

CHAPTER 5



SEARCH AND REUNION



Adoption Council of Canada
Conseil d'adoption du Canada

How Do You Spell BirthMom?

By Paula Schuck

“Mom, how do you spell birth mom?” my daughter hollers, perched at a mahogany desk inside a motel room in Niagara Falls.

We have come here for Canada Day, July 1, my two daughters, myself and my husband, to play as a family, see the sights and celebrate my daughter’s graduation to grade one. I am puttering around by the motel vanity, applying a bit of mascara, a spritz of hairspray.

Last night we gathered as a family, kept the kids up way too late and watched Canada celebrate its birthday, fireworks way too loud for little ears, the hour much too late for tiny, contented bodies. On the way back to our motel, both Payton and Ainsley fell fast asleep. This morning, my eldest girl Payton turned six. Her party is next week. A big movie party. Six of her closest friends. Today she cannot yet know it is her birthday. And yet somehow she does.

Right now, at this point in her life I am Payton’s version of spell check. Routinely I am asked to spell for her any given word, as she sits crayon poised over pad of paper, writer in training. I saunter over casually spelling the word slowly out loud. When I am beside her, she tells me she is drawing a picture for her birth mommy, Cheryl. Flowers. A little girl and a butterfly. Reds, blues, pinks and purples. Happy colours. Payton’s favourite colours, chosen with the precision of a six year old alpha girl, a first child, a perfectionist.

Dear Birthmom Cheryl:

It’s your baby girl. Today is my 6th birthday. I miss you.
Love: Payton.

I am at once heartbroken and proud. How well my beautiful girl has integrated her adoption experience. How healthy her precious heart. She does nothing to hide this from me, her forever mom, the person who first met her when she was six weeks old. I scarcely knew how to lift her tiny sleeping body from the infant carrier she arrived in.

I praise my daughter for doing this for birth mommy. I tell her the picture is beautiful. She makes me promise to send it. Later I will follow through. We have closed adoptions for both my daughters. There is no contact between us and birth parents. In the past I have sent my own letters and pictures to the social worker who handled our adoption, entrusting her to keep them until the day birth parents come looking.

So dramatic this shift from trusting five-year-old to cheeky cynical six. A couple of months ago I looked at my daughter, her face clouded in a sadness that had not been there before. Psychologists, social workers and adoption experts all tell you six is the magical age when children experience a great developmental shift in thinking. Cognitively they are able to understand abstracts. Life and death. Grief and loss. Time. Not surprisingly adopted children also begin to re-evaluate the nature of adoption.



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FROM BEHIND CLOSED DOORS
MEGHAN ELIZABETH CHARTERS
OCTOBER 30/03

Every child asks, at one time or another, where she came from. In my case, I came from behind closed doors. As a 1960s baby of teenage parents, I was placed for adoption, and that meant my adoption was handled entirely behind closed doors. Throughout my life I wanted to open those doors. I needed to know who and what was behind them.

I needed to do this for myself. It wasn't about mere curiosity. I needed to know my beginnings and the mother and father who gave me life. That need to know about my family of origin (a term I prefer over birth parents) was compelling. It's fair to say my search was even necessary for my own health. I was not trying to find a replacement for my family of adoption, for mine was a happy home. I was trying to find the rest of me.

Six years ago I met my mother. This past Father's Day I met my father for the first time. Now, having met them both, I have been amazed at how strongly genetics carries through bloodlines. I found a great deal of me behind those doors once I opened them.

My experience of the meetings with my mother and father is perhaps exceptional – they always wondered about me and both wanted to meet me. I'm still opening the gifts I received at those meetings. Before my reunions I never really felt connected to anyone. I did not know anyone who looked like me or who shared my blood. I did not know where my shyness and sensitivity came from. My adoptive parents and my adopted brother were so gregarious, popular, and outgoing. I knew they loved me; but I also mystified them – I wasn't like them.

From my mother I learned that there is a family trait of low platelets and high blood pressure. I have her rounded shoulders and her mother's jaw and chin. We're both shy and want to please others. I learned that my long history of clinical depression comes through my mother's line through three generations. Finally I could put my moods in perspective. We share a sense of humour, appreciating irony and a sense of the ridiculous. We even laugh in the same way.

