

# Insight & Outlook

## REASSESSING ADOPTION An Interview with Suzanne Arms

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*This is INSIGHT & OUTLOOK. I'm Scott London. Today, a conversation with writer and educator Suzanne Arms.*

*[Voice of Suzanne Arms:] "I think it's very important, in a day and age when many people are simplistically looking at adoption as being the quick fix, that we need to understand that adoption is a life-long process.... But we can make adoption better if we go in with our eyes open and don't hide the truth."*

*This year the United States will spend an estimated \$10 billion on child welfare, and a good deal of that money is earmarked for adoption programs. Expanding adoption services in America is seen by many as a way of combatting homelessness, unemployment, welfare dependency, crime and other social problems.*

*But, according to some observers, adoption practices often bring pain and suffering to the very people they are meant to serve. The rights, responsibilities, and needs of birth parents, adoptive parents, and adopted children are often confused with our society's tendency to protect, punish, and take sides.*

*This is the view of Suzanne Arms, a photo-journalist, educator, and author of two books on the subject: To Love and Let Go and Adoption: A Handful of Hope.*

*Suzanne Arms has spent the past two decades challenging and changing the way Americans think about childbirth, midwifery, and adoption. In the early seventies, she published Immaculate Deception, a groundbreaking look at the American culture of childbirth which the New York Times called "one of the best books of the year" in 1973. She has also produced and directed a film about childbirth, and founded a community, non-profit birth center in the San Francisco Bay Area. Today she makes her home in Colorado.*

*I spoke with her on one of her recent visits to California*

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SCOTT LONDON: Suzanne, you first started exploring the adoption issue back in the late 70s. In your book you tell the story of a 16-year-old woman who first brought the issue alive for you.

ARMS: That was a woman who came up to me in a conference. She knew she had to place her child for adoption because she was in an impossible circumstance in her life – a time and a place

and with a man which made it impossible to be a parent and do the job she wanted to do, a quality job. She was looking for good parents for her baby, and she was looking for a really fine homebirth – I met her at a home birth conference. This is when I began meeting women who were birth-mothers, who were of the highest level of personal integrity...

LONDON: When you say "birth-mothers...." I just want to clarify the terms.

ARMS: Birth-mothers are women who are carrying babies they are choosing to relinquish. So the birth-mother is the biological mother who does not then raise the child.

Since I had grown up with this image, this myth, of the horrible woman who gives her baby for adoption – you know, "What kind of a woman could she be?" or "She has no rights to this child because she has given him up," and so on...

LONDON: This myth that is still quite pervasive today.

ARMS: It's very pervasive. It's with a lot of ambivalence that we view these women. Adoptive parents, in particular, tend to see these women as both saints, for giving them a child that they could not otherwise have, and as something to be kept at arms length and who can't be trusted because she might want to "steal" the baby.

Over and over again, in meeting these women around the country, I was struck by the quality of sensitivity to their babies' needs. Then I remember talking to a woman who worked with many drug-addicted mothers, some of whom were placing their babies for adoption, who talked about how in her years of work as a pediatrician working with drug-addicted teenagers she had been struck by the fact that, overall, it was the mothers the mothers who had the greatest sense of maturity, the greatest capacity to see the child as separate from themselves, and value the child's need for the kind of nurturing human babies need, and who were best able to assess their own incapacity to do this work, who placed their babies for adoption. It was not the irresponsible ones.

That's what started me on the road to writing what was my first book, *To Love and Let Go*, which is basically opening the door of the closet that birth mothers and birth fathers have been hidden in this culture. The second book, *Adoption: A Handful of Hope*, which is still out, which looks at adoption from the inner world perspective – what it *feels* like, the emotions involved, the psychological issues related to being an adoptee, to being a birth-parent, to being an adoptive parent...

LONDON: It's essentially a book of adoption stories.

ARMS: Yes, in which I weave narratives.

LONDON: You've said that these stories were very difficult to write for you. Why was that?

ARMS: They were painful to write because they all touched on my own personal issues of abandonment and pain. I came to understand, years after writing *To Love and Let Go*, that what had really drawn me to adoption was not what it was. It was that this was another voiceless minority, as I was part of a voiceless minority of sexually traumatized children, abused children, incested children. I was merely giving voice to a group of children who could not speak, and thereby giving them the power to speak. I didn't understand that for many years because I wrote the first one before I even understood my own situation, because I had no memories until my mother's death.

So it was a very personal journey for me to write about these women. It would plunge me into my own feelings. I remember, in Alexandra's case – who came to live with us for a while, actually...

