began to explore this method of inquiry. I discovered that “Autoethnographies and biographies are conventionalised, narrative

expressions of life experiences” Denzin (2017, p. 7). One particular description which really struck me was:

Autoethnography is a blurred genre...a response to the call...[I]t is setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections between life and art..making a text present..refusing categorization...believing that words matter and writing toward the moment when the point of creating autoethnographic texts is to change the world. Jones (2005, p. 765)

A “response to the call” was the phrase that struck me, I had once responded to the call and it had been a difficult experience. This call was being an advocate for myself and my fellow adopted adults. I had experienced first hand how we were viewed as disturbed, dissatisfied and ungrateful for looking to the past and searching for our authentic selves. “Sure didn’t it all work out? People would often say to me, with a hint of irritation, unable to see the giant, jagged hole that persists in my hear to this day” Palmer (2019, p. 1). I can relate to this comment by a fellow adoptee, I met with a birth relative on one occasion after my mother rejected contact with me.

“What are you hoping to gain” she had asked as she looked at me warily. “If it’s health information there’s nothing in our family to be concerned about” she explained defensively. What I wanted to gain or re-gain was the a connection with the authentic me.

Freire (1970) contends that “one cannot conceive of objectivity without subjectivity” that neither can exist without the other, nor can they be dichotomized” (1970, p. 24). While Dominice (2000) proposes that “A person’s life history is understood as an educational process” (p. 1). Denzin (2017) also relates that “a life is shaped by key turning point moments, these moments leave permanent marks” (p. 12). I began to realise that my life was punctuated by events that had impacted on me and left their mark. These events had rendered me fearful about coming too close to my research and I needed to reflect on why this was. I was experiencing what Mezirow identified among his ten phases to ‘transformative learning’ as a ‘disorienting dilemma’ Kitchenham (2008, p. 105). Reflection was insisting on an honest examination of the reason for my preoccupation with the dynamics of placement. While an emerging awareness that my construct of placement had evolved from previous life experiences.

As a child aged three I was placed in a children’s home when my adoptive parents decided to separate, being consigned to an institution and the ensuing vulnerability and powerlessness of

feeling displaced resonated with me as an adult teaching student on placement. I was also born in a mother and baby home in Cork in 1964 an institution described as having a “harsh regime” Milotte (2012 p.171). Although this experience pre-dates my memory as I was there from birth to nine weeks old “my words weave a life story out of what cannot be known, yet can be spoken, felt, understood, told”. Jones (2005, p. 125).

Halfway up that long winding driveway that veered left towards the convent and lake an old rusted sign pointed me in the direction of what was once the hospital building.

Sorry Jacinta, I just realised that I haven't explained what the exhibition was about and why it made me think of Bessborough. The title of the Exhibition was “(A)Dressing our Hidden Truths” by an artist called Alison Lowry. It is her response to the legacy of Irish Mother and Baby homes and Magdalene Laundries. Using the medium of glass she has created pieces such as scissors and a pile of human hair to represent the removing of women's hair as a penance.

There was a list of the Mother and Baby Homes, Magdalene Laundries, institutions and children's homes on the wall. There on a black board in white typeface were Bessborough and St Clare's Orphanage where I had spent time. Seeing the names of these institutions made me feel validated in a way. I had never seen them share the same space before, other than in the folder where I keep the documents I have gathered relating to my personal history. This folder I am sure is much larger than the minimal details contained in our adoption file.

Jones (2005) suggests that “ A child's self is centred in a past only known because it is spoken by others” . As an adopted adult this has been my experience, my early life has been related to me in a piecemeal, heavily redacted manner by others namely from the organisation involved in my adoption. Information on my origins did not come from my immediate family, in fact adoption was never mentioned to me growing up. I always knew I was adopted from the age of four when I heard someone mention it to another within my earshot. I never queried it with my father, even at a young age I guessed that this was a secret and I must be the keeper of that secret. This information also set me apart, I felt different and I did not want this difference exposed. This was the moment when I began to feel an isolation that has stayed with me all of my life. I was the keeper of a secret that I had never agreed to keep but became my burden.

Chapter Three

3.1 A Search for Beginnings

My early memories have been created from fragmented information released to me from the institutions where I resided, firstly with my birth mother and then alone. The word released is appropriate because it is kept locked away as the state had kept those they deemed undesirable had once been incarcerated. At present in Ireland an adopted has no legal right to information about their origins. I had reached the age of thirty-nine before I asked for information from the adoption agency that arranged my placement with my adoptive parents. My adoptive father died in November 2003 and his loss was devastating to me. In this instance I have referred to my father as my adoptive father this is to distinguish him from my birth father solely for the reader. Hereafter I will refer to him as my Dad because this is how I think of him. While I was sorting through his belongings after his passing I had hoped to find some paperwork relating to my adoption. There was none, I did not have contact with my adoptive mother since they split in 1968, she had died in 2000 and therefore I could not ask her.

I discovered the name of my adoption agency it had been in my possession since 1997. In that year my dear nana whom I had lived with on and off for many years died at the age of eighty-six when her apartment caught fire. I was in London at the time of her death and as was my usual way of dealing with any trauma throughout my life, I tried to carry with life as usual. However, this time it did not work I developed vertigo and lost my balance for many weeks. My doctor suggested I attend bereavement counselling as he felt that the vertigo was caused by unresolved grief.

On discovering that I was adopted the counsellor asked if I had ever tried to find out anything about my adoption. I replied that I hadn't, that I couldn't and wouldn't ask my father about it. She asked if I would like her to find out the name of the agency that handled my adoption and I found myself saying that I would. I have no idea why I agreed to my counsellor finding out. I was actually quite startled when it was suggested. Whether subconsciously I did want to know and this was the first time I was open to this possibility. Perhaps I assumed that the counsellor knew better than me and I should have this information. She seemed to think that I should know and that this information would benefit me. At the time I couldn't really see how. When I attended my next session she passed the name to me on a piece of paper. She told me it was

called Cúnamh and that it was just off Grafton Street. I thanked her but didn't ask how she had gotten this information. I was accustomed to not asking questions.

I did not use this information, until I wrote to Cúnamh at the end of December 2003. My Father had died at the beginning of November 2003 and his loss had left me feeling like I had lost my footing in the world, I felt totally alone and in my panic decided that I would trace my origins in the hope that it would ground me.

Another realisation that occurred to me was that my undergraduate dissertation was not in fact my first piece of research. In 2004 I carried out a piece of personal inquiry, at the time I was not conscious that this was research, to me it was a search for my identity. On December 30th, my adoption order was granted, at this moment my past was officially erased. This was the moment when Jacinta Bernadette (my birthname) legally became Sharon Maria Louise. My own involvement in this quest for my origins was necessitated by the fact that having applied to the adoption agency I discovered that I was facing a four-year wait for an appointment with a social worker. I decided that I would place my name on the waiting list however and prepared for the long wait. In the meantime, I found my original birth certificate at the General Record's Office this was my first time to see the registration of my birth. Adopted people in Ireland are given an extract from the Adopted Children's Register listing adopted parents in lieu of a birth certificate. This lack of proper documentation sets us apart, we are different it is visible when we show this document to anyone.

I was still relatively new to the world of adoption so I decided to join a support group for adopted adults run by Barnardos. This was my first experience of sitting around in a group and sharing experiences with others. It felt very strange because it was the first time I had spoken openly about my experience as an adoptee with anyone. Through discussion and support from my fellow adoptees I considered my options for seeking my natural family.

Stories were shared by group members who had remained on long waiting lists only to discover that their birth mother had died while they were on hold. I decided after much soul searching that four years was too long to wait and I would conduct my own trace. Armed with a how-to-guide from others who had done similar traces I did find my birth-mother. I carried out the trace over a period of two years, it was something that I was actively engaged in at times at other times I left it to one side.

What finally, moved me forward in this trace was when my adult daughter left home. As I had experienced when my father died I felt a strong sense of loss when she left. These losses also caused me to reflect on what my role in life had become, for years I had been a daughter and a mother now what and who was I? In brief, it was not a positive outcome my birth-mother wanted no contact. I will not elaborate on this because it was a painful experience and the trauma was compounded by the response of the adoption agency.

On discovering that I had contacted my birth-mother the social worker from the adoption agency contacted me in work to reprimand me, I had no business carrying out my own trace she stated. It was selfish and thoughtless to intrude on my birth-mother's life, did I even consider how difficult this would be for her? Yes I had, I assured her my contact had been very discrete and cognizant of the fact that her family may not have known of my existence (they already did and had always known). What was my alternative I asked, wait for four years for an appointment with a social worker, people can die in the interim.

*"Oh Sharon" she said with air of disappointment in her voice
"I never thought that you would be the one to jump"*

Jump where?

