

LEE MURRAY

Secrets of an “Illegitimate Mom”

I use autoethnography to tell one of my secrets of mothering. I tell the story of being an “illegitimate mom.” I tell my story retrospectively using first person and present tense. This is woven with reflections from different times and places in my life to create a multilayered and multidimensional emotional account of my life experiences. It is an evocative account meant to bring the readers into the story so that they can relate the story to their own experience or experiences. I have many struggles and shame related to being an “illegitimate mom.” The shame is not about getting pregnant; it is about giving my baby away. Using autoethnography as methodology, I tell my story to my baby—my 40-year-old son, Dave. I write him a letter. Perhaps at the end of the letter I will see my circumstances through a different lens. Perhaps it will provide healing for both Dave and me. Perhaps it will reduce the shame and loss. Perhaps it will connect and open a conversation with and about “illegitimate moms.”

I believe autoethnography, and ultimately stories, are often multilayered, multi-dimensional emotional accounts. I tell my story retrospectively using first person and present tense. The sights, sounds, feelings, emotions, and impressions are brought to the surface. In this way, I hope to bring the readers into the story so that they can relate the story to their own experience or experiences—sometimes similar experiences, sometimes not. In this way I acknowledge, recognize, and examine all components of the human lived experience.

I use autoethnography to look back to my teen years and my struggles with being an “illegitimate mother.” I have carried that shame for a long time and have allowed myself to separate from it. The sharing of that situation, and the decision I needed to make, is one of the biggest secrets I have ever kept. And I don’t understand why. I still find it very difficult to tell this story. Perhaps

it is about the loss and the shame. The shame is not about getting pregnant; it is about giving my baby away. And so I tell my story. I tell my story to my baby—my 40-year-old son, Dave. I write him a letter. Perhaps at the end of the letter I will see my circumstances through a different lens. Perhaps it will provide healing for both Dave and me. Perhaps it will reduce the shame and loss. Perhaps it will connect and open a conversation with and about other “illegitimate mothers.”

May 22, 2009

Dear Dave,

You were born 40 years ago today. Happy Birthday! I wanted to write this to help you understand our history together. This is a story about you, but mostly about me. As I write this to you I think back to the letter I received from Social Services. It was a surprise, an awakening.

The letter read:

Dear Ms. Murray,

I am trying to locate Barbara Lee Murray. I believe you are this person. I have important family information to share with you.

In the event you are not this person, please call me to advise, so I may continue my search elsewhere.

I am hoping you will respond to this letter by calling me collect. Your cooperation and understanding is most appreciated. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely, Social Services Program Worker

It didn't make sense at first, and when I realized what it was about, I left it and didn't respond. This all seems very ridiculous and incomprehensible now that I know you. I don't know what I was afraid of. I don't know why the secret seemed important to protect, perhaps because I have protected it for so long. Maybe I don't know how to tell. I have had so few tellings of this story, and I don't know what to expect for a response. I don't even know what response I would hope for. Am I afraid I will be judged? There have been a few occasions where I had the opportunity to tell.

I am sitting in the lunch room at work and talking with the other nurses about a young patient we had cared for and her decision to give her baby up for adoption. One of my colleagues says, "That could be me in there. I'm just lucky I didn't get pregnant at her age. I got into a lot of trouble in those years, but pregnancy wasn't one of them." I struggle to say something. I remain silent and the moment passes. I wish now that I had had the courage to tell my story then, maybe even to my young patient.

I am out for coffee with a few of my friends and we are talking about the trials and tribulations of raising teen-agers. One of my friends says that adolescents today are so much more informed than we were. “They seem to have healthier relationships and are more knowledgeable about sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and birth control,” she says.

“Knowledge may have prevented STIs and pregnancy, but has it developed healthier relationships?” I reply.

“Maybe not but at least they can talk about birth control and they can take ‘the pill’ if they choose. We never had those options. We were afraid to even talk about it. We were afraid of being bad girls,” she insists.

We all nod our heads in agreement. I think back to my own story of teen pregnancy and want to tell, but I don’t and I wish I had. I think they would have understood.