LONDON: This is one of the women in the book.

ARMS: She is one of the key figures in both of those books, because the second one takes off from the first (and includes all of the first and then expands it with more stories, including adopted kids and adoptive parents, and follows them all for up to eight years). Alexandra lived with us for a while. I was married to an obstetrician at the time who was her physician. When she went into her depression, it was very, very difficult for me. She went into a very typical birth-mother depression after she relinquished the baby and the parents cut her out of their life, inexplicably and totally against the agreement they had made with her (which was a private adoption with an agreement of openness). She went into a deep depression. That she was able to come out and talk about it, her mere talking about it, put me in it – because I had a tendency to go into acute depression.

So one of the things people love about this book is that it touches them very, very deeply. I've heard it said that adoptive parents who read this book have their hearts really opened.

LONDON: It's quite unlike a lot of the adoption books out there which generally have a more upbeat tone. This seems to be more sober and reflective.

ARMS: It is more sober, yes...

LONDON: It's like it's written in the minor key, you might say.

ARMS: Yes, I have that tendency [laughs]. I feel that adoption is not an answer to unwanted pregnancy for the majority of people. I think it's very important in a day and age when many people are simplistically looking at adoption as being the quick fix, that we need to understand that adoption is a life-long process. It involves incredible amounts of emotional distress for those who are raising adoptive children, for those who are adoptive children, for those who are birth-parents, because all adoption involves grief and loss and because all adoption involves issues of abandonment. You see, for a young child or a baby, to be separated from your biological kin – your biological mother in particular, but also your biological picture – is equal to abandonment. Now, that is not how birth-mothers feel when they are placing a child for adoption, but separation from the mother, from the core nurturing sense, that which you have lived within – the womb of the mother – is abandonment. So, adoption has some very heavy issues around it.

As I began to explore the issue and look into the research, I found that adopted kids showed up *far* more frequently – and I mean two, three, ten times over the number of non-adopted kids – in truancy, in problems in school, in acting out behaviors, in suicide and depression, in ending up in psychiatric hospitals and prisons, in the murder population. It's not because there is anything wrong with these children, it is because they are wounded and their wounds haven't been addressed.

So, when I wrote the second book, in particular, *Adoption: A Handful of Hope*, I wanted to look at the nature of the wounding, and I wanted to look at the nature of the healing, and how you could create adoptions that really worked and were wholesome – understanding that they are not the best of all worlds. The best of all worlds is for children to be with their biological parents, if at all possible. Next to that is to be with their biological kin of some kind, if at all possible.

LONDON: You also talk a lot about the difference between open and closed adoption.

ARMS: Yes. Basically, the notion of open adoption is that you know who your biological parents are, if you are an adopted child. As the adoptive parents, you have some way of contacting them; you maintain at least addresses, or can get them. So you can have an open adoption through an agency...

LONDON: But this isn't the norm, is it?

ARMS: No. The norm is closed adoption. While more and more interest is being raised in open adoption, we are a country that is still based in Victorian attitudes of shame and secrecy. So, to have a child that you place for adoption is a shameful thing. To be an adopted child is to be in a position where you are supposed to feel grateful for someone loving you. And to be an adoptive parent is to be someone who is supposed to fulfil all the child's needs. So this is all a false understanding of reality. It's all built on a system of secrecy. Closed adoption changes the child's name from the adoption forward, changes the initial birth record. Now, you can see how much falsification there has to be. It's an unauthentic form, because you can't cut a child off from its roots.

LONDON: You write that "closed adoption fails everyone" – not just the child, but also the birth parents as well as the adoptive parents.

ARMS: That's right. I would say, actually, that the birth-parents are the ones we can *see* it fails because they are cut out of the picture – they are not able to be part of the child's life, they are not able to have contact with the child, even if the child wants to. Now, that's not true in many cases, in many states, that allow there to be a meeting if all of the parties register with the state or register with the adoptive agency that it occurred through and agree that they want to be reunited.

But I want to make a real appeal to adoptive parents or prospective adoptive parents here, especially those who are anxious or worried about the possibility of an open adoption, and afraid of birth-parents wanting to take their child away from them or take a child back – especially with what you see in the courts today, because there is some insanity happening precisely that way. What I want to say is that, to raise a child who is adopted who you are not allowed or supposed to put in contact with his or her parents of biological origin is to make the job that much more difficult for you, because it is the biological parents who hold certain pieces of that child's identity, heredity, medical history, physical and personality characteristics. Adoptive children have that question always, "Who am I?", "Who do I look like?", "Who plays the piano besides me?" These are questions that come with the territory of being adopted. When the child is not able to find answers, it makes it much more difficult to be a child, but also much more difficult to be the parent trying to raise that child.