Into the ocean, off a cliff?

I suppose it was a jump of sorts, more a leap of faith really. I jumped out of the known into the unknown with no support and no idea where I would land. I was an adult in my forties yet I felt like a troublesome child, how dare I step beyond the barrier that they had created for me? None of this was any of my business and how dare I search for my identity, the authentic me. I was working as a receptionist at this time and was fielding phone calls while the social worker continued to interrogate me on another line. I went into autopilot, ignoring the rising shame and tears and continued with my work.

People passed by my desk and smiled at me unaware what was being poured into my ear. At least they don't know what an idiot I am. I told the social worker that I would have to go that I was at a busy reception desk, she demanded that I come to see her. I said no thank you. I felt

ashamed, chastised my motives for tracing misunderstood and already dealing with my birth-mother's rejection, I withdrew.

I buried and distanced myself from this experience and had no intention of ever revisiting it again until the day that I heard the word autoethnography. I had turned my back on identifying myself as adoptee and stepped away from advocating for adopted adult's rights. Doka (1989, 2002) cited in (Mitchell, 2018, p. 4) contend that "grief, a natural response to loss, is considered disenfranchised when it is not acknowledged or attended to by society". Mitchell (2018) continues that a loss is deemed forbidden if the "relationship is not recognized" my relationship to my family of origin had been legally dissolved therefore it was not considered a loss for me. It was a loss, a loss of my past, a loss of connection and the fracture of my true narrative.

At the time of writing a proposed Adoption (Information and Tracing Bill 2016) is currently on hold, this bill is intended to:

provide for the making available by the Child and Family Agency of a service for the tracing of certain persons, their birth relatives and other persons, and of a service for the provision of information to and facilitation of contact between such persons; to amend the Adoption Act 2010; to amend the Child and Family Agency Act 2013; and to provide for related matters. (Adoption information and tracing bill 2016)

In brief this bill is intended to allow adopted adults access to their birth records for the first time since the Adoption Act of 1952. On June 19, 2019 Minister Zappone placed the bill on hold to allow further consultations. Speaking in the Seanad the minister explained that the narratives given by some adopted people about their dealings with both the state and church officials had affected her deeply. She related that:

views expressed by adopted people about their life experiences and their interaction with State and Church officials and agencies particularly with regard to their efforts to seek information that is absolutely core to their identity was deeply disturbing to me." McMorrow (2019)

This legislation had attracted a lot of arguments, its intention is to set up a legal method for information and tracing with the setup of a searchable database controlled centrally by the Adoption Authority. Adoption files were kept by individual adoption agencies and each agency acted autonomously when handling trace and information requests O'Halloran (2019). Controversy has arisen due to the attempt by the legislators to balance the rights of birth parents to privacy while respecting the rights of the adoptee to their identity. Initially there was an

inserted provision (since removed) that an adoptee would sign an undertaking not to contact the natural parents in return for birth information O'Halloran (2019).

It is sad that there are birth parents who have never shared the fact that they gave birth and relinquished a child to anyone they know. This is due to the secrecy that prevailed in the past and the idea that a woman was ruined if she gave birth outside of marriage. The idea that an adopted person could just arrive at their door uninvited is a terrifying prospect for them. They too have to live an unauthentic existence. Palmer (2019) writes about her own experience of having to live in the shadows, she has contact with her birth mother however her mother will not introduce her to anyone she knows. She likens this experience to an illicit affair, her role in her mother's life has a duality, she is her mother's child yet her mother's lack of acknowledgement negates this relationship.

Palmer (2019) disclosed that she has received many letters and emails from adopted adults who know the whereabouts of a natural parent and that they have not made their presence public. Instead "they have acted responsibly, honourably, compassionate to their natural parent's needs and respectful of their privacy" (p.1).

Lifton (2002) likens adoption to a ghost story she explains that "professionals cannot really see the adoptees, adoptive parents and birth parents who enter their offices, unless they see the ghosts who accompany them" (p.71). The notion of a ghost or a spectre presents the illusory aspect of lives lacking in authenticity. Before I had found out the details of my own birth, the time I was born and my birth weight details I imagined I had emerged one day from a filing cabinet and was not born like other people. Lifton (2002) presents the adoptee who passes through life accompanied by the child they were before their identity was changed. The birthmother is followed by the ghost of their relinquished child, her trauma present but hidden and the adoptive parents travel through life with the ghost of their own child never born. Each member of the adoption triad must exist in what Lifton (2002) calls "The ghost kingdom" (p.72)

I would not look at it again it was too painful nor was it my concern according to my adoption agency. Perhaps, the social worker was right I was not entitled to look for my past it was selfish. I should accept the identity that was created for me, be compliant, abandon the search for my authentic self and ignore my true emotions concerning this part of my life. My wish

for authentic memories was present but never declared. Hart cited in (Mezirow, 1990, p. 186) contends that:

To 'raise consciousness' means to arrive at such an awareness and to anchor the process of becoming aware in individual reality rather than in analyses and theories that were produced elsewhere.

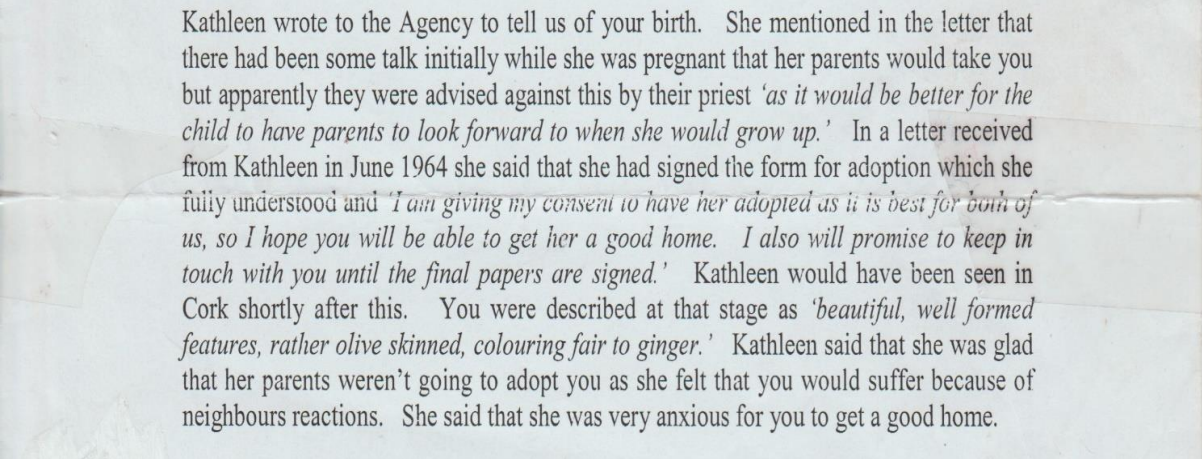
Chapter Four

4.1 An Epistemological Shift

I shared my concern with my supervisor that my thesis would not be authentic if I did not address my recent realisations. He queried what I meant about being authentic, what was the significance of this term for me and for my research. Firstly I researched the meaning of the word itself, there were several definitions offered of the term, the ones that had the most significance to me were “of undisputed origin, not a copy, genuine, based on facts, accurate or reliable ” (Stevenson, 2010, p. 107).

I am not “of undisputed origin” as an adoptee my origins are contested by the organisations who hold information on my conception and entry into the world. For example, the expression ‘putative father’ as fathers in adoption files are described suggests a questionable connection. The term infers that our mothers named these men as our fathers, but could the authorities be sure of their honesty? This calls into question the reliability factor when considering my authenticity. The language of adoption is also contradictory, for example non-identifying information, this phrase describes the heavily redacted information offered to adoptees if they request details of their lives before they were adopted. How can it be informative if it is not comprehensive, how can a complete picture be formed from an incomplete narrative?

My origins are the property of the state, they can be viewed in total only by my adoption agency and the mother and baby home where I was born. Civil servants are also privy to my complete family history if they are an employee of the Adoption Authority of Ireland (formerly the Adoption Board). My complete life narrative is not available to me without this I am a construct of the organisations connected with my adoption. In contrast to the definition of authentic I am not genuine and my fractured life narrative is not based on fact, it is filled in by my adoption agency with what we adoptees call the ‘fairytale’. This refers to the way we receive our non-identifying information, it is sanitised and suggests that there is no underlying pain or distress in the relinquishment of a child for mother or baby. It creates an impression of a finite occurrence, birthmother gladly handed over her child and everyone lived happily ever after.



