

The ties that bind: a fractured existence

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As a child I felt forbidden to indicate interest in my origins for fear of hurting my adoptive mother.

During genetics class I didn't want to draw attention to myself by pointing out that the assignments were meaningless for me who had never seen the colour of my parents eyes or hair. I feigned indifference about the people who gave birth to me and completed the genetic assignments for the phantom girl my adoptive parents never had. She had brown hair, brown eyes, stood 5'7" tall and had a weak heart. I had brown hair, blue eyes, stood 5'5" tall and had a cold heart according to my adoptive mother.

Like many adopted children, I found it easier to accept the prescribed story that I was special and to pretend I was fully interested. But, although the rest of the world seemed not to notice, there was no escaping the fundamental differences in mentality and temperament between my adoptive family and myself.

My childhood was an endurance test. Could I hang onto the shreds of my happy, independent birth personality until I was finally able to leave home and become my true self, or would I forget my true essence during the years of play acting sad, angry roles? At night alone in bed I danced with princesses and tried to remember.

As an adult adoptee I had built a strong, happy and interested life, albeit with some obvious missing parts and irritating problems which dogged me no matter how often I moved. But I liked my life and others mostly viewed me in a good light.

The break up of yet another short-term relationship began to corrode the edges of the 'successful' lie I was living. What eventually prompted me to make contact with my birth family was a certainty that I had learned as much as I cared to about being strong and independent and that my life could continue as it was or I could challenge myself to relate differently, better to people.

I was told that there is a strong desire for the reunion story to have a fairy tale ending. We are all burdened by some hard issues, and we'd all like to feel that we can grow beyond our difficulties. When a reunion story is told everyone wants the meeting to be the resolution so that they are encouraged to face their own inner demons.

I don't know what I expected to bring back from meeting my birth family. At the very least, I hoped for my genetic heritage. In my fantasies I expected it to heal all wounds.

Those of us who decide to search get caught up in the momentum of our decision. We travel backward into time toward ourselves at the same time as we travel forward to our reunion. I began to connect to the feelings I had around abandonment and the pain, grief and terror surfaced and overwhelmed me. It felt a lot like madness most days and frightened me considerably. For the first time I felt out of control and I wondered if I'd ever

regain my footing again. In a way the answer is no - there can be no turning back to the person I was when I was denying my feelings.

Intellectually I had made peace with my adoption, but meeting birth family isn't an intellectual experience and quite quickly I realised that feelings were going to surface whether I wanted them to or not.

My birth family is a loving, generous and close one. During this first few months of phone contact I began to feel inadequate, just as I had as a baby. When you get given away at birth you come to believe you're flawed. All the problems in my life which sprang up, then became an extension of the things I was feeling about my adoption and it was an intensely difficult time. Our first contact had an unreal quality to it. I thought our genetic link would be so strong that I would instantly bond. But instead I heard complete strangers talk about their lives and I wondered how I could trust that these were genuinely my parents and not just any couple who had relinquished a girl.

Our meeting reassured me that I am my mother's daughter. We are the story everyone imagines. We look alike, we have the same sense of humour, the same temperament, interest and tastes. I loved my sister at first meeting, more deeply than I have loved most people in my life. We are very different, yet entirely similar. We're cut of the same cloth as they say. I feel ambivalent about my father, but I cannot deny the genetic bond.

Their story is an old, tired one. They were engaged in the 50's when life was more judgmental and she got pregnant before the wedding. They were young, ashamed and worried that people would count months, so they put me up for adoption and told the world I had died.

I came home from the reunion more confused than healed. I struggled with my grief and angry feelings. Why hadn't these people valued me enough to lie to the world that I was premature rather than claim I was dead? How was I ever going to integrate all this new information?

Adoptees have two existences. I see we are people who are never whole, never completely at home with ourselves. Ours is a fractured existence. I think I immigrated so I could openly declare my foreignness. Being an immigrant meant I had a good excuse to feel out of place.

It can take a long time for adoptees to begin to feel. I know now that nothing is going to heal my abandonment issues and that I need to learn to relate to them in an adult manner. We can stay where we are, try to remain comfortable and not feel much, but what then is the point of it all? We never return the same person once we've experienced pain.

I miss my brave personality, which fell victim to the feelings that surfaced because of the reunion, but I'm proud of the person I have become. Someone who can finally openly feel, who has honest relationships and who can stick with a problem long enough to find a resolution. Someone who is learning to be a part of a loving family (with lots of trepidation), but slowly acquiring new relating skills and wasn't that the whole point?

"I have been given a gift. The gift of my past and with it has come a lesson. I have learned the telling of the truth, the act, is where the answer lies. It is what I need to do in my own life. It is no easy thing to do. It is an act of courage. No matter how different our lives may seem, the lessons we need to learn are the same. Every life is about making choices. Do we choose to love or hate, resent or forgive, hurt or heal, run or be brave?"
(source unknown)

R, adoptee.