

## **Q&A with Betty Jean Lifton, author of *Lost and Found: The Adoption Experience, Third Edition***

The first edition of Betty Jean Lifton's *Lost and Found: The Adoption Experience* advanced the adoption rights movement in the United States in 1979, challenging many states' policies of maintaining closed birth records. For nearly three decades the book has topped recommended reading lists for those who seek to understand the effects of adoption—including adoptees, adoptive parents, birth parents, and their friends and families.

Now in its third edition, author Betty Jean Lifton talks with us about her book. Dr. Lifton is an adoption counselor and adopted person. She has a practice in Cambridge Massachusetts as well as New York City and does telephone counseling across the country. Visit her website at: [www.bjlifton.com](http://www.bjlifton.com).

You can also listen to this interview on our University of Michigan Press Author Podcast page at: [www.press.umich.edu/podcasts/index.jsp](http://www.press.umich.edu/podcasts/index.jsp).

### ***The University of Michigan Press: What makes this book still relevant today? Why a third edition?***

**Betty Jean Lifton:** The book is relevant because the psychological issues that adoptees faced in the past are still with them today. Whether they grew up in the closed adoption system or the semi-open system we have now, adoptees still feel like second class citizens because adoption records are sealed in all but eight states. As long as records are sealed, there is a stigma to being adopted, of being illegitimate, of being a bastard. Of being, as I say, invisible, because no one can see what it feels like to have been abandoned by one set of parents, even if one was chosen by another set of loving ones.

Still, despite the psychological feelings remaining the same, there have been many changes in adoption practice. And this third edition covers them.

### ***UMP: What are some of these changes?***

**BJL:** One of the most important ones is that there is a shortage of adoptable babies in this country, unlike years ago.

### ***UMP: Why is that?***

**BJL:** Many reasons. For one, the 1960's saw the beginning of many societal changes. There was no longer the same discrimination about an unwed mother keeping her baby. And many did. Then, too, abortion was legalized in 1974, and women had a choice about having their baby or not.

Incidentally, the shortage of babies changed the way society treated birth mothers. Before they were told to disappear after they gave up their babies. Today we see birth mothers in the position of choosing who will parent their child. Birth mothers are much in demand, like the goose who laid the golden egg. Prospective parents are in the uncomfortable position of competing for the few available babies by making up brochures in which they have to sell themselves. Also it is important to point out that these

women giving up their babies are for the most part not young hapless teenagers, but married women who already have a few children and cannot afford to raise another one.

***UMP: How else has adoption practice changed?***

**BJL:** We've seen lawyers, sensing the lucrative possibilities, taking over the domestic baby field. They barged in, even though they were not trained in child care. They introduced advertising, something genteel and respectable agencies never did, but are doing now to keep up with the competition.

***UMP: What do you think of open adoption?***

**BJL:** It depends on what people mean when they say open adoption. You have to ask how open is open. Usually it is on a continuum from fully open, which means the birth parents and adoptive parents stay in touch after the adoption is finalized and the child has some relationship with the birth mother or father, or both. For the most part, there is what is called semi-open adoption, which I call semi-closed, because even though the adoptive parents send photos of the child for the first two years, it is usually done through a lawyer or agency, and cut off after that. And though the child may know the birth mother's name or see her photo, he or she does not meet her. This puts the child in the same psychological situation as the adoptee who grows up in the fully closed adoption system. The child has to split off his or her real feelings and disappear into what I call the Ghost Kingdom, where the ghost mother and father hang out.

***UMP: What are your feelings on adopting children from abroad?***

**BJL:** It's another way the adoption field has changed. Because there are so few adoptable babies in this country, prospective adoptive parents have been going to Korea, China, Russia, Guatemala, South America, and more recent South East Asia and Africa to find babies or children. I think it's great, except that we're now learning that there are a lot of dishonest baby brokers in many of these countries and their governments have recently closed down on the number of children they will make available.

***UMP: So what will people do who want to adopt?***

**BJL:** Many are looking at children available for adoption in foster care. It's not an easy solution, for many of these children are older and have experienced abuse.

***UMP: What other changes are you seeing since *Lost and Found* was first published?***

**BJL:** When *Lost and Found* first came out, adoptees were just coming out of the closet. Now we are seeing many more searches and reunions. In fact, society is accepting the fact that adoptees need to know about their origins and heritage.

***UMP: How do adoptive parents feel about this?***

**BJL:** I think most of them understand that their child's search is not a rejection of them. People adopting today expect that their children will one day seek a reunion with their birth parents. In fact, adoptive parents today are much different from earlier generations who adopted and then tried to disappear into their communities like biological families. Now adoptive parents are forming active support groups – first to share advice on finding children, and then on how to raise them.

**UMP:** *There is so much to think about. What haven't we covered?*

**BJL:** Well, the rise of the Internet, and websites and blogs has changed the way adoptees and birth mothers search for each other. Many of them do not need professional searchers, but can just turn on their computers and use their own skills. We can say the Internet has revolutionized ways of finding and being found.

**UMP:** *Now that we've covered so much of what has changed, is there anything that hasn't?*

**BJL:** A lot. The bad news is that adoptees' birth certificates are still sealed in all but eight states. Adoption reform groups have tried to get open record bills through the state legislatures for years, but with little success.

**UMP:** *Why is that? Especially since there is so much openness in adoption today.*

**BJL:** Because we have conservative lobby groups that have been blocking open record bills for almost thirty years. The National Council for Adoption and Mormon groups are the most active. They claim to be protecting the birth mother, who they say was promised confidentiality, even though there is not one piece of paper to back this up. And they say that women will get abortions rather than being found by their child some day. Even though statistics show that states like Kansas, which has open records, have lower abortion rates.

**UMP:** *And what is the good news?*

**BJL:** That adoption reform groups are not giving up. Each year they go back to their state legislatures and try to get their open records bills passed. Meanwhile, adoptee and birth mother support groups still exist and hold conferences around the country. And professionals in the mental health fields are educating themselves as to the psychological needs of their patients who are members of the adoption triad.

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Read more about *Lost and Found: The Adoption Experience* at:  
[www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=334810](http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=334810).