Kathleen wrote to the Agency to tell us of your birth. She mentioned in the letter that there had been some talk initially while she was pregnant that her parents would take you but apparently they were advised against this by their priest *'as it would be better for the child to have parents to look forward to when she would grow up.'* In a letter received from Kathleen in June 1964 she said that she had signed the form for adoption which she fully understood and *'I am giving my consent to have her adopted as it is best for both of us, so I hope you will be able to get her a good home. I also will promise to keep in touch with you until the final papers are signed.'* Kathleen would have been seen in Cork shortly after this. You were described at that stage as *'beautiful, well formed features, rather olive skinned, colouring fair to ginger.'* Kathleen said that she was glad that her parents weren't going to adopt you as she felt that you would suffer because of neighbours reactions. She said that she was very anxious for you to get a good home.

Figure 2

On the other side were the happy adoptive parents ready to receive a new baby girl, I was presented to them as brand new with no baggage and no name. A new character for them to create in their own image. I should mention at this point that I am not against adoption however I am against secrecy that denies people their right to know where they came from. Below is the letter that my adoptive parent received eight weeks after they had applied for a baby girl. This letter was released to because my adoptive parents had both passed away.

13.6.64.

Dear Mr. & Mrs. Conlon,

You will be delighted to hear that we now have a lovely little baby girl whom we consider to be most suitable to you in every way. She was born on the 11th of April and was nearly 8½ lbs. at birth. She has progressed exceedingly well since. This little girl is inclined to have olive skin and has lovely features. I am sure that you will both be thrilled with her.

I will have her here for you on next Friday June 19th at 12.30pm. and I hope that this arrangement will suit you. Would you please let me know if this is alright and would you also be thinking of what you would like to call her.

Looking forward to seeing you on Friday,

Yours Sincerely,

Adoption Worker.

Figure 3.

Another definition of the word authentic that resonated with me was “relating to or denoting an emotionally appropriate, significant, purposive and responsible way of life” (2010, p. 210). Having completed the Higher Diploma in Adult and Community Education in 2018 I became aware of an epistemological shift in my thinking. While studying on this programme I completed the introduction to counselling module and here I discovered the significance of behaving in an authentic manner as an educator. I learned about Carl Rogers who proposed the person-centred approach to counselling (McLeod, 2007). Reasons proffered for the rationale behind this method is the notion that personal difficulties arise people’s lives if they lack opportunities to share their true selves. How can I share my true or authentic self if I do not have a complete narrative to consult?

To prevent feelings of self-judgement and insignificance the person-centred approach maintains that a relationship offering the space to flourish is essential. Rogers states that “individuals who live in such a relationship even for a limited number of hours show profound and significant changes in personality, attitudes and behaviour” (Rogers, 1961, p. 36).

Reflecting on Rogers “core conditions” termed by Rogers in 1957 as empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard (McLeod, 2003). Empathy, defined as the “therapist’s sensitive ability and willingness to understand a client’s thoughts, feelings and struggles from the client’s point of view” (Rogers, 1980 p.85). I began to realise that I had no empathy or positive regard for my own life experiences. There had been no desire or commitment by me to examine my own internal realm (Dryden & Mytton, 1999). Change happened for several reasons from participating in ongoing dialogues with my class peers and tutors throughout the year to reading about and exploring the ideas of educational theorists. Among those were Freire (1921-1997) and his concept of liberation and that the “world and human beings do not exist apart from each other, they exist in constant interaction” (Freire, 1970, p. 24).

I realised that if I ignored these discoveries that I would be hiding behind my research. Continuing with my original theme would be restrictive and a subjugation of my authentic voice. Freire, (1970) refers to the concept that liberation from oppression occurs “by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (1970, p. 25) He continues that liberation is a harrowing experience but the individual emerges transformed. Although emancipation is sought Freire contends that human beings are also apprehensive to seek it as it is a ‘painful’ experience (Freire, 1970, p. 23).

To explore this notion of self-liberation would be a difficult experience for me. It meant excavating and uncovering experiences that I had entombed with the intention of never bringing them to the surface again. Liberation demands a great deal of the self, an examination of where we are at in life and what has led us to this place. Was I really prepared to make this journey? As a child I loved stories from Greek mythology among them Homer's 'The Iliad and The Odyssey'. I thought of Odysseus and his long trek back to Ithaca after the Trojan War "However, your heart has prompted you to ask about my troubles and that intensified my grief. Well, where shall I begin, where end my tale"? Homer, (1946, p. 110). This embarkation away from the safety and comfort of familiarity would demand a great deal emotionally a re-examination of painful personal experiences.

4.2 Excavating

In addition to Greek mythology I also had a fascination with archaeology and history. Was I this because I had an unconscious desire to explore my personal history, to unearth what was buried? I pored over books on Egyptian finds, the tomb of Tutankhamun and the artefacts discovered alongside him. I grew up in the Liberties of Dublin an area of historical significance, as children we regularly abandoned our desks with our teacher to walk our local area seeing history alive in Dublin's city walls.

Evocative names like Fishamble Street, Cornmarket, Winetavern Street, Cow Parlour, Blackpitts and The Tenters spoke about their historical uses. Two cathedrals St Patricks and Christchurch were a constant in our environment. Accompanying our teacher into the latter's crypt to look at the skeletal remains of a cat chasing a mouse entranced me. The past present and visible. My childhood dream was to become an Archaeologist I wanted to dig and discover, hold precious artefacts in my hands. I lived at that time with my nana a formidable and kind lady, she was unimpressed with my ambition to dig and did her utmost to change my mind. It seems the desire to excavate and discover was always part of my psyche although I was unaware of its significance at the time.

*I want to be an archaeologist
I think that would be great
I'd read some hieroglyphics
And find a golden plate
Dinosaur bones and Viking ships would all be found by me
And I would travel round the world, examining debris*

*You can't be an archaeologist
Said Nana with a glare!
You're a girl you should be clean
Wear pretty dresses, comb your hair
Digging is for men she said
and if you want to fly
You can be an air hostess and watch the clouds float by*

*Your hands will both be dirty
You'll freeze outdoors all day
You can't be an archaeologist
Put that dream away*

Conlon (2019)

An intersection of dialogue, reflection and theory was pivotal to a realization that I was viewing education and knowledge in a different way. I had begun to consider what knowledge entailed, was it the property only of the academics who could explicate theory? Seeing knowledge as outside of myself had stopped and I realised that it was no longer solely the domain of the more knowledgeable other as suggested by Vygotsky. Knowledge had become a lived experience for me theory began to be internalised and applied to my own life story.

As the worlds of academic theory and real life had begun to fuse for me, reflection became an intrinsic part of my life, adult education was the catalyst for this. In the afore-mentioned research I carried out in 2004 I had acquired documents relating to my life before adoption. I began to see these documents not just in a personal way but realised that they also had a

historical and social context. They were educational, they were an archival account of women and children's status in society in Ireland in 1964.

Garrett (2000) explores what he describes as the "absence of Irish women and children within Irish historiography" (p.27). The experiences of women termed PFI or Pregnant from Ireland, a terminology afforded Irish unmarried and pregnant women who travelled to the United Kingdom were investigated. He looks at the period of the 1950s and 1960s when women disappeared from Irish society, their withdrawal necessitated by the secrecy surrounding unmarried pregnancies and adoption. Garrett (2000) suggests that women and children from this period have existed 'outside history' (p.28). He concludes that Irish History has a "male centred and patriarchal history" and has not adequately tackled the 'experiences' of women and children. Murphy & Luddy (1992) also ask the question "And what is history in Ireland? A narrative account of the doings of men, written by men and taught by men"

Students of feminist history are cautious of suggesting that "women form a "homogenous undifferentiated mass" (Garrett, 2000, p. 28) Rather they maintain that class, culture and location attributed to the narrative of women's lives. It is implied that women and children's involvement in history are interwoven. Garrett explains that these experiences have largely been absent from history only becoming more visible in the last 'thirty years' (Garrett, 2000, p. 29).

At this stage on my research journey I was still committed to my previous idea of placement supervision for teaching students to theorise. Reflection had changed my direction and I finally acknowledged and accepted that my preoccupation in the phenomenon of placement was woven with my previous life experiences. Experiences must be named, reflected upon and discussed which is authentic but not always possible or easy as it can raise painful reminders. I also realised that I must address the missing discussion on the lives of women and children who found themselves marginalised by society as the most vulnerable times of their lives. I have watched over the years as stories, usually presented in a sensationalist way have come in to the public domain. Stories for example of the babies from Tuam Orphanage found in a cess pit and the tireless work of Catherine Corless to make these children visible. It has been my experience that these stories appear, society is horrified then the stories disappear and are forgotten until the next revelation. As an alumna from two institutions I now felt a responsibility to be a witness to this time in Irish history, both as a child and now a woman.