Adoptive kids, it turns out, tend to start "acting out" their need for connection, their need to understand their biological roots, well before the age that is recognized in this country, which is after the age of 18 when *maybe* they should be allowed to meet their biological parents. They start acting out pre-pubescent – 9, 10, 11.

So, if people can enter adoption understanding it may be more complex to have an open adoption, and certainly far more complex to have one step further (which I would recommend) – a cooperative adoption – where you actually have involvement and relationship with the birth-parents, or if that's not possible, say someone is psychotic, or someone is dead, then with other kin of that family – it may be more complicated in the beginning, it may be more problematic and complex, but it holds much more possibility for wholeness in the child's life, and an easier kid overall. And a happier family situation overall. So, it's another one of those things where the

complexity in the early phases makes it easier in the long term. It's all about attachment and abandonment.

LONDON: My guest is writer, photographer, and educator Suzanne Arms. She is the author of several books including *Immaculate Deception* and *Adoption: A Handful of Hope*. I'm Scott London, and this is INSIGHT & OUTLOOK.

Suzanne, I'm reminded of the rhetoric on the campaign trail of George Bush and Dan Quayle when they were talking about "family values." They insisted that they were *opposed* to abortion, but *all for* adoption. And now Newt Gingrich and company are talking about orphanages. What do you make of these sorts of political proclamations?

ARMS: I think that there is a growing desire to punish people who don't think like we do, and a growing belief that the solution to the complex and very, very difficult problems we are facing in this country related to violence and alienation and disintegration of family and community ties, can be handled by quick fixes. The first quick fix is, don't give anyone any information about sex and they are not going to want to do it. Se second is, don't allow them any access to any contraception or family planning; that will prevent them from having babies that they aren't capable of handling and don't want. The third is, if they do get pregnant, punish them by taking them off the welfare ranks if they are poor, or insist that they go back to work immediately with the baby, or take the baby away entirely. Adoption is the best, because we've got so many waiting parents. Why should these "unfit" parents be allowed to raise a child when there are these really qualified, well-heeled, well-educated, middle-class people who want babies? And, it is true that we have many, many more infertile couples now – that's a whole other show [laughs] because the amount of infertility in this country is rising as the sperm count is dropping in all industrial societies, largely due to pesticide residues in our foods and toxins in our environment. We do see more and more couples just desperate to have a baby. It raises all sorts of questions. Should we have a right to have a child just because we want one? Should we be able to go to any lengths? The irony is, why is it that couples who wait and wait and really plan, wait until they are really mature enough to have a baby (and this isn't always true; sometimes couples are just filling the empty bedroom, doing what they think is the American way – "Now that we've got the second car and got the promotion, let's have a baby")... There is an irony to people who really, really want to have a child and want to love a child, and *can't*, while those who *never* dream of getting pregnant. *don't* want to get pregnant, and get pregnant the first time they have sex. I would say it is a punitive streak in this country, this talk about adoption being the answer. It is *one* answer, it is a complicated answer, and it is not an easy solution.

LONDON: Many people consider adoption only as an alternative to having their own children. This leads me to wonder whether, after many failed efforts at having their own children, various forms of infertility work and so on, people don't come to adoption carrying their own wounds and frustrations. And maybe harboring overly high expectations about what parenthood is all about.

ARMS: Yes, they do. Not always, but many people do. I've interviewed numerous adopted children who were raised with a feeling of obligation toward their parents and were not able to feel loved by their parents for who they were. They looked different from what their parents expected to look like; they had different traits; they were not found worthy or loveable, and were then abandoned by their adoptive parents. Or, who were in a battleground between the adoptive parents; the mother, on one side perhaps, and the father on the other, one of whom really bonded to this child and one who didn't. I think it's a very important point to make that children need to be loved for who they are, not for a place in our emptiness.

When people have been through a great deal of infertility and all the mechanistic solutions to infertility (which are humiliating, at best, even though they may be necessary for some people), there is a kind of privacy that they need and a kind of putting themselves together again. It is very, very important before they embark on parenting. And they can't all do it before they actually have an adopted child placed in their arms. But it does complicate it because it means that they are grieving from the loss of their fertility, or their inability to carry a child themselves. As they are taking a child, it is similar to a birth-parent who is grieving from the death of a parent, say, or the death of another child, as this other baby is gestating in the womb during pregnancy. So it complicates these issues.

