

CUB Communicator

SPRING/SUMMER 2002

Concerned United Birthparents – established nationally since 1976

Jean Paton, Mother of Adoption Reform, is Honored by CUB

Jean Paton is paid tribute by Karen Vedder, Reuben Pannor, Lee Campbell, and Mary Anne Cohen



Tribute to Jean Paton

by Karen Vedder, CUB President

I'll always remember the first time I saw Jean Paton—she was sitting in a light as if an angel descended from heaven. I was in awe of her. I am still in awe of her – her courage, her intelligence, her whole being.

It was when I was attending my first CUB Retreat. I was new to CUB and attended the Retreat with a great deal of trepidation. I had no idea what to expect. The setting was rustic, but beautiful. Fall had arrived with a fury, surrounding the facility with fields of trees changing colors before the winter doldrums set in. As far as we could view was a sea of magnificent golds, reds and oranges. Coming from California, it was breathtakingly beautiful.

Workshops were held in various rooms, including the sparse dining room. Keynote presentations took place in the main room, walled with cozy wood and massive windows. In this comfort zone, I had my first experience with Jean Paton. She sat with her back to the wide windows that looked out onto the sea of golden hued trees. The sun was shining just so, causing the fields to sparkle as if they were an opened treasure chest. And there was Jean, the keeper of her own treasures, including experiences

Jean Paton, founder of the adoption reform movement and Orphan Voyage, passed away March 27, 2002. Born December 27, 1908, Jean was 93 years old when she died.

Jean Paton Tribute

with adoption, her own and others.' She sat in a straight-backed chair (her request) with a shawl draped over a small table (also at her request). When she spoke we all listened, enraptured by her words as she led us into her challenging world of adoption awareness and reform.

This was the first time I had met Ms. Paton and regretfully, I did not spend time talking with her. I was too intimidated. To me she was a wise guru with time only for important people. I was so wrong. As I later learned, Jean was not only approachable, she loved to talk, loved to hear more stories and share her own. Now I look back on the missed opportunities to talk with her and I feel cheated. If only I hadn't been so shy. If only I had realized how incredibly open and honest Jean was rather than the holy guru I imagined. Because now she is gone. And I miss her.

Years later we were back on the east coast for a CUB Retreat. Jean was there to help celebrate CUB's twentieth anniversary. She had been an essential force in CUB's birth and twenty years later she still supported the organization. In her late eighties, her presentation was a bit fuzzy due to moments of forgetfulness, but what she said was pertinent and worthy of note-taking.

When the Retreat ended, Barbara Shaw and I decided to ferry over to Boston for an historic sight seeing adventure. As we were sitting on the boat, I noticed a lone figure hiking along the dock walkways. She appeared to be elderly, yet walked with purpose and a strong stride. As the admirable senior got closer, I recognized Jean Paton, so determined in her gait, showing no fear. She appeared confident of who she was and where she was going. It was in that moment that she became my role model. I decided I want to be just like her when I reach my eighties—vital, self assured, independent, filled with words of wisdom, and not afraid to walk in strange places.

Four years later, I began my tenure as president of CUB. When the Winter 2000 CUB Communicator was mailed, we received many reactions to the new format, the pictures, and articles. One cherished note came from Jean, who wrote to say, "The new board looks as strong as the mountains pictured behind them." Quite a compliment from a woman who knows

about impervious mountains—a consistent challenge the moment she realized the need to know the identity of her birthparents to the moment she died.

When the Fall 2001 Communicator came out, once more Jean had something to say. She was concerned that perhaps "anger" had been adopted as a new focus with CUB and felt it was an unhealthy avenue to travel. She wrote her comments, not via email, but the old fashioned way of notes and letters. Jean was not about to give up her typewriter, a machine responsible for many articles, pamphlets and books. I responded to her concerns, defining our focus as activism, not anger. That anger can motivate toward activism is a good thing, I explained. She seemed satisfied.

Just five days before Jean died, once more she faced her typewriter and keyed more thoughts and reactions to our newsletter. What I had admired years ago, beginning the morning I saw her sun illuminated body sitting before the golden sea and the afternoon she walked so steadfastly along the docks of Boston, I admire even more now. She was vital, she was clear thinking, she was self-assured, and she was independent right up to the moment of her death. For us to even hope to walk in her shoes, following her pathway, is a challenge, as well as a privilege and honor.

Jean, we will miss your letters. We already miss your presence on this earth. We rest easy knowing you are now with family. You are probably already stirring things up in the great beyond as you find a cause, a need for awareness and change. Thank you Jean for everything you have done for adoption reform and adoption awareness. This I say for all those your life has touched, including me. It was an honor to know you. I will honor your memory for the remainder of my life.



Jean Paton's Last Letter to CUB

(written five days before her death)

Dear Editor,

I read with interest the page in the recent Communicator where my correspondence appeared. Anger is possible to include with love, but rage is not. It is a problem, always.

Then I turned to page 26 and read what the professor had to say about the closing of birth records. She said the movement started in the 70s? What ever was I doing in 1953?

The adoption rights movement took a different form after Florence Fisher got into it, but without the work of forming groups, the massive correspondence with individuals, the field trips, plus my own influence on Fisher, there would have been no movement. If she wants to know the true antecedents, tell her to get in touch with me. I think she might be surprised. We are in another Civil War, and it is not at all pleasant.