Freire likens liberation to giving birth and the opportunity to surface as newly born. He contends that “action is human only when it is not merely an occupation but also a preoccupation” (Freire, 1970, p. 27). This has been my understanding, I have been preoccupied by the notion of authenticity and acknowledging my true self as a form of reflecting on the past. Otherwise my research is incomplete as it becomes what Freire suggests as a denial of ‘subjectivism’ and its role in ‘analysing reality’ (1970, p. 24). He asserts that there needs to be both the subjective and objective in a “constant dialectical relationship” (Freire, 1970, p. 24). Freire also maintains that to deny our subjectivity is ‘naïve and simplistic’ (1970, p. 24) . To do so is to negate the truth that the world is populated with human beings imbued with life histories that impact on their actions and way of being.

This concept speaks to me on a visceral level as my own identity is melded in a notion of rebirth and a manufactured identity. Muncey (2005 p.10) suggests that the use of “snapshots, artefacts and journeys make up a patchwork of feelings, experiences, emotions and behaviours” help to depict life. She continues “that they are useful in constructing a meaningful whole” central to presenting the truth “to the world that needs to hear it” To this end I have included documents and extracts from letters I received in response to my requests from agencies and institutions regarding my adoption and time spent in a children’s home. These documents or artefacts I had collected in 2004 following the death of my Father when I decided that I would look for information about my family of origin. Lifton (2002) remarks that :

adoptees often do this after some major event in their lives-marriage, the birth of a child, losing a job, the death of an adoptive parent-when their dissociation lifts, and they have access to their psychological need to reconnect with the past and know where they came from. (p.74)

From an ethical perspective it is important to mention that any names other than my own have been removed from documents I am presenting to preserve the anonymity of the senders. These documents have an important archival context in that they highlight my first experiences of being placed. I was nine weeks old and unaware I had been placed however, it was my first experience of being alone in an unfamiliar environment. It is important for me to acknowledge the significance of this early experience on my overall view of placement and it also explains my correlation of the idea of being placed and institutions.

According to Kitchenham (2008) Mezirow contends that there are dual components to transformative learning. Cited as ‘critical reflection’ and ‘self-critical reflection’ (2008, p. 105) they are an opportunity to explore suppositions, discuss and thereby make a decision. I had finally come to my decision that my methodology for my thesis would have to be autoethnography. Initially it was through critical discourse within my supervision group that I experienced a disorienting dilemma, a realisation that I could not hide the authentic me behind an inauthentic thesis. Guilt also emerged as part of the reflective process, I became aware that I had residual guilt from relinquishing my responsibility to my adopted adult peers. Having once advocated for change I had put this to one side, fifteen years on this still elicited a feeling of abandoning my fellow adoptees. There is a feeling that by carrying out this piece of research I can also address my lack of advocacy in a manner I can emotionally cope with.

One Saturday in the early hours of the morning I got a text message from my friend who is a fellow adoptee, she had received a message herself asking to contact Minister Zappone in relation to the upcoming Information and Tracing Bill. The Minister had mentioned that she had heard no feedback from adoptees concerning the bill and we decided that we must make our voices heard. I forwarded a standard email that had been prepared and I was surprised when our voices were heard and the bill was delayed for further consultation. O'Halloran (2019)

Subject: Adoption Information and Tracing Bill 2019

Dear Minister Zappone,

I am writing to you to express my concern about the Adoption (Information and Tracing) Bill 2019, which you are attempting to have passed before the summer recess. The proposed system for Túsla to automatically attempt to locate and contact both natural parents before the release of birth certificates and adoption records to adopted people is an unacceptable interference with the privacy of both natural parents and adopted people.

Moreover, the measure requiring adopted people whose natural parents object to the release of their records to attend a hearing at the Adoption Authority is discriminatory and wholly unnecessary.

Adopted people deserve nothing less than full access to their birth certificates and records, just like every other Irish citizen. They deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, and not as a threat to their natural mothers' privacy.

If you cannot obtain approval from the Attorney General's Office for non-discriminatory legislation, I ask you to please withdraw the Bill.

*Yours sincerely,
Sharon Conlon (Bessborough 1964)*

Chapter Five

5.1 A New Identity

In December 2003 following the death of my Father I wrote to the Adoption Board (now the Adoption Authority) to ask for the name of the agency that handled my adoption. I wrote to ask for certain details from my file below is the letter I received in January 2004

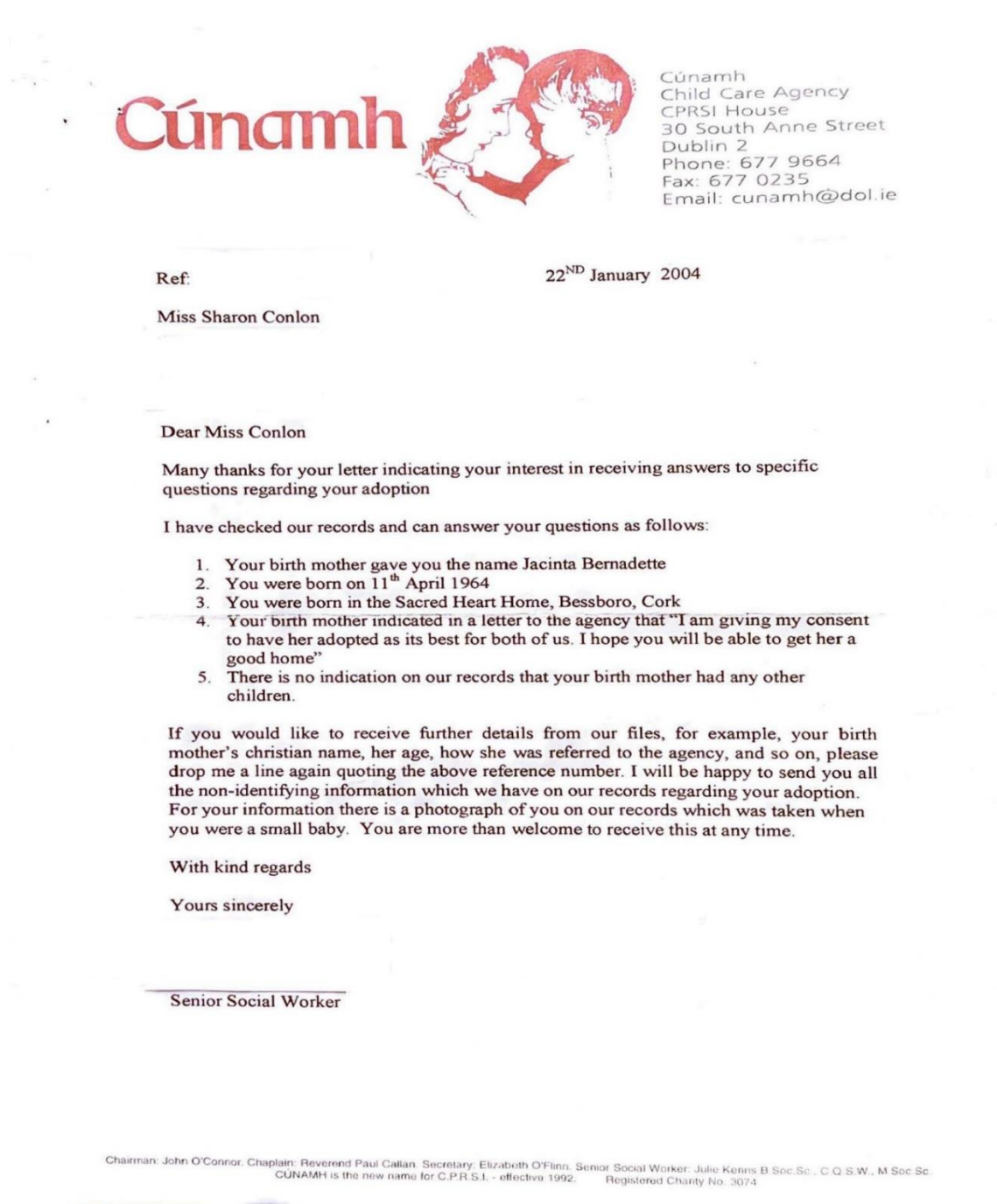


Figure 4.

Receiving this information was a turning point in my life, I finally had a gossamer threaded connection with my past. I could not relate to my original name, the name Sharon is the one I will always identify with as it is the name that has accompanied me through life. The mention of a photograph excited me, I have very few photographs of myself as a child and I was anxious to see one of how I looked at that time. I replied that I would be delighted to have the photograph and it was sent to me.



Figure 5.

I wondered why the agency had this photograph of me, I guessed my Dad sent it to the agency and intended it for my birthmother. He was an avid photographer and had a very kind heart, he would have thought of her. However, the photograph stayed in my file, the idea was for the

birthmothers to forget and put this event behind them. A photo would be considered a reminder, I wondered if they told my Dad the photo had been passed on?

