

The Bulletin

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FEATURES

BRINGING OVER BABY

ADOPTION ANNE SUSSKIND Thousands of Australian women have trouble conceiving each year. **ADD BUDGET BIT** Thousands of children around the world need a loving home. So why is international adoption such a rarity in this country?

EVERY DAY, WE READ ABOUT in-vitro fertilisation as the response to infertility, about miracle births and scientific breakthroughs. In Australia in 2002-03, there were approximately 30,000 "assisted reproductive" services, Medicare-subsidised to the tune of at least \$2400 each, which means there were about 30,000 attempts to have children via IVF and related procedures.

Yet there were only 278 international adoptions across Australia in that time. It strikes me as very odd that Australia, with such a pro-IVF culture, should have such an anti-adoption culture.

Let me confess: I am a journalist with an agenda. I have an adopted child from Africa, and he is the best thing that has ever happened to me.

To go back 15 years, in my early 30s, I was a cliché, part of that "I forgot to have children" generation, preoccupied with work and waking up late to my own maternal desires. I was also cynical, riddled with doubt about bringing a child into an increasingly complex and dangerous world. I was divorced from my teenage sweetheart, confused about the whole nuclear family package and not in an appropriate relationship when I began longing seriously for a child.

Despite being goal-oriented in my career, there was, through my 20s, a more general kind of floundering about how life should be lived and an inability to act decisively.

Today, I feel I have been lucky and enterprising, and redeemed what could have been an ongoing sadness in my life. With the adoption of my little boy, I have made my first real commitment, embraced life, said "yes" at last. My partner and I have bonded with him utterly, and our families have welcomed him with open arms.

That governments across Australia subsidise fertility treatments so heavily while making international adoption so daunting, financially, emotionally and time-wise, is heart-breaking. I know there is a biological imperative for many women, and am told that carrying your own baby is a very special experience – and I don't want to pit one way of doing things against the other or be sanctimonious – but surely there is a disjunction here, with so many older women, particularly, turning their bodies inside out trying to make babies while there is a huge pool of needy children in the world.

There is a big leap of faith to make when you adopt. Will I love the baby? How do I know? What if? Yes, adoption is scary, it's a lottery. But then so is having a biological child, especially as an older mother. I know several people who've adopted, and not one who has a moment's regret. Sometimes people will say to me: "Oh, isn't he lucky, what a good life he will have in Australia." I'll correct them: "No, I'm the lucky one."

That said, once I'd made the leap, the fact that adoption makes so much sense at a rational level makes my pathetically over-intellectualising and introspective brain very happy. And, while there is no question that my primary motivation was personal, the altruistic aspect pleases me, the simple logic, the balance. I have embraced a little person, with whom I will share everything I have, materially and emotionally.

Even the act of making a will pleases me now because I have someone to give things to. I had grown tired of taking photos of my life, my travels, tired of shopping and tired of eating out. Now there is another life to record, I feel like a useful hunter-gatherer when I go to the shops and going out to eat is a real treat. He is

enchanting and I look forward to seeing him every morning.

I am originally from Africa, which perhaps made the leap to an African child easier, more familiar. But one of my best friends, Ruth, who doesn't have that advantage, is equally thrilled with her decision to adopt a little Ethiopian girl, Lette: "I have no misgivings whatsoever. With my little girl, I feel as though I've hit the jackpot. She's pretty amazing. I know all mothers think that but she really is."

Many times I was asked: if I wanted to do the right thing, surely it would have been better to give money to help a family raise a child in the country of their birth? Wasn't I scared that he would resent me one day for transporting him to a largely white world?

To the first question, I reiterate: it is not a pure act; I never said it was: I needed him as much as he needed me. As to the second, believe me, if you have spent any length of time in Africa or a developing country, with its millions of neglected children, and they have stopped being a statistic – or any time with people desperate for children – it becomes glaringly obvious. When it comes to deprivation or even a lack of opportunity, it's really not about race or roots; it's about needy children and adults who need children, about opening the door not to a baby made of your own cells, but a child in need of protection who may otherwise grow up on the streets.

These babies, I keep thinking, are like refugees, but refugees with sponsors.