And what about the origins of CUB? Did you know I suggested there be such a group? Mary Ann Cohen and Lee Campbell came forth from Massachusetts and CUB began.

Tribute to Jean Paton

by Rubeen Pannor

I first learned about Jean Paton at a social work conference in the early 60s. The discussion was about a book Jean had just published, **The Adopted Break Silence**.

Jean was described as an eccentric, irresponsible social worker, who was attacking the institution of adoption. I was warned to stay clear of her ideas. It was shortly after that at a CUB conference that I met Jean and became one of her life-long admirers.

Jean was one of the early pioneers whose ideas helped to usher in the adoption reform movement.

Tribute to Jean Paton

by Lee Campbell, CUB Founder

To me, a neophyte in the mid-70s' struggle for adoption reform, Jean Paton was an indomitable battle-scarred veteran. She was amazing. Her writings flowed from a wellspring that seemed to have no bottom. No one could match her then, or now, in terms of sheer, raw passion. That includes me—and I was plenty intense in “my day.”

All of my early interactions with this dynamo were through the snail mail she meted out as rapid-fire as a casino card dealer. These epistles are apparently scanned forever in my mind, for I can easily recall what each sheet of the reams she mailed me looked like: typed letters streaming across the pages, looking as if they had been wrung from an exhausted ribbon in a standard typewriter. Each word packed a punch. Jean Paton always made me stop and think, and think some more. She was an inspiration.

The first time I met Jean was at a conference. Many people probably hold this vision of her: Jean hobbling into a banquet room, trailing a ball and chain behind her. In person, she was clearly no less afraid of controversy than she was in print.

The movement's early momentum owes much of its success to Jean Paton. I know that wherever she is, she continues to agitate for adoption reform among whatever angels she passes during the travels of this, her . . . good night.

Tribute to Jean Paton

by Mary Anne Cohen

Before Jean Paton, there was no adoption reform. We owe a huge debt to the courage and foresight of this lone adoptee who dared to “break the silence” about how it feels to be adopted and denied one's heritage.

Jean Paton was born on December 27, 1908, in Detroit, Michigan, and named Ruthena Hill Kittson. As her parents were not married, she was soon surrendered for adoption, adopted by the Paton family and renamed Jean Paton.

Jean worked many years in the adoption field before she began to question the system. As middle age approached, she wondered about her own heritage.

In 1954, Jean wrote the groundbreaking work, **The Adopted Break Silence**, which grew out of her interviews with forty adopted persons, as well as her own experience in searching for her birthmother. One of these forty adoptees was the playwright Edward Albee, who kept in touch with Jean for many years thereafter.

When Jean Paton was born, adoption records were open to adopted adults, so she had no trouble obtaining her own original birth certificate. However, by the time she began her research into adoption as a social system, records were being sealed everywhere. Jean spent the rest of her long life battling this injustice, often virtually alone.

She began the support network, Orphan Voyage, in the 50s. Far-flung members kept in touch with her via the newsletter, “The Log,” as well as by phone and mail. Jean answered all phone calls and correspondence personally, and made many referrals to search help and local groups as the adoption reform movement began to expand and grow from the 1970s onward.

I first connected with Jean in 1975 after getting her address from a magazine article about adoptee searches. She answered me, a suffering young birthmother, with a long, kind and compassionate letter, while other organizations just sent a form letter and request for dues. Thus began a friendship that lasted for many years.

It was Jean who first suggested that birthmothers should have their own group and newsletter. This suggestion led to the formation of CUB in 1975.

Jean was also the first to claim the name

“bastard” as a term of pride, with her “Bastards Are Beautiful” buttons that came out in the 70s. Many of the more timid reform groups were shocked by these buttons, but I loved it and wore mine with pride.

Jean was always firm about adoptee rights. As an “insider” of the social work profession, she was scathing in her denunciation of that group's infantilization of adopted adults. She was unique in the adoption reform movement in that she did not seek personal fame, money, or ego gratification. Jean devoted her personal efforts to the good of all touched by adoption, without asking anything in return.

I never doubted Jean's integrity, brilliance, commitment, and unique view of adoption and the adoptee's place in the world. Jean continued to be controversial and challenged us all right up until the end.

Jean Paton was not just a reformer, she was a poet, philosopher, and accomplished sculptor and visual artist. Her book of poems, **They Serve Fugitively**, is one of the best examples of adoption poetry I've read. Her writings on adoption issues are still worth pondering and debating. She was truly a Renaissance woman. She brought wisdom and a profound spiritual view to adoption that many others missed. She went deep into the mystery of adoptee as outsider, gadfly, oracle, and prophet to the larger society.

When Jean passed away this spring at the age of ninety-three from a heart ailment, she was still bright, sharp, and working on a new book about adoption. As the founding mother of adoption reform, she richly deserves to be remembered and honored. Her work for adoptee rights must be carried on. I only regret she did not live to see open records everywhere. It is because of the work she started alone over fifty years ago that the rest of us have such a firm foundation from which to go forward to victory.

Jean fought the good fight with compassion, grace, intellect, and soul. May she be met in heaven by all her family, both by adoption and birth. May we continue her good work here on earth. Rest in peace, Jean. You were one “Beautiful Bastard.”

This tribute first appeared in Origins/Spring 2002.