5.2 Pregnant from Ireland (PFI)

“To begin my life with the beginning of my life I recall that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) Dickens (1850, p. 5). I should mention that I do not actually recall and neither was I told any details about my birth. I had been adopted in 1964 from a Mother and Baby Home in Cork at the age of nine weeks and as previously mentioned was brought to Dublin and placed with my new parents. As mentioned any details gleaned about my entrance in to the world happened as recently as 2004, forty years after my aforementioned birth.

My birth was not a happy occasion as my twenty-year old Mother was unmarried. “Having a child out of marriage was regarded as an unspeakably scandalous act” Milotte (1997, pp. 10-11). My pregnant Mother had escaped (or so she thought) from her home village in Mallow, north Cork to England. There she found work as a domestic in a hospital for those with mental health problems even in-utero I had been in an institution. When my Mother approached a Catholic Adoption Agency in February 1964 for help, was told that they did not handle Irish adoptions.

Such was the number of Irish pregnant women arriving seeking support from English Adoption services that they “earned the nickname ‘PFI’-Pregnant From Ireland” (Milotte, 1997, p. 10) The advice given was that it was best for her to return to Ireland and have her baby there. She was repatriated and a place arranged for her in a Mother and Baby Home in Cork. Enroute to The Sacred Heart Mother and Baby Home in Bessborough she was interviewed in the offices of the Catholic Protection and Rescue Society of Ireland (CPRSI), South Anne St, Dublin.

What then were CPRSI rescuing children from? Apparently, the biggest fear at this time was that a Catholic baby might find their way to a Protestant family. Archbishop John Charles McQuaid had set up the Catholic Social Welfare Bureau in the 1940s and appointed Fr Cecil Barrett as its head. The aim of this organisation was to “provide for the welfare of Catholics” Milotte (1997, p. 23). Fr Barrett was also the head of the CPRSI “a militant and anti-proselytising organisation” Milotte (1997, p. 23). Barrett was considered an expert about the fostering and adoption of children, he collaborated frequently on the drafting of the 1952 Adoption Act with Archbishop McQuaid.

My Mother and I found ourselves in the hands of this organization and it was agreed in their Dublin offices that she would place me for adoption when I was born, she was then sent to Bessborough for her confinement on March 4th, 1964. I use the word confinement because that is what the experience was for the women and their children. The women there were called "first offenders" meaning this was their first pregnancy out of wedlock.

The girls were treated like criminals in this building and there was a general air of penitence. It permeated every corner - even the chapel. Those in charge who ran the godforsaken place like a prison did so as cruelly and as uncaringly as any medieval gaoler.

(Goulding, 1998, p. 42)

As I made my way around the exhibit I came across the piece that affected me most and really made me think of you. Suspended on wires were little white christening gowns, they reminded me of the little cotton gown that was put on my daughter when she was born in the eighties. Titled 'Home Babies' it was a representation of the infant bodies discovered in a septic tank in Tuam. This alcove was dark apart from the light shining on these disembodied gowns that seemed to float in the darkness. For a moment I could visualise you floating in the darkness as a nine-week old infant cold, forgotten and stripped of your identity wearing this infant shroud.

I suppose the fact that the fifth interim report of the Commission on Mother and Baby Homes was published today and the Minister's comment that out of nine hundred children who died in Bessborough itself or in hospital having transferred from Bessborough only sixty-four children's burial locations are known. The Sisters apparently do not know where the other children are buried! They too are suspended, forgotten and lost somewhere in time. It sounds strange I know but I laughed when I heard the newsreader say that the nuns said they would not or could not disclose where these babies were at rest. Not because it was funny, but because I guessed who they had spoken to. There is no need to name her here, we both know who she is.

Back to that March day I went to visit Bessborough, I had made an appointment with Sister and I arrived earlier than I expected. Travelling in on the bus to Mahon to the convent I wasn't really sure where I had gotten off the day before so I asked a lady if

she knew where I should get off for Bessborough. She looked at me knowingly as though she was used to being asked this question.

"Are you going to the home ?" she asked

"Yes, I was born there, I am going to have a look around" I replied.

"My Mother had a baby there," She continued. "It wasn't a nice place. We never knew about my brother. She only talked about it when she was very old, she used to cry "

"I am so sorry" I said

"How long are you down for ?" she asked

"Just for today" I said "I am going home this evening, I am very nervous going in here"

"Sure, those days are gone, they aren't in charge anymore girl" She replied. "Your stop is next, good luck"

Girl? She was right I felt like a girl, a very young girl frightened girl.

I thanked her and stepped off the bus.

Crossing the road I passed by a small industrial unit to my left with a few office buildings. They looked out of place there I thought. These modern buildings when I was about to walk into a building from the past. The convent is off the beaten track well hidden from the main road. This made it a great place to hide out, away from condemning eyes if you were unmarried and pregnant. Walking a short distance through some trees and bushes the large open gates stood in front of me. Glancing at the Sacred Heart Convent to the right of me I passed through the gate posts which looked like limestone sentries and started up the drive. The sun blinded me but it was a very cold day and I pulled my scarf tighter and pulled up my hood.

Wow Jacinta! the grounds there are beautiful, someone finding themselves there and not knowing the history of the place would find it beautiful. Did the pregnant women walking this drive stop a moment to take in the beauty around them? Did the surroundings reassure them put them at ease? That I cannot answer, maybe they were preoccupied with other more immediate concerns.

What were they walking into, would they find kindness, understanding and sympathy?

No, they would not

Would they be judged, shamed and vilified?

Yes, they would

Were they giving away their freedom?

Yes, they were

When I reached the rusted old hospital sign I turned left into a small courtyard and walked towards an open door. Two women stood just inside the door, they looked at each other and then at me waiting for me to speak.

"Hi, I'm sorry I am a bit early, I wasn't sure of the buses. My name is Sharon I am here to see Sister" I rattled on nervously. "I have an appointment for eleven" I continued.

"She's around here somewhere" one of the women said looking behind her as if she could be found there.

Suddenly as if she had been summoned appeared another lady, smaller than the other two. Aged in her late fifties (don't quote me on that Jacinta I am hopeless at guessing ages) she wore a lavender coloured jumper and navy skirt. The lady I had been speaking to said "Sister, this is Sandra she is here to see you"

"Sharon" I corrected in a whisper.

Without making any eye contact or even looking directly at me Sister spoke "Did I give you an appointment?" she asked.

"Yes Sister, I wrote to you and we spoke on the phone yesterday. I am sorry I am a little early I wasn't sure of the buses" I spoke very quietly, something about this building, this space seemed to require it. Reverence at all times please.

"Well, you are welcome, I will get my coat and give you the tour"

Still no eye contact.

"Thank you, Sister" I spoke to her back as off she went to get her coat and the two chatting ladies disappeared down a corridor.

At this point Jacinta I should say something about this Sister she seemed very stressed and distracted. Hers was a job I would not want firstly she had sole charge at the time of all the adoption records from Bessborough. Added to that she also had charge of all the records from the order's other convents Sean Ross Abbey in Roscrea and those from Castlepollard in Westmeath. Vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, did she think that this unhappy charge would one day be hers?

I wondered if mine was the first visit that day or was I one of many? Was there another show at three? What did she think of all of us wanting to return here to see where we were born? Did she find us ridiculous, pathetic or annoying? Did she understand the need we had to connect? I wish I had been courageous enough to ask those question.

Sister returned in her coat and indicated to me to follow her, we both headed off down a narrow corridor, Stupidly, when I imagined this place before I had seen it I had envisioned a convent. However, this was a hospital building separate to the convent itself. The corridor had a linoleum floor, when it was a working hospital I am sure these floors were scrubbed and kept gleaming by the women inmates. We passed by a room which Sister said was the occupier's office back in the day. It had a glass window which would have given a complete view of the comings and goings on this corridor. Pointing to the right and glancing at me briefly she said and this was the kitchen.

"All of the meals were prepared in here" she said but did not bring me inside. "Would you like to see the delivery room?" she asked. "Yes please" I said. Sister opened the door to a small empty room, that could have been anything really. All of the furniture and medical equipment that may have been here once was gone. No bed, no cots gave an indication of what this space was once used for. On the wall hung an old sink long and white. It reminded me of the sink that the babies were washed in at the hospital where my daughter was born.

So, this is where we made our entrance into the world I thought Jacinta. Did I feel any sense of recognition? No, I didn't. I expected to but there was nothing except a feeling of being in a dream, that this was not quite real. Suddenly, I felt very alone, I wished I had let my daughter come with me. I needed a familiar and comforting presence with me. I didn't feel like Sister was not my companion on this journey into the past. She was an archivist of my history a history she would not share with me. She was my tour guide, giving me facts about the building, nothing more. There was no understanding or enquiry into the enormity of this visit for me. I didn't show that I was feeling a bit overwhelmed I was afraid that Sister might decide to end the visit if I did.

