

An Adoptee/Adoptive Mother's Letter to Adoptive Parents

by Dorothy J. Morrow

The Importance of Attitudes

As a teenager, when I dared to ask my adoptive mother if she knew anything about my birthmother, she frowned and said, "Why would you want to know about *her*? You're an ungrateful wretch!" My adoptive mother intimidated me, and in order to keep the peace I postponed my search until after her death. Her word "wretch" is the clue that this painful exchange took place many years ago, in the 40s. Her angry rebuke still burns in my mind, and, sadly—all these years later—I *still* hear its narrow-hearted spirit echoed in some of the stories friends tell me.

Like the newly reunited birthmother who urged her birthson to call his adoptive parents because she felt they should know about their reunion from the beginning and should hear about it from him. When he called, he said, "Mom, I'm calling to tell you I've found my birthmom! She lives in..." "Stop right there," said his mother, "I don't want to hear any more and I don't want to meet her." His parents were divorced, so he called his father with the same news. "Stop!" came the startled reply. "You've already told me too much." In all fairness, the birthson had not prepared his adoptive parents in any way. A warm, reassuring letter closely followed by an in-person visit to deliver flowers, hugs and words of love would have been far more considerate and effective than an out-of-the-blue phone call.

Now that I'm older and braver, today I might answer my adoptive mother by saying, "Yes, I *do* want to know all about her and perhaps meet her some day. I need to get answers to my questions, to find out where I come from and to see someone I look like. It does not mean I'm ungrateful at all; I am *very* grateful. I love you and you will always be my only mom." I would hug her and, I hope, we would both cry. It's too late for that now, but not too late to have love and understanding for my adopted daughter and *her* birthmother.

Our Fears and Illusions

Adoption expert Annette Baran¹ told me recently that in her experience fear is the main emotion felt by all members of the adoption triad. Adoptees fear hurting their parents and fear finding someone who falls short of their dreams or who will reject them. Birthparents fear that they won't measure up to their child's fantasies or that they will suffer by comparison with the adoptive parents, whom they imagine to be sublime blends of virtue, wealth, and social status. I became aware of that kind of wrong thinking at the last AAC Conference. Then I met a young, beautiful, birth-mother. After she learned I was an adoptive parent, she stunned me by

declaring, "You're this perfect person and I'm just the slutty birth—mother!" Later when I talked to another birthmother about this, I said, "How can she feel that way? We are all ordinary human beings with the same needs, fears and feelings of inadequacy." "Yes," she said, "but remember that we birthmothers have always been told how superior adoptive parents are because they are in a *position* to raise our babies!



Dorothy Morrow

As for adoptive parents, they fear that a reunion will somehow hurt their adult child but mostly that it will hurt *them* when, as they imagine future events, they are temporarily ignored, or worse, even supplanted in their son or daughter's affections. Adoptive parents have their own set of illusions, imagining birthparents as young, attractive and ever fascinating. The reality is that in most reunions ordinary people are found, all very much in need of empathy and love, and that, if a reunion is undertaken at the right time and in the right way, adopted sons or daughters will end up loving their adoptive parents more fully and bonding with them more strongly than ever.

I found my daughter's birthmother twelve years ago and today the three of us had lunch together. Such an event was awkward initially, but it isn't now. We have a good time together, talking of the things women always talk about. But as Jane Nast says, "You have to do the work." Relationships between members of the adoption triad require work, just like any other, if they are to succeed.

My personal conviction is that the openness and supportive behavior of the adoptive parents plays strongly into—or is even predictive of—the success of any reunion between adoptee and birthparent/s and of their subsequent relationship. The adoptive parents' welcoming manner, their respect and empathy for the birthparents, can certainly allay the pain, guilt, and anxiety birthparents usually bring to a reunion. The adoptive parents' understanding and trust empowers adoptees to try to blend birth- and adoptive parents into one extended family. If adoptive parents have a loving attitude, everyone, especially the adoptive parents themselves, will benefit.

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Adoptive parents of all ages joining AAC will benefit particularly from talking to adoptive parents who are 'reunion graduates' and have become friends with their son/daughter's birthparents. These reunion veterans can share frankly their own pre-reunion anxieties. They can tell how they met and built an alliance with the birthfamily, and the blessings which came from forming an extended family, especially the heightened bond with their adoptive children. Such first-person, positive accounts, together with reassurances of support to be found