

Interview with Sharon Shaw Elrod Author of *Shar's Story: A Mother and Daughter Reunited*

Reader Views is happy to welcome Sharon Shaw Elrod, author of the powerful memoir "Shar's Story: A Mother and Daughter Reunited." Sharon is being interviewed by Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of Reader Views.

Juanita: Thanks for taking the time to talk with us today Sharon. Would you please tell us about the story you tell in your new book, "Shar's Story: A Mother and Daughter Reunited"?

Sharon: In 1966, I did the worst possible thing a young woman could do. I got pregnant and wasn't married. The father of my baby deserted me. My family abandoned me. I was so ashamed I couldn't tell any of my friends. I went into hiding for five months. My daughter was born on June 1, 1966. Shortly after I surrendered her for adoption, I returned to civilization and pretended like nothing had happened. Thirty-six long years later, she returned to find me. This book describes that experience, with all the tears and joy that accompany such a journey.

Juanita: Why did you decide to write your story at this time? What inspired you to actually write this book?

Sharon: A big part of the story is how I released guilt and shame and disgrace. When those ugly feelings began to disappear, and forgiveness and love moved in to replace them, I just *had* to write about it. Someone told me this book was *screaming* to be written. Coincidences abound in this story, and I want other women who share either the experience or the bad feelings, to know they too have options to live life differently.

Juanita: Why was it not possible to keep your baby? How have the times changed since 1965 in regards to unwed mothers?

Sharon: In 1965-66, women lived within carefully crafted boundaries. If we drifted outside those boundaries, like an unwed pregnancy, we became "fallen" women. We were tainted with sin. Something was wrong with us. Others looked on us with disgust. The baby became the sign of sin, and if we cared at all about having a "good" life, we surrendered the baby. The adopting couple, just because they were married, were eminently more qualified to raise the baby than were we (just because we were *not* married). Now, the carefully crafted boundaries are gone and a single woman can choose to keep her baby without the fear of social exile.

Juanita: What were the range of emotions you felt at the time of your pregnancy and subsequent years after?

Sharon: I was frantic to keep my pregnancy hidden until I went into hiding at an adoption agency in Ottumwa, Iowa. I was full of guilt and shame, because of the disgrace I'd brought upon my family. Remorse and despair filled most of my days, because I knew I would never be able to raise my baby. I was totally hopeless. After I returned to civilization, I pretended nothing had ever happened, speaking only briefly one time with my mother about the experience. I numbed my senses about the incredible loss I had experienced, and did not allow the grief ever to surface for long. I lived with buried grief for 35 and a half years. It was when I began telling my extended family about my baby that the grief finally resurfaced and I was able to begin to let it go. A whole lot of joy began to fill my life then, and within five months, my daughter contacted me.

Juanita: Is the emotional rollercoaster typical for adoption situations?

Sharon: Yes, it is. Having a baby is supposed to be one of life's greatest treasures. To have to surrender that treasure, *just because you aren't married*, is incredibly difficult to accept. I still have to be careful to manage my anger about that loss.

Juanita: In retrospect, how do you think the numbing of your senses, and suppression of grief affected other aspects of your life throughout the years?

Sharon: I believe my life was inauthentic; that is, because I thought I had to pretend I'd never given birth to my daughter, I wasn't being *me*, wasn't the *real* me. That part of my life was sealed off. I think buried grief generates anger and resentment, which also wasn't allowed in my family. I had to be *perfect*, always right, always having all the answers. I carried a very heavy emotional load for three and a half decades. I overcompensated by over achieving, needing to be the leader and generally standing out in the crowd. I had so much to prove. I had to keep the real me from public view, because I was so badly tainted.

Juanita: What was the catalyst for your decision to finally reveal your big secret to your family? How did that experience change you?

Sharon: Several threads came together at just the right time... My aunt (one of Mother's younger sisters) and I had been arguing on the internet about prayer in public schools. That led to some discussions about my mother's need to control others. A second thread was the impending death of my favorite uncle and his request for me to travel to Iowa to say goodbye to him. A third thread was my priest at church challenging his congregation to live more authentic lives; let go of the lies and accept God's grace and forgiveness. I really needed to hear that! I told my aunts and uncles and cousins on that trip to Iowa and the incredible shedding of guilt and shame and disgrace began! I can't describe the exhilaration I felt once I started telling them about my daughter.