Next port of call was the nursery, once filled with babies and activity, now empty again devoid of furniture or any remnants of its former occupants. This is where we all lay unaware of the fact that in a few weeks, months or years we would begin a new life. One that took us away from our Mothers and our ancestors, some made the journey to America. Wherever we ended up our

destinations were not known to the women who had conceived, carried and birthed us. Again, I wished that Melissa was with me, I wanted to see her reaction to this place, I also wanted to slip my arm through hers. That morning when I had left her at the hotel she had joked "Now don't tell them that you have a daughter and you are not married, they might try to keep you in there" I had laughed and told her I would keep it to myself. I desperately wanted to share a joke with her now, this was a grim experience I craved some respite and some levity. Did the women and children who lived in this home ever have a reason to laugh?

We climbed a staircase together that brought us to a large parquet-floored room. "This was the dormitory" Sister explained. The women who were expecting slept here awaiting their baby's birth. "Look at that floor" she exclaimed. My head went down immediately, what was I supposed to be looking at?

"Any woman would be delighted to have that floor in their home, what wood do you think that is?" she asked. I desperately searched my brain for wood types, I hadn't a clue! If I gave the wrong answer would I be ejected from the building? "Em, Teak? I offered. "Yes, Teak" she seemed happy with that answer. "Hasn't it aged beautifully?" she mused. "Yes, it's beautiful" I replied.

Our flooring conversation seemed to have created a little thaw in Sister, she began to chat to me as we left the building to explore the grounds. "So, did you have a happy life?" she asked. "Our Mothers always want to know that" She made it sound like they were in a holding compound somewhere waiting for replies to this question.

"Oh, you know life" I told her "It has had its ups and downs" I wasn't going to tell her that three years after I left Bessborough for adoption that my parents had separated and I was placed in a children's home. I did not want her to think I was disaffected or bitter, again I was afraid that if I told the truth she would dismiss me. No unhappy adoptees here please!

We walked around the grounds, I saw the glasshouses where fruit and flowers were grown. The convent was completely self-sufficient once Jacinta. The women worked the land, fed the cows, cleaned the convent and hospital. There was even a small shop in Mahon village that sold the flowers and fruit grown in the glasshouses again staffed with women from the home.

Our journey brought us to the convent entrance, a beautiful Georgian building facing a lake. Passing by the convent and long white conservatory we arrived at the little red-bricked chapel which Sister wanted to show me next.

Sister opened the chapel door with her key and it creaked open, We went inside and I stood for a moment trying to take in everything at once. It was a small chapel with seats either side of a short aisle. We walked up to the altar and to either side were also rows of seats. "This is where the congregation sat" said Sister. I realised that the Sisters would not have been visible from the main body of the chapel. "The girls did not want to be seen, you understand" she suggested. I nodded that I did understand, perhaps it suited both parties. Suddenly I became aware that at the back of the chapel were stacks of bed frames and mattresses. Seeing me notice them Sister said "These are going to a hospital in Chernobyl"

"Please don't send those beds to Chernobyl" I pleaded in my own head. "Those are misery beds, haven't the people there suffered enough?" Those beds and mattresses are souvenirs of a cruel regime and an unhappy time. I glanced at the baptismal font I had been brought in to see and left the chapel. I was desperate for this visit to come to an end now. Too much for one day.

On April 16th 1964 a couple from Dublin who had been married for nine years and had not been successful in having their own child decided they would adopt. They approached CPRSI and filled out an application form. The brevity of A4 application form from 1964 compared greatly with the present day where prospective parents participate in an extensive assessment.

APPLICATION FORM

INFORMATION GIVEN BY APPLICANTS ON THIS FORM WILL BE TREATED IN STRICT CONFIDENCE.

Name and Address... MR & MRS FERGUS CONLON
LEONARDS CORNER
 Phone:

Date of birth of husband 3/5/30³⁴ Date of birth of wife 27/12/33³¹

What is your income? £14

Date, nature and place of employment PLANT MANAGER
60 MINUTES CLEANERS, PHIBSBORO

Are you both in good health? YES

Date and place of marriage 19TH MARCH 1955 ENGLISH MARTYRS MANCHESTER

Have you any children? (If so, state age and sex) No

Has any child been adopted by you before? Give particulars No

8. What is the accommodation of your home? 3 ROOMED COTTAGE
1. LARGE LIVING ROOM, BEDROOM, KITCHEN & BACK Y.

9. Why do you wish to adopt a child? (Are you both anxious...YES...have you fully considered the matter?) YES: WE LOVE CHILD AND WE FEEL THE BABY WOULD COMPLETE OUR MARRIAGE

10. State age and sex of child you would like to adopt A GIRL
AS YOUNG AS POSSIBLE

11. Are you BOTH good Catholics? YES

How often do you receive the Sacraments? { Husband: Frequently
 Wife: MONTHLY

12. Give name and address of a responsible person who can vouch for you:
BRO. ANA DEUS MOUNT ST. JOSEPH ABBEY ROSCREA
 Signature of husband Jerry Conlon
 Signature of wife Greta Conlon
 Date 16/4/64

NOTE: Parish Priest's and Employer's references and Medical Certificate will

Figure 6.

This was 1964 and there were 1,292 babies available for adoption, fifty-one of those destined for the United States of America (Milotte, 1997). Supply was much larger than demand and adopters could specify gender and age. Adoption agencies also attempted to match children's colouring and looks to their intended families. Prospective parents must be practising Catholics and have a reputable person to vouch for them. My Father had a childhood friend who had entered Roscrea Abbey and was very happy to be that referee. On June 13th, 1964 a letter arrived from the adoption agency informing my parents that a child that matched their requirements had been found and I was available for collection in six days.

I already had a name, this would never have been disclosed to my parents. As with all new parents they wanted to choose a name for their new baby, I was not newly-born however and I did have a history of my own. This was year zero and whatever had gone before must now be erased and forgotten, my life would begin again as Sharon Conlon.

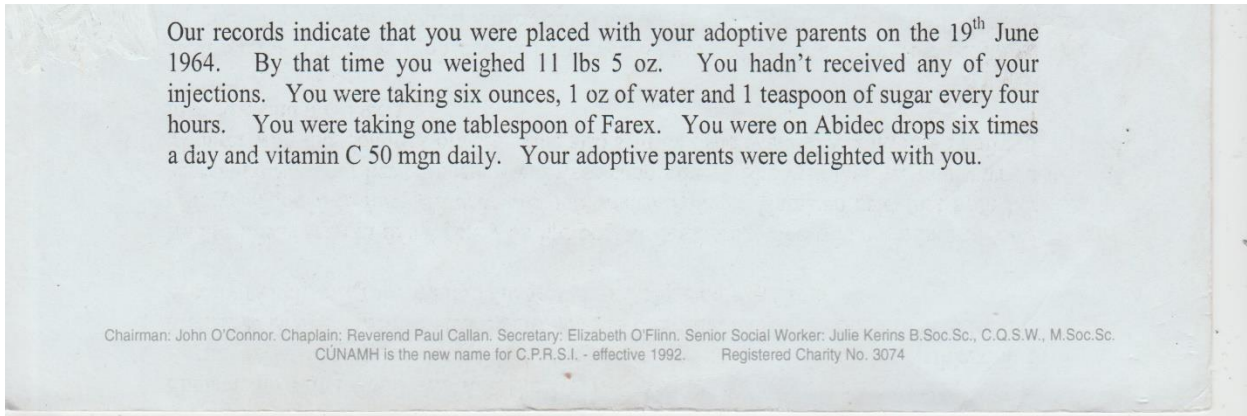


Figure 7.

When I completed my Higher Diploma in Further Education, I had three teaching placement supervision visits from my tutors. Having been placed with my adoptive parents I discovered from my non-identifying information that I also had three visits from the agency's social worker. The first visit took place in early July, my name had now changed from Jacinta to Sharon. A second visit happened in September I seem to have passed this visit as it was noted that I settled in quickly and had caused no trouble to my new family.