Why is it so hard to adopt in Australia, and why is it so far from people's minds? Locally, the supply of babies has diminished: there is effective birth control, abortion on demand and single motherhood is socially acceptable. There were only 194 local adoptions in 2002-03. And babies from overseas are not instantly available: national pride comes into it and poorer countries, reluctant to admit they cannot look after their own, have many safeguards.

But still, it is widely acknowledged that in Australia there is a mindset against international adoption, which is played out by making the process like an obstacle course.

Most children come into Australia via long-standing bilateral agreements we have with seven countries. But Trudy Rosenwald, who works for Adoptions International of Western Australia and who has eight adopted and two biological children, says 36 other countries with "adoptable children" or children in need have joined the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption. In theory, this means Australians can adopt from these countries.

Yet Australia is "dragging its feet", furnishing prospective parents with the names of only about five of these, depending which state they are in. "Six countries in Africa have joined, the most recent South Africa in December 2003, yet the public servants only tell you about Ethiopia, which is a bilateral country," Rosenwald says. "Guinea, which joined the Convention in February, and Madagascar, which will be formalised in July, are not on the lists.

"And increasingly, government departments around Australia say there are many more applicants than 'adoptable' children. Yet we hear differently from some of the sending countries, and from receiving countries such as the Scandinavian countries and Italy.

"Australia's 'populate or perish' policy from after World War II seems to have resurfaced: there is such support for people giving birth come hell or high water but so much resistance to children entering Australia through adoption."

Rosenwald says UNICEF, which until recently had an anti-international adoption stance, has reversed its position after "opening its eyes to the deplorable state of affairs for many children of this world".

Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show that international adoption is easier in some states than others. The ACT does best on these scales – with 1.6% of the population, it has 5.4% of international adoptions – while South Australia, with 7.7% of the population, has 24.5%. At the other end, Queensland, which has 19% of the population, has only 10.4% of these adoptions.

As it stands, international adoption can cost parents up to \$35,000, including the bureaucracy at both ends, health checks and air fares. It can take between two and four years and there is no promise of a baby at the end. The process of psychological assessment is rigorous, which is appropriate, but perhaps it has

gone too far when prospective parents say they' ve been grilled so much that they' ve been made to feel like criminals.

In the case of one couple I know, the social worker doing the assessment apologised, prefacing her interviews with: "I' m sorry, this must be hard for you, to be doing this when any 16-year-old girl can just go out and get pregnant, no questions asked." In another, the sister of an adopting couple couldn' t believe the scrutiny her family received from the community affairs department.

Underpinning it all, there is in Australia the stolen generation issue and a political correctness argument about removing children from their roots, a fear of baby trafficking, an anxiety about litigation and, most damning, the view that the third world may again be supplying the first world with its needs.

I worried about this last question but then I read the words of another adoptive parent, interviewed by this magazine two years ago, who said: "I was embarrassed about taking a child from their country. But when I stood at the orphanage, I would have taken six children if I could. I took him away from an orphanage culture."

Also reassuring is that, under the terms of the Hague Convention, the "principle of subsidiarity" says all attempts must be made to find a child a suitable family in his or her country of birth before an international adoption can take place.

Sometimes I think the stumbling block may be racism. It is only about 35 years ago that this country had the White Australia Policy. It is hard to believe there would be the same resistance if the children in need were white. Yes, one could argue, but then they would not feel their difference so keenly: children are cruel to each other and my little boy might have a hard time because he is not white.

Around and around in circles with these uneasy questions. It is an unfortunate fact that most of the babies in need today are black, and most of the people able to offer them homes are white.

If my little boy should one day wish to explore his origins, I will facilitate that. If he wants to find his birth mother, I will make that easy for him. I have met her and she is a fine woman who wanted a better life for him than she could provide. I am confident that no matter what problems he encounters, it would not be better for him to be in an orphanage or bounced from foster home to foster home.

In the US, the number of adoptions has increased significantly since 1998, when Bill Clinton did away with legislation preventing white parents from adopting black children, and the 2001 increase in the adoption tax credit to \$US10,000 (\$14,361) per child.

I keep coming back to the same thought: if governments here would change the climate by sanctioning adoption from the top down, more people would open their hearts to these babies, and I know many women who would consider taking them in. I

Out of Africa

Care to comment?

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