What was it that stopped me from telling in these instances? I feel bad when I think of you and wonder how this may make you feel. I want you to understand that the decision not to tell is about me and not about you and maybe that isn’t fair. I wonder if the not telling is about deceit or self-deception. Or is it my fear of being judged? Standards have changed. I wonder if it would be helpful for you to understand how the norms and standards of society have changed somewhat from the time you were born.

Teen moms are more accepted now and they receive much more support and understanding. There is much less pressure for unwed/teen mothers to give their babies up for adoption. Unwed mothers were considered somewhat suspect at that time if they did not give their babies up for adoption, and social welfare was reluctant to provide support without careful investigation and surveillance (Juffer 743). It wasn’t until the mid-’70s that the term “unwed mother” was replaced by “single mother.”

Pre-marital sex is generally more acceptable now and not as taboo as it used to be. However, I tend to judge myself and perceive being judged on the standards of society at the time of my pregnancy. There was a lack of harmony between my behaviour and what was acceptable at that time. The normative discourse did not include discussion about conditions that contributed to teen pregnancy such as lack of knowledge, lack of access to birth control, lack of sexual education and the possible lack of consideration for the determinants of health in the young mother’s situation.

I was quite aware of those standards as a young unwed mother to be. When I read the literature now, I begin to understand that my reactions and responses were quite typical of unwed mothers of the time. I’m sure the literature is quite boring to you, but some reflection on it may help you understand the situation and dilemma I faced as an unwed teenage girl expecting a baby in 1969.

Illegitimate pregnancy and unwed mothers were hush-hush in the culture of the '60s. I exposed "the limits of what were culturally thinkable about proper sex and motherhood" (Reekie 77). My predicament was considered a purely female transgression. My growing belly destroyed the image of chastity. My pregnant body was evidence of my unacceptable sexual behavior and transgressions and I became a sexual, social and moral deviant (Pietsch 65). My behavior appeared to challenge my subordinate role as a young woman, and I was labeled as mutinous, rebellious, uncontrollable and uncontrolled, unclean, disorderly, deceitful, disrespectful, misbehaved, as getting myself in trouble, and as a social problem (Solinger 35, 215; Vance 4). As an illegitimate pregnant woman, I was stained and marked.

The culture of the time supported a secret adoption plan where "the unwed mother could put the mistake—both the baby *qua* baby, and the proof of non-marital sexual experience—behind her" (Solinger 346). Repentance was most often achieved through an adoption arrangement (Pietsch 71), which also provided the infant with a normative (two-parent, heterosexual, traditional, married) family (Solinger 346) who were financially and morally fit (Wegar 82). The illegitimate mother could revoke her sin, restore a semblance of normalcy, delete the illegitimate child from existence, and expunge her sexual past. Was any of this behind my decision to adopt? Was it the agenda of others? I never meant or thought about you as a mistake. I was naïve and made a mistake in judgment. I never wanted to delete or deny your existence, but is that what I have been doing by keeping it a secret over the years? On a conscious level that was never my intent.

I wasn't striving to have my bad behaviour expunged nor did I want to hide my baby. But is my secret of illegitimate mothering part of the image I have portrayed in the past? Is there an attempt to maintain this image of success and morality? Probably in high school I would have been considered the girl most likely to succeed and the least likely to get pregnant. Does my past as an unwed mother have anything to do with my success (or not) or my morality? Does my reluctance to tell maintain the normative discourse of unwed mothers? Does it maintain and reinforce this distorted idea of illegitimate mothers being social and moral deviants?

My awkwardness and reluctance to tell comes from a place deep inside me, a place where explanation is difficult to find. I am trying desperately to sort this out, to help both of us understand why this is a difficult story to tell. Perhaps, once I tell, I become vulnerable. There is no turning back or taking back. I am left wide open to absorb the reactions of others. Part of what gets in the way of my telling is the expected response of the listener. It is difficult to share something so intimate and yet central to one's life (Bok 75). When I tell, I want the listeners to share the burden of the story. I want them to understand

the circumstances of the time, the difficulty of the decision, the impact of my youth and to empathize with my sadness in giving you away and my joy in meeting you after all this time. I also want them to ask questions to further their understanding and perhaps, in so doing, to further mine. I also hope listeners may assist in a possible interpretation of my sharing or disclosure, and ultimately assist in reaching through the layers of secrecy: "Once named [secrets] are forced into the light, compelled to take an identity" (Bok 77). Perhaps it is this identity I am afraid of.