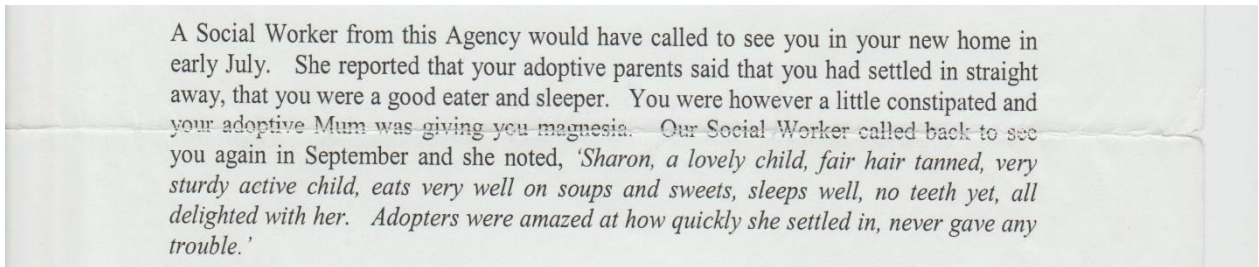


Figure 8.

One final visit took place in November and it was noted that things were going well at that stage. There is no elaboration as to what was going well that seems to be unimportant information to record, I assume I was still not causing any trouble.

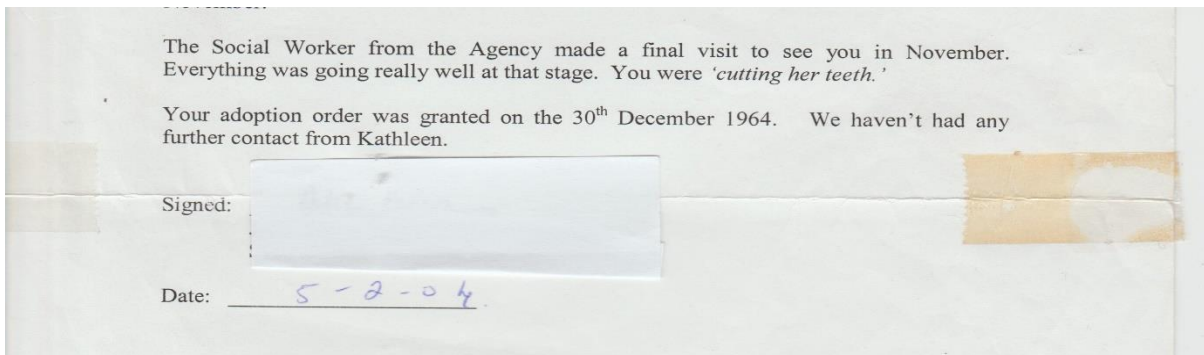


Figure 9.

Once my adoption order was granted I was on my own, there were no further visits to check on my well-being, I was now a legal member of the Conlon family.

I was eight months old.

5.3 Another Home

“To lose one parent Mr Worthing may be regarded as misfortune, to lose both looks like carelessness” (Wilde, 1895, p. 14). As Lady Bracknell suggests there seems to be an element of carelessness in my losing two sets of parents in three years. I can’t take any responsibility for these losses although I did blame myself for many years. In December 1967, my parents separated this was not a gradual thing, it happened quite suddenly when my Mother left the family. They had been unhappy for many years before I was brought into their lives. They did not put this on the adoption application form for obvious reasons. Their assumption was that the missing factor from their lives was a child, this was not the case. When my Mother left I was brought to stay with my Aunt where I was living quite happily by all accounts.



Figure 10.

For some reason known only to my late Father, he took me from my Aunt’s home and placed me in a children’s home. I never asked him why, my assumption is that he wanted to pressure my Mother into coming home, it didn’t work. I was three years and ten months old according to the records from the home.



Sisters of St. Clare

The Generalate • "Bethlehem" • 63 Harold's Cross Road • Dublin 6w
Telephone: 01 496 6880 / 496 6791 • Fax: 01 496 6388

Ms. Sharon Conlon

South Circular Road
Dublin 8

6 April, 2005

Dear Ms. Conlon,

Thank you for your letter of 30th March, 2005 in which you recall the time you spent in St. Clares. We have checked our files and enclose the only record that we can find relating to your time in the children's home.

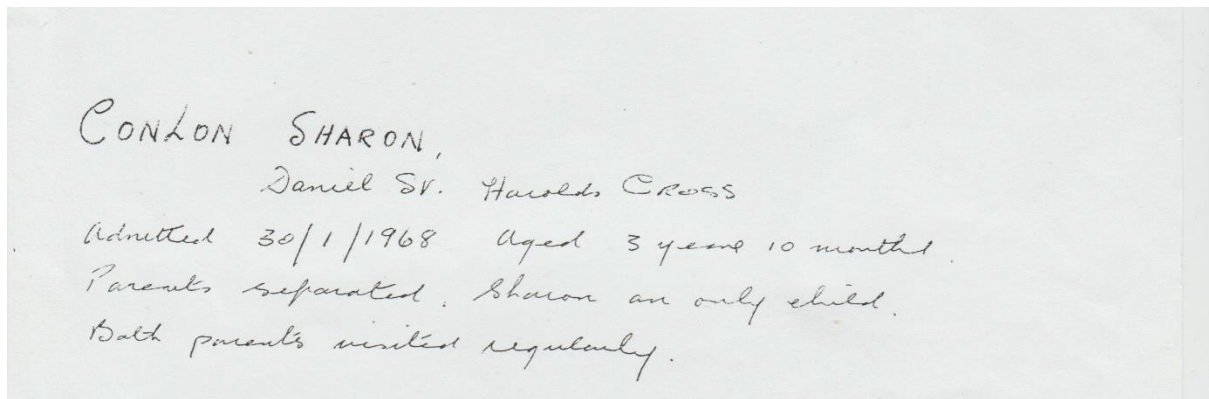
I am sorry it is so brief, but hope it will be of some help to you.

With every good wish.

Yours sincerely,

Abness General

Figure 11.



CONLON SHARON,
Daniel St. Harold's Cross
Admitted 30/1/1968 Aged 3 years 10 months
Parents separated. Sharon an only child.
Both parents visited regularly.

Figure 12.

In 2005, I wrote to St Clare's former children's home to ask for any records about my time there, above are the replies I received.

It was cold the day I was left there and I recall clearly what I wore, a yellow cotton dress with nursery rhymes printed on it and an Aran-knit cardigan. My legs felt cold in my ankle socks. We climbed the two steps that took us to the front door of the home, Dad knocked and the door was opened by a woman dressed all in brown. I found myself in a kitchen staring up at a large steel pot. A lady who I assume was the home's cook tried to engage me in conversation about the nursery rhymes on my dress. I don't remember if I answered or how I answered, this conversation was presumably to distract me from the fact that my Father was leaving. I cannot say what my reaction was on finding him gone and realising that I was now alone, I don't remember if I cried or screamed.

I recall nights in the upstairs dormitory, a row of small beds with white covers, a curtained bed at the end of where the Nun on duty slept. Listening to the passing traffic, watching the shadows of cars thrown up on the wall then disappearing. I remember wondering if my Dad was ever going to come and get me in his car. These memories are not always animated they are like stills from a film. I remember being sick, I was fortunate to catch all my childhood illnesses in one go, measles followed chicken pox. Then an unpleasant case of impetigo, I recall one of the Sisters treating the sores on my scalp and cutting my hair so that she could get to the sores. Everything in the home was communal, no personal toys, keepsakes or clothes. Another little girl walking around in my nursery rhyme dress this upset me because I couldn't go home if I didn't have my dress. Nothing was mine no parents, no family or personal belongings.

In September I started school this was a very positive experience for me. I was dressed in a brown woollen uniform and felt immediately at home in the classroom. Crayons, jotter and pencil that were just for me the class teacher was lovely and I felt so happy for this brief respite every day away from the home.

Four lines recall are all that are recorded about my years spent in the home, it contrasts considerably with the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Report (2009), day 11, July 15th, 2004. In this section of the Ryan Report the same Sister who sent me the four lines of information provided twenty-five pages of information when giving evidence to the above Commission. Here she gave an authentic account of a child's experience of being placed in care:

I suppose I feel very strongly and be very aware that when any child is admitted to residential care, it is a very distressing experience for them because they are going to leave familiar surroundings, move to live with strangers in a strange place and everything about it is strange.

Ryan (2009, p. 11)

The Sister also acknowledged that:

we would accept that for many years the daily routine in the institutions, they didn't take into account the needs of children. The life was too regulated and too disciplined to allow for differences in their physical and emotional development.

Ryan (2009, p. 18)

There is no record of my release, my vague recollection is that I started school there I remember a Summer holiday with the nuns and I also remember two Christmases. My reckoning is that I was there approximately two or more years however I cannot be sure of that and the records I received did not expand my knowledge. The information is also incorrect, both parents did not visit regularly, my Mother was gone and living in the UK, I did not see her again until briefly on the day of my First Communion. When questioned by Mr. Lowe on the background of the children who were placed in the home, Sister replied:

I think there was quite a mix. You don't have the background, I suppose, that you have for the industrial school children where you have committal orders and there is a little bit about their parentage and how many other children were in the family. Sometimes it would be family groups because it might often have been a mother who was ill or perhaps died.