I really encourage people involved in adoption to do a lot of healing on themselves before they... or at any point that they possibly can, but especially before they adopt a child, so that they really come fresh to it.

Then there is also the issue of those people who want to adopt children from another culture, or adopt children from a war-torn country, or who want to adopt children because they don't want to bring more children into the world when we have over-population. So there is a lot of altruism in adoption too. But the complexity increases when you have children of other races, children who have various handicaps, children who might be ill, or children who you have displaced from their culture. It's not that that can't also be bridged, it's just that... The important thing for people to understand is that the issues are complex, not simple. They need to be faced head-on as complex. Adoptive parents really benefit from group support. So do all parents. But adoptive parents in particular, like parents of disabled kids, benefit from psychotherapy and counseling work often. They benefit from anything that helps them understand this child's needs and wounds. And adopted children benefit from various kinds of healing modalities that run the gamut from a lot of cuddling and nurturing (and if it's a young baby, sleeping with this child, carrying the child skin-to-skin, trying to address the losses that this child has had; at a very physical level, sometimes breastfeeding a child even if you are not able to get your own milk, but many women can with a lactate device that allows you to put milk or formula in and run it through a tube next to your breast while the child suckles) to just understanding the needs of a high-needs child. Most adopted kids fall into the category of high-needs children and need an extra amount of attention, and an extra amount of reassurance. It tends to resurface at every major holiday and every major event – whether it's their going through puberty or graduating from a grade or school, or going to a new school, or getting married. The wounds tend to be opened again, and it's not that it wasn't healed; it's because there is a new level of it, a new layer of it that needs to be looked at. People who adopt should not do so unless they are willing to look deeply at the emotional issues of living.

LONDON: I'm reminded of the old Chinese saying that it takes a whole village to raise a child.

ARMS: It's a Chinese saying, it's an ancient tribal saying. It really does.

LONDON: You say in your book that "it's a myth in this society that in raising children, parents have even the partial support of the community."

ARMS: That is right. In fact, most parents in this culture, I would say most women, are single parents and don't even acknowledge it. The father is away all day at work, or absent emotionally. Sometimes it's the mother who is absent. Often, single parents are going in with their eyes open. They *know* they can't do it alone and they are looking for community. We have a myth in this culture that we can somehow close ourselves off from the world – which is something, as I said before, that adoptive parents have a natural desire to do, in pulling back into their privacy after they have

been so exposed in their infertility work. But, in fact, what we really need is the support of neighbors and friends – a tribe, a real sense of community.

You see some people doing that these days. I've met some extraordinary people in adoption, including a couple of gay couples – a lesbian couple and a pair of gay men – who adopted children and knew they needed community and went out and chose the kinds of situations in which they and their children would feel really nurtured and supported. I think it's a wonderful model, because so often in middle class society (at least in America) people think they can go and do it alone, just themselves and a baby sitter, or themselves and a day-care center. It doesn't work. When you add abandonment issues to full-time day-care, and a baby not getting to sleep with its parents, and parents being physically away too many hours a day – working, supposedly, to get the things this child needs (but which the child doesn't want because it wants your attention) – you tend to increase the amount of woundedness there is for adopted children.

So it's a tender issue. I believe we can go a long way to making adoptions more optimal. But the features that are important in this landscape are: openness, honesty, a recognition of the wounds that occur to everyone, at each individual's own level, the wounds that need to be addressed and may need help in healing – whether that's physical help, whether it's help from nurturing, or help from an outside counselor or massage therapist. And, adoptive parents and everybody involved in adoption needs to see themselves as part of a community in raising a child, or a community around the child, because the child is really what is so crucially important here. When you have a child whose needs haven't been met, it makes it much tougher to parent.

So I have great sympathy and empathy for people who are raising high-needs or special-needs kids. Adoptive kids are special-needs kids. But we can make adoption better if we go in with our eyes open and don't hide the truth.

LONDON: Thanks very much for talking with me, Suzanne.

ARMS: You're welcome.

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*I've been speaking with photo-journalist and educator Suzanne Arms. She is the author of numerous books, including To Love and Let Go, Adoption: A Handful of Hope, and Immaculate Deception.*

*I'm Scott London. Thanks for joining me on INSIGHT & OUTLOOK today for a new look at the adoption dilemma with Suzanne Arms.*

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*The e-mail address, if you would like to be in touch with your comments or reflections on the program, is [insight@west.net](mailto:insight@west.net). That's [insight@west.net](mailto:insight@west.net)*

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