Juanita: Your daughter contacted you in a relatively short amount of time after you revealed your secret, and began to release the shame. Do you think this was a coincidence?

Sharon: No. She and I believe we were always connected spiritually. I believe that connection allowed communication after I began letting go of the lies and pretenses, and she intuited safety as a result. She contacted me when she felt safe to do so.

Juanita: How and why, did your daughter Rachel Ann decide to find you?

Sharon: A friend of hers had been badly injured in an auto accident, and she began to think she should 'seize the moment' or wait too long and never have the opportunity to know me. She googled the name of the adoption agency and put the telephone number in her cell phone. On a shopping trip one day, she impulsively placed the call.

Juanita: How did you begin to get to know each other, and what was the response of your respective families?

Sharon: She sent an email to the director of the agency, who forwarded it on to me. I responded. Then nothing happened for five months. I thought that was all I would ever hear. It was really heartbreaking... all over again. Then a week before Christmas, the director called me to tell me he had a Christmas present for me. She sent me an email directly, not through him, and we started emailing each other. We both saved all the emails. My family was totally thrilled. My friends were so supportive. They couldn't wait to get all the information possible, and everyone wanted to meet her. Rachael Ann's husband was very supportive, but she didn't tell her parents until several months later. She knew they would be threatened, and put off telling them. Her mother is still very insecure about what Rachael has done, and I can only hope that one day she will decide nothing has really changed in her life. Rachael has simply found a 'bonus'. She told her two children the day we met them; they were very excited about meeting me and my husband.

Juanita: What has this adoption/reunion experience taught you?

Sharon: I experienced first-hand what many people only talk about, according to my minister-husband. God's grace and forgiveness is delivered to each of us on a silver platter. When we accept it, joy and love just take over!

Juanita: Sharon, how has the experience of releasing the grief and shame changed your self-image as a woman, and a mother?

Sharon: I feel more whole, emotionally and spiritually. Since I don't have to be perfect anymore, I can admit my flaws, and that results in self-acceptance on a very *real* level. I love me for who I am now, not for who I pretended to be for so many years.

Juanita: How deep do you go in your book, in regards to the emotional aspects of your internal journey through this whole experience?

Sharon: I delved as deeply as I could at the time. The book has been described by many as 'very emotional'. However, I now must admit I've discovered even more feelings and emotional responses that hadn't surfaced when I wrote the book. So a full-length memoir is in the works! I love this little one-night book, but now I have to write the *whole* story.

Juanita: We certainly look forward to your full-length memoir and the added insights that you will share. Do you feel the direction you took with your professional career was tied in with the traumatic events surrounding your pregnancy?

Sharon: Absolutely! I was the underdog, despised and disgraced. I went into social work to help people who were socially neglected and mistreated, just as I was.

Juanita: What are you ultimately conveying to readers through your book “Shar's Story: A Mother and Daughter Reunited”?

Sharon: I'm conveying the spiritual message about the power of God's love and grace. I hope I'm telling other women who've shared the experience of feeling insurmountable social pressure to surrender a baby that they, too, can conquer the aftermath. We don't have to be victims forever. And I think I've shared some important information about how to go about doing a reunion with the baby/person you've loved in absentia for so many years.

Juanita: Who do you envision reading your book?

Sharon: Readers who enjoy non-fiction; the million and a half women who were forced to surrender babies for adoption between 1945 and 1973; adoptees and adoptive parents and families who share adoption experiences; professional social workers and counselors who facilitate reunions.

Juanita: Sharon, how can readers find out more about you and your endeavors?

Sharon: My website is www.sharsstory.com. I also respond to absolutely every letter and email I receive. My email address is SharElrod@sharsstory.com. My snail-mail address is on the web site.

Juanita: Thank you for talking with us today Sharon. Congratulations on the release of your new book, your remarkable journey, and the blessing of finding your daughter after so many years. We look forward to your expanded memoir and wish you and your family all the best. Do you have any final thoughts for your readers?

Sharon: Thanks for the invitation, Juanita! I really appreciate the opportunity to explore more of my life in this book with you.