So, you would see on the page maybe and this is the sad part about it, it is only a page but it is these children's lives and that is what strikes me strongly. Ryan (2009, p. 26-27)

Sister went back into the hospital building and I followed her to her office. She opened the door for me and I went inside and looked to see where I could sit down. There were four chairs lined up against the wall, far away from the desk. I stood and waited to be directed to sit. "Now, did I give you a reference number" asked Sister. I gave her the number and she left the office. In her absence I tried to decide where I was going to sit.

As part of my Junior Cert English Jacinta I read *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, I loved that book. There is a scene where the Uncle of the main character Pip comes to visit him in London. Pip has come into an inheritance from an unknown benefactor, he originally lived with his sister and Joe who was a Blacksmith. Joe loved Pip like his own son and dresses up in a suit and top hat. Clothes he feels extremely uncomfortable in but he does not want to be an embarrassment to Pip. When he arrives into Pip's apartment Joe takes his hat off and tries unsuccessfully to balance it on the mantelpiece. No matter what way he places it, the hat falls off much to his growing anxiety. Well, I approached these lined-up chairs with much the same anxiety. I sat on one then moved to another, none of them seemed to be the right chair to sit on. Would it be appropriate I wondered to bring one of the chairs across the floor closer to the desk? Were they lined up in this manner because Sister wanted her visitors to sit away from the desk? I moved one away from the wall and left a gap between myself and the desk but I felt ridiculous so I returned the chair to its original spot. At that moment I felt like Joe Gargery, out of place, anxious and trying desperately to do the required thing but failing miserably.

Sister returned with a beige paper folder in her hand. "Found it!" she exclaimed. She sat at her desk and made no motion to me to move closer so I guess I was where she wanted me to remain. She opened the file with the authority of one who has ownership. I desperately wanted to edge closer to that desk to see if I could make out anything upside down. "Do you know your Mother's surname" she questioned. I told her the name I had. "That's right" she smiled at me. "Oh, and you were adopted through Cúnamh " "I was" I replied. "Does it say when my Mother was admitted?" I asked. Sister scanned the page in front of her "March fourth"

she read. "That's today's date" I said. "So, it is" she countered unimpressed.

Imagine Jacinta our Mother and I both arrived here at the same time of the year! That was a revelation to me, maybe the weather was the same that day and the grounds would have been in a similar seasonal state. This was the only time I had felt any connection during that visit. Sister intruded on my thoughts "Have you accommodation for this evening, you are more than welcome to stay over?" This idea seemed very bizarre to me although it was a kindly meant. "I am going home to Dublin this evening Sister but thank you for the offer" I responded. "Sister Louise will be so delighted to hear about you" she said. Who was Sister Louise I wondered I have no idea why she would be delighted to hear about me? I didn't ask, I wanted to go back to my hotel and hug my daughter. Sister stood and I went over to shake her hand and say thank you. She saw me to the main door and wished me a safe trip home.

Chapter Six

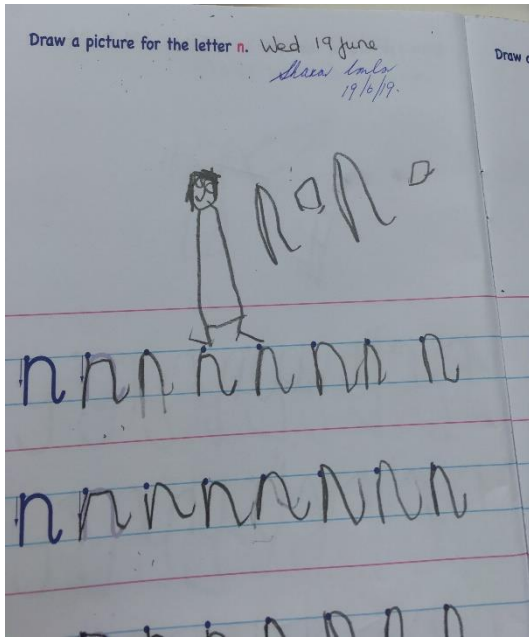
6.1 Conclusion

When I reflect in the future on the writing of this thesis I know that the struggles I faced will be what I remember most. It was a sporadic experience, I would write a lot then write nothing for a long time. I ran away from it many times but always returned. At times I felt like throwing in the towel however, I felt a real commitment to this inquiry and that held me fast. There was an authentic desire for me to connect with others by writing, to present the hidden history of those involved in the world of Irish adoption. I felt discomfort with my chosen methodology even though I am certain that this methodology suited my particular inquiry. Autoethnography is not a linear process and mirrored my own journey, the back and forth from the past to the present.

When I could face writing I stayed with it for as long as I could, in the days following it was difficult to restore some kind of equilibrium to my life. I would eventually return to the present and it was spending time with my grandson that helped me move from the past to the present. It was impossible to be part of his little world without being fully involved and that was my saving grace. I would collect him from school and we would head off to the local library or Starbucks to do his homework.

A hot chocolate for Fergus and a frappe for me, then out comes his folder with that day's homework." Okay Fer, what do we have today then?" He opened his handwriting book and looked at the page dated for today. "N, today nana, can I draw the picture first before I do the writing?" he asked. "Absolutely" I answered.

His little finger touched my nose. "Yes, nose is starts with n " I said. "Nooooo" he laughed. "Nana, that's starts with n, I'm going to draw you" he said.



One of my major struggles with the methodology concerned the “open-endedness of this form of enquiry” Anderson & Glass-Coffin (2016, p. 78). I realised that I felt comfortable with the more traditional methodology in my undergraduate thesis with data, findings and analysis to explore. This methodology demanded a lot of me personally because I had to reflect on my life experiences, I also had to make sure that I was not just writing in an autobiographical way.

Autoethnography seemed to correspond with my life journey, it felt fragmented with no real ending. The reality of an unfinished process and product was difficult to accept however, it did correspond to the incomplete journey of the adopted self. There was no closure to my adoption experience and there will never be, it is impossible to reconnect with the past as my original self. This awareness emerged as I was writing, it was a difficult recognition and reinforced the realisation of a situation that is not generally understood unless you inhabit this ghost world as Lifton (2002) refers to it. It was painful and necessitated me taking long breaks in between my writing to regain my footing. Anderson & Glass-Coffin (2016, p. 79) state that:

The autoethnographic resistance to finality and closure reflects a conception of the self (and society) as relational and processual, mutably written in a moment that opens into a panoramic, albeit not unlimited, future of possibilities

My search for authenticity exposed itself as layered, firstly a search for my original self. Then an examination of archival documentation, not entirely factual and lacking any authentic human emotion surrounding the highly emotive experience of those involved in the adoption triad (birthmother, adoptee, adoptive parents). Another layer was the realisation that I had distanced myself from my authentic life experiences and this was necessary to protect myself from further trauma. When I began this thesis I was not completely sure what authenticity I was seeking and decided to let the writing take me in the direction it needed to go.

The thesis wrote itself in my head constantly, particularly in the early hours of the morning. That was when my subconscious really woke up, I would wake and write something into my phone. I found it upsetting when the interim report on the Mother and Baby homes was released and the controversy surrounding the intended adoption tracing and information bill was raised in the press. At times like that feelings of vulnerability were heightened and I had to distance myself from my writing for a while.

What really strikes me though is the fact that no matter how difficult the reflection seemed at times I always came back to it. This needs further exploration, was it a sense of responsibility or a real need to do this I am not completely sure? What I do know is that I would have been very unhappy if I had not completed my thesis, I see it now as an amazing opportunity to reflect on my life experiences and what I have learned from them. I am grateful that I participated in the Higher Diploma in Adult and Community Education before I attempted this. There at the coalface I learned the value of reflection and the freedom to discuss and learn from the experiences of others.

Personally, I have grown from this experience it has been difficult and a lonely experience at times because I had to spend a lot of time in my head with my own memories. I was unaware when I first heard the term autoethnography that I would experience such an emotional journey, yet I did and I survived.

Fourteen years have passed Jacinta since I made the journey back to Bessborough to see if I could find something of our Mother or us. The answer is that although I know that we were born there no connection remains except the knowledge that we were born there and spent nine weeks there before my journey to Dublin. While I was there I had reverted to a childlike state, desperate not to do or say the wrong thing. The effect this building and meeting Sister had on me felt like a regression, I felt powerless and, in their charge, once again. Despite this I am glad I went, I believe there are a lot of changes there now and the adoption files have been moved to the Child and Agency in Cork. Perhaps the achievement was finding the courage to make the visit, to return to a time that I don't remember.

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