

Jean M. Paton, *Orphan Voyage*, 1968

In a book written under the name given to her at birth, Ruthena Hill Kittson, adoptee and visionary search activist Jean Paton presented her rationales for search: the equality of all citizens, the self-determination of individuals, and adoptees' emotional need for a "curative" and "breakthrough" reality that would finally make sense out of their disrupted life stories. Above all, she insisted that adoptees were not permanent children in need of lifelong supervision and protection. They were responsible, mature adults, fully capable of making their own decisions about search and reunion. Her vision of an independent, voluntary adoption registry through which natal relatives might be reunited dates to an article she wrote in 1949, making it one of the earliest such suggestions in the documentary record. Mutual consent registries proliferated after 1975.

Quoted from: [The Adoption History Project](#).



This picture, which reads "Don't Forget," was drawn by a six year old girl, who gave it to Jean Paton, her social worker, on the day in 1940 she moved from a temporary placement to her new adoptive home.

My own views on adoption have only recently come to their present relative fixity. As I am entering upon the middle years, this is no youthful immature view. I was myself twice adopted. Origins are relatively unknown. I understand the many phases in which this problem evolves to a final answer. In addition I have worked as a trained social worker for four years in the child placing field both with natural parents and placed children. This personal and professional experience has also made me alert to the expressions of this problem that arise in miscellaneous experience. And for a long time I have believed it impossible that anything could be done about the uncertainties and persistent dissatisfactions inherent in adoption.

This I no longer believe to be true. There is a very specific way in which a beginning could be made in minimizing these man-created "unknowns." I believe it is important that this be done, for two reasons. First, to give to natural and adoptive parents, and to adopted children, an opportunity to tie back into the racial stream. Second, to place emphasis on "unknowns" where it properly belongs, in the sphere where it is not given to man to answer them. Each of us must struggle to live in a world of morality and uncertainty. Let it be on equal terms, with no one having the pain or the privilege of a special, private mystery to which he must adapt himself. . . .

In what we suggest is to be incorporated a more profound belief in adoption. When we reach the point of placing in the hands of natural parent and adopted adult the responsibility for and the means to their reunion, both the testing and the fulfillment of our practice break out at last into a reality. Adoption itself matures, and those who have experienced it mature. And this we believe is entirely possible for them. In fact the expectation of maturity is implicit in what we suggest. And, as will be seen, the adopting parents themselves take their true place and attain their full human value in the midst of this.

What is suggested is the establishment of a central point of clearance, separated from agency or court, to which natural parents and adopted adults who have attained 25 years, may come, registering the facts about themselves and whatever is known of the other persons, together with a request that each be notified when both have registered and been matched; that this notification be supplemented by giving to the person first registering the necessary information to put him in direct touch with the one he seeks, with the proviso that a

registration always be open to cancellation upon request. Let it be assumed that those who have reached the point of sustaining themselves through a period of active registration will be able to sustain a contact which they must carry on without agency or court support, yet with the greatest positive strength which comes from the realization that both have come of age in this matter. . . .

Somehow it did not make sense to me that social agencies should decide when, how, and whether people should try to establish a means of helping themselves.

If adopted people wanted to try to build a responsible way of reconciling with natural families, should they not be allowed to try? Were they inferior people, who must cool their heels outside of agency offices, waiting for a nod?

Whatever may be the facts as to how many adopted people are distressed about lack of contact with kindred people, and whatever explanation may be adduced as to the reasons for their distress, the overriding reality of their pain must lead to help. How is this to begin? From whom shall it come?

Each step of the Search will further differentiate him [the adoptee] from a child of standard family. The most alarming step of all—if he takes it—will put him face to face with a natural parent. Herein he will be at the same moment highly distinct from persons reared by their natural parents, and at the same moment he will find the universal, common element in himself—the cure of the stigma.

Here is the greatest threat and real danger in Search: that he will mistake the shock of loss of the Stigma (against which loss he has guarded himself for many years) for the shock of the reality of his parent which, though it exists, is far less in magnitude, involves less of himself, and involves him only childishly.

From this point he must meet a new difficulty, that of living openly in society as an adopted person who has completed Search. This phase is perhaps self-evident, and its problems will not be suggested here. They are common to all who have gone through a profound experience of change.

The Reunion of adopted people with their kindred is not equivalent to other human reunions because of the experience within it, the loss of Stigma, which other reunions do not include. Other actual reunions are not linked to concepts of personal change and personal reformation, except for reunion with God when that is experienced or believed possible. Therefore the special curative element in the adoption Reunion seems to most people to be an unlikely thing. Examples are, of course, known to many privately, whether or not the full potentials of the situations have been achieved.

Because, then, Search is so integral with the adoption life history it is of importance whether it shall be controlled, and by whom. In an age when release from conflict is almost lost to view, the Reunion experience is like water in the desert—scarce, desired, fought for. Here, in its control, is a possibility for freedom or for slavery that perhaps has been overlooked. . . .

Sealed, or closed, adoption and the control of Search by outsiders is a modern practice that exhibits modern thought. It is an attempt to evade aspects of life which have been designated as “unpleasant” and assumed to be incompatible with healthy development. This designation and assumption are in error, and the breakthrough of adoptive Search, when guided by sufficient balance and understanding, can enable a Seeker to become well in an age of illness and anxiety.

By Ruthena Hill Kittson, (birth name of Jean Paton) – from Orphan Voyage (New York: Vantage Press, 1968), 27-28, 31, 33, 253-255.