The need for privacy and time also hinders my telling. The disclosure of intimate secrets takes time: time for the telling and time for the listening and exploring. I am reluctant to share my secrets unless I have a sense that the listener and I will have the time and also the privacy. And both are very difficult to guarantee. I have this visual picture of entering this ideal cone of silence, listener and teller together, for an agreed upon amount of time. I suppose, with all my preconceived conditions of disclosure and the sharing of secrets, it is not a surprise that I still hold some secrets very close.

I also wonder if the listener will be discreet in the retelling. Some secrets I want to tell myself and only to whom I choose, but I realize that, once told, secrets have a way of seeping out to include one more person at a time and unfortunately we are unaware of all those who know. In writing autoethnography and having it available in the public domain, I need to assume everyone has the potential to read my work and know my secrets. Will the telling of my secrets allow me to heal and reconcile those things in my past that I do not readily share? My regrets about not telling are usually related to a missed opportunity for possible intimacy and healing. Will it be an opportunity to recreate myself and gain new insight that is not possible through introspection itself? Will the telling alleviate my guilt and bring forth transformation? Will the telling provide healing?

I think the first person I want to tell is you. I want to tell you about your birth and our week together as mother and son.

I was almost 18 years old when you were born.

It is dark and I stand and gaze out the window. My back is sore, and I rub it and walk around the house. I don't want to wake my Aunt Irene. I have been away from home for a month, staying at my aunt and uncle's home. I am seeing an obstetrician rather than our family physician and I will deliver in a city hospital rather than our local hospital. I am out of sight.

I don't feel well, but I don't really feel sick. My back hurts and I just want to walk around as fast as I can. I guess my walking wakes my aunt. "Are you okay?" she asks concerned.

"I don't know. I'm scared," I whisper. She asks me if my stomach feels tight.

I answer, "No but my back is so sore. I feel like crying . . . but it comes and goes and I think I can stand it if it goes away soon."

My aunt phones Sandra (her daughter, the nurse). She is at work at this very moment on labor and delivery. "Does it sound like labor pains?" my aunt asks.

"No but bring her in anyway, just in case, and we'll assess her," Sandra replies.

The nurse is trying to do an admission and assessment on me, and I am already holding on to the top of the hospital bed and everyone is trying to settle me down. Sandra gives me a cigarette and tells me to try to relax. I can't relax; I have to go to the bathroom. I want to push. People are starting to look anxious; someone checks me again and says, "Let's move her."

Move me where? I have to go to the bathroom!

They are trying desperately to locate my doctor. I hear the commotion, the hurrying, the bustling, the almost panic. Now I AM scared. My back hurts and I want to stand up. I can't stand lying on my back. They are making me lie on my back, and they are putting my legs up in the air. What is going on?? Where is Sandra??? She looks upset, she looks a bit panicky, and she looks like she is going to cry. Help!! I want to be brave, but I don't know what is happening. Soon I hear Sandra's voice, very quiet, very gentle, "It is almost over Lee, you can push now, push your bottom down into the table, don't lift your bum off the table . . . PUSH! You're doing good . . . just a little bit longer, hold it . . . you can do it . . . that's a girl . . . It's a boy!"

I hear the doctor say to take the baby away if he is okay. The baby is fine despite his fast delivery. He is dark, cute, funny looking, red, crying, yelling and I want to hold him. The doctor says to take him away and I say, "I WANT TO HOLD HIM!"

He is gentle but firm: "Lee, if you hold him and get attached to him you won't be able to give him away."

"I promise I will. I just want to hold him." I hold you and I fall in love. You are gorgeous, you are red, and you quit crying. You look at me as if you know me and all I want is to hold you and love you for as long as I can. And I do.