Both she and I are passionate gardeners, although I'm new to this absorbing hobby. When I learned that my background included farmers, horticulturists and gardeners, I realized the seed of my passion comes from a long family line. Neither of us can resist pulling one more weed from the garden or buying just a few extra plants in the spring. We both marvel at the daily miracles of Mother Nature. In her I found someone who not only shared my blood, but whose blood clearly shaped mine.

In my father's face, I saw my own eyes and face reflected back to me, where before, I'd had only a mirror. At a picnic lunch, I laughed with recognition when my father said he was sorry because the roll *I* was cutting came apart. We have this uncommon penchant for saying sorry over the least little thing. Then I watched with fascination as he opened an envelope just as I do, tapping one end of the envelope so that he could neatly tear off the other end.

My nearly superstitious insistence on having a clean, orderly house and all bills paid before leaving home on a trip comes from my father, who needs exactly that same order. I learned that my compulsion to move around furniture and rearrange kitchen cupboards on a monthly basis comes from my father's mother. She did this weekly, much to the distraction of her family! My father and I share a wish to avoid conflict. We both seem to need control.

My reunions have given me other gifts. I feel grounded now, whereas before I felt as though I had dropped out of the sky. For the first time I am connected to my family of origin. I feel more confident and sure of myself. Where I had been grafted to my adoptive family tree now I know the source of my original roots. I knew what I had gained from my adoptive family. Now, I have my full inheritance. I know who I am. I'm not merely part of one family tree, but rather a part of a whole orchard.

There have been bumps and bruises along the way but they have been worth it. Reunion is about learning the whole truth of my existence and about finding the rest of me. It's very difficult to stand whole when part of you is locked behind closed doors. For me reunion has been priceless. Let's open the doors.

FROM BEHIND CLOSED DOORS: A POSTSCRIPT ON SEARCH AND REUNION MEGHAN ELIZABETH CHARTERS

Recently a close friend asked me if I wanted to write a follow-up to my letter entitled “From Behind Closed Doors,” which I had submitted to the Adoption Council of Canada. That organization kindly printed my piece October 30, 2003. I was pleased by her invitation and so I write this postscript to search and reunion.

In my original piece I described the many gifts that I have received since finding and reuniting with my birth parents. I also asked for a call to open Ontario’s adoption records. In this postscript I’d like to speak a little further about search and reunion.

I am happy to share with you that 11 years has gone by since my birth mom, Annie*, and I reunited. We continue a warm and rich relationship. While I now live in Western Canada and so cannot visit Annie and other family relatives as easily, she and I talk on the phone at least twice a week. We give each other what support we can, we share news and ideas, we laugh over “Vinyl Café” shows and the antics of our pets, and we commiserate with one another when one of us is hurting. We care about each other.

Sadly, my meeting with my birth father, Marvin*, did not ultimately go well. Our contact lasted a brief three months. Initially our intense e-mail and phone correspondence absorbed us both, just as had my initial contact with Annie. However, and inevitably, our “honeymoon” phase came to an end when I made an ill-timed request.

My request involved his young grandchildren. Marvin and his family felt the grandchildren should be told that I was an “old church friend” of Marvin’s. At first I accepted this approach but I soon realized I was uncomfortable with this story.

I asked Marvin to consider telling his grandchildren the truth — that I was their aunt. I explained why I was uncomfortable. Encouraging him to speak with his family about my suggestion, I hoped that he would allow me to be who I was to his grandchildren, my nieces and nephews.

Not long after this phone conversation I received a very angry and accusatorial letter rife with his opinion and with many questions. His nearly paranoid tone shocked me. He ended his letter asking me to “no longer intrude in [his] life.” I was very hurt and bewildered by his marked change in attitude. This experience reaffirmed for me that we can never truly know what actions or words of ours may be hurtful to another, and this is especially so in the fragile early days and months of meeting a birth parent.

Nevertheless, I still believe unequivocally that those hurts were worth our meeting. We gave one another answers to many questions, and that was more than either of us had before we met.

I am grounded and more self-assured. My picture of who I am is so much clearer to me now. I see clearly what each family – my birth family and my adoptive family – has given me. One grief, though, is unresolved. I could not talk with Mom and Dad, my adoptive parents, about Annie or Marvin or about my overwhelming and emotional roller-coaster experience of reunion.

This was not, as you might imagine, because I was afraid of upsetting my adoptive parents. Nor was it because I feared my parents would see my search as a betrayal of them. And I certainly did not remain quiet out of some concern that Mom and Dad might think I preferred my birth parents. I simply couldn't talk with them because both of them had died before I began my search.

Although she did not raise me, Annie has become every inch a Mom, just as my adoptive Mom was to me. I still grieve that the two women never met. I believe they would have liked and respected each other. Both women were concerned about my well-being. How blessed I've been!

I wish I could have talked with Mom and Dad. If they were here now, I would tell them that as priceless as reunion has been to my own emotional health, my search was never about finding "better" parents. I would have assured them that my love for them was in no way diminished. My search was always about finding the rest of me. While they may have been scared or had fears about my being hurt, I am certain my Mom and Dad would have supported me, because they always wanted the best for me. This is what most parents want for their children.

For all the fears and fantasies I had about my birth family and why I was relinquished, none of the hurts that came along the way were as scary as my imagination.

Truth, not lies, really is easier to live with and to accept. I do not doubt that had Mom and Dad been alive during my search and reunion, they would have felt fear. Worse, my searching might have rekindled griefs of their own, unknown to me. But I still believe search and reunion is worth those risks.

One of the deepest difficulties of adoption, and search and reunion, is that these events are a bit like having a purple hippopotamus show up at the dinner table. Everyone can see it, but no one wants to talk about it.

So I wish I could have talked with Mom and Dad about my own search and reunion. I think it might have cleared the air, maybe broken down some silent assumptions we each had. I like to think that my search and reunion would have helped my adoptive parents and me to find our respective voices.

*Names changed to protect privacy.

Suggested Resources:

McColm, Michelle (1993). *Adoption reunions: A book for adoptees, birth parents and adoptive families*. Toronto: Second Story Press.

Although dated in terms of today's differing practices of adoption, this Canadian author does genuinely speak to all members of the adoption circle. Chapter 3, "Adopting a child: The adoptive parents' experience" has a nice section on adoptive parents' concerns and argues for open dialogue between child/teen and adoptive parent (pp 70-75).

Adoption Community Outreach Project (Spring 1997). *Search manual for adoptees and birth relatives*. Jointly sponsored by Parent Finders Inc., Adoption Council of Ontario, with funding support from the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services.

Two short chapters are perhaps the most relevant: Chapter 6 "Some Good Advice" and Chapter 7 "Reunion...and After." In Chapter 6, the argument is made that while family and friends and even support groups can be good resources "there are times when we can benefit from the objectivity of a **trained therapist** who has no personal stake in our very complex, multifaceted journey" (pp.97).

In Chapter 7 the manual outlines succinctly the post-reunion stages of "The 'Honeymoon,'" "The 'Letdown,'" "The Showdown" and "Resolution." It also candidly discusses the not unusual phenomenon of genetic sexual attraction.

See also Appendix A: "The role of adoptive parents in search and reunion" (pp 125-127). This section is a very succinct and readable outline of what adoptive parents often deal with when a son or daughter initiates a search. It looks at the emotional turmoil that can surface in adoptive parents, the common fears they may have, and the inner work they might consider doing to help them through the process. The appendix also suggests the many possible benefits for the adoptee in having a reunion.

Brodzinsky, D.M.; Schechter, M.D.; and Henig, R. M. (1992). *Being adopted: The lifelong search for self*. New York: Anchor Books (Doubleday).

I recommend this book strongly as a general reference for those adoptive parents seeking to understand what their daughter or son must cope with over and above the usual development issues. Particularly helpful are the discussions of search and reunion, and acting out behaviour that might otherwise be inexplicable and distressing to the adoptive parents.

Sachdev, Paul (1992). *Adoption reunion and after: A study of the search process and experience of adoptees*. Child Welfare League of America 71(1), (pp 53-68).

Despite the journal source, this research paper discusses a questionnaire survey conducted in Ontario of adoptees who had completed a reunion.