I keep you in my room for the next six days and they keep taking you back. I sneak into the nursery during the day and I take you out. I go back at night and hold you and rock you and talk to you and sing to you. I tell you everything I think you need to know. I read to you. I sing some more and kiss and hug you constantly, and all they care about is if I will be able to give you away. I assure them daily that I will. I know I can; it is the best for you and probably for me. They continue to take you back to the nursery, and I continue to take you to my room and keep you in my bed. We were the first rooming-in couple.

Finally, I have had enough. I am mad at the nurses, I am mad at the doctor and I am mad at myself for reassuring them that I will give you away. Finally I explain, "I have had enough . . . If I give my baby away I will have only these five days to give him all the love I can, and it needs to last him for a while so leave me alone, PLEASE!" And they do, and I give you away.

The day you stayed at the hospital and I left with my mom was the hardest day I ever had. I took you a whole pile of clothes and diapers I had bought. I told them which outfit you were to wear home from the hospital, and I walked away crying and I felt I would never stop. There was a terrible sense that I would never see you again. MY HEART BROKE. I left you and, with you, a part of me. I built a wall around that part of my life and tried to move on, but there was always a sense that something was missing.

In 2003, you decided to find your birth mother. You received a letter from the Post Adoption Division of Community Resources and Employment describing your birth and your biologic mother.

David's natural mother was a young girl of 18 years at the time of David's birth. She was of Scottish ethnic origin and of the Protestant faith. She had a grade 12 education and was an excellent student. She planned to go into Nursing. David's first mother was an attractive, out-going girl, about 5'5" tall, weighing 110 lbs. She had light brown hair, greenish eyes and a fair complexion. She had an oval-shaped face, well shaped brows, straight nose, high cheek bones, well shaped mouth, large eyes and a round chin. David's natural mother was very musical, having a grade seven in piano and a grade two in music theory. She also played a clarinet in a school jazz band. She also enjoyed sports and drama. She participated in swimming, volleyball, curling and competed in track and gymnastics. She was also active in drama, choir and glee club.

David's birth mother was quite easy-going and friendly, related well with people but tended to be make impulsive decisions on occasion. She rarely angered and did not hold a grudge and was not a moody person. She involved herself quite deeply with other people; she was quite determined but not obstinate. She was inclined to be a group leader. When it came to health, she had never been seriously ill. She had undergone prenatal care for seven months prior to David's birth and there was no history of epilepsy, mental illness or retardation, cancer or heart disease in her family.

David's birth mother was single and David was her first child.

I read the description of myself and I struggle to recognize this person. I barely remember the interview. I remember you telling me, after we met, what a difficult time it was for your parents waiting for the time period to be up when I could change my mind and take you back. That time period was difficult for me as well but for very different reasons. I will never forget the day we were re-united.

I am sitting on the couch and scanning the hotel lobby and mostly watching the door. I am somewhat nervous but not as nervous as I thought I would be. I have thought about this, dreamed about this day and the whole atmosphere feels surreal. I don't really know what to expect. I keep watching the door with anticipation as I sit quietly on a couch. I see someone come out of one of the hallways, look around and then go back down the hallway. I think that maybe it is you, but I'm not sure. I think that perhaps you are a bit shy or hesitant, and it is difficult for you to approach me. We have sent pictures to each other so we have an idea of who we are looking for. I decide to get up and follow you. I say "Dave?" and you turn to face me. It is you! You explain that you were actually going back down the hall to catch the score of a hockey game. I totally understand that, and we both laugh.

And so here we stand, mother and son, meeting after 36 years. Where do we begin?

There doesn't seem to be any degree of real awkwardness; we seem to connect and relate quite easily to each other. It would be interesting to hear what your initial impressions were. We spend a wonderful afternoon together sharing our lives thus far, asking and answering questions and realizing that we have probably been in the same place at the same time on different occasions. We have similar interests (in particular hockey and golf), we view relationships and the world in general in a similar way and we both love Elvis! I tell you about listening to the song, "In the Ghetto," in the hospital after I had given birth to you. I listened to that song repeatedly during that time, and since that time it has always made me feel sad when I hear it. In fact, I have turned it off on occasion because the sadness became overwhelming. Listening to that song always takes me back to that time and place and to the struggle of that life altering decision that impacted both of us—and will for the remainder of our lives.

You tell me that "In the Ghetto" is your favorite Elvis song. Of course it is! You listened to it over and over for the first week of your life. I heard that song several weeks after I met you, and I was no longer sad. I merely smile now when I hear it and think about you and our reunion. At that moment, I realized I had begun to create new memories and new perspectives regarding your birth and the future of our relationship.

As we say goodbye and make plans to meet again soon, I feel so happy, yet I feel so sad. Sad perhaps, because we have not met sooner. Sad, for missing 36 years of your life. I brought you into this world, but I did not have the opportunity to nurture, support and raise you, to watch you grow and mature and show you every day that I love you. Sad because I am your "other" mother, not your "real" mother.

A young girl who gives her baby up for adoption becomes a mother of sorts, the biological mother; illegitimate and invisible. When she is reunited with her child after several years, she attempts to claim an "other" mother maternal



Four generations united.

identity (Downe 165). But lo and behold ... it is to feel like an illegitimate mom once again. Mothers who relinquish their babies become “separate, different than and less than full mothers” (Lynn 4).

If I had kept you, my baby, I would have been seen as a shameful, filthy, and worthless person, but when I gave you up for adoption I was seen as selfish and uncaring (Lauderdale). I only wanted the best for you and I thought adoption was in your best interest. There was a perception from others that I would forget about you and move on. I never forgot you. However, I never let myself grieve openly because it was not socially acceptable at the time to speak of my unwed mothering experience. The normal grieving process was inhibited and prolonged with no real resolution of the grief. I never felt coerced into making the decision to adopt—persuaded perhaps, but not coerced. This may have assisted in the adaptation period following your adoption, but I never felt I had an opportunity to express my feelings regarding the adoption and to acknowledge my unresolved grief (DeSimone). When I read the literature I realize that my experience may have been somewhat different from the norm. I can relate to the sadness and grief at the time, but the resulting depression and despair did not grip me in the years to come as is reflected as a common response in the literature. An unplanned pregnancy and the relinquishment of a child for adoption are outside the range of typical adolescent experience and may threaten the successful negotiation of the developmental task of adolescence (Lash Esau). However, I believe I developed a stronger identity and a higher commitment to succeed (Lash

Esau) to prove that I had made the right decision.

I think a small hole in my heart still remains and that is my regret that we didn't meet sooner and we can not be closer. I wish I could grab my grandchildren and hug them and kiss them and have them be happy to see me, but I am mostly a stranger to them. I also don't want to be too intrusive. I want to maintain connection, but I don't want to overwhelm you or make you feel uncomfortable. I have read about birth mothers fearing rejection, loss of contact and losing their child a second time (Howe and Feast 360). I don't have that fear exactly, but I do have a fear that we may slowly lose contact if we don't commit to an ongoing relationship. I wonder how we can work out a relationship that reflects that we are mother and son and still recognizes and accepts the fact that I am an "other" mother separate from your adoptive mother, your "real" mother. You are my son, but our relationship is different from the relationship I have with my other three children.

Unfortunately you have not met one of my sons yet. I am a bit disappointed with his reluctance, but I try to understand where he is coming from and also how that may make you feel. If it helps at all, he was a bit reluctant to have his little brother in the family as well. I remember telling him I was expecting a baby. I was holding him, and he was sort of perched on my tummy while I attempted to explain to him about my growing tummy, a baby growing inside, the excitement of the impending birth and the arrival of a new sibling. He looked at me with his big, green, sad eyes and replied, "I hope it's a dog." So don't feel bad; he just needs a little time to come around perhaps. And where is this kid that used to think my story was so cool?

I believe our reunion brings the potential for healing for me and perhaps for you, too. You have obviously had wonderful parenting, and I appreciate meeting your parents and their understanding that you will always have some connection with your natural family. I truly thank you for your initiative in making the effort to find me.

Take care and I look forward to seeing you again soon. Stay in touch.

Love, Lee

Our reunion brings with it an opportunity for healing and also a recognition of the enormity of the loss. But as I face my grief and shame and acknowledge it, I also realize that I am able to reclaim that part of myself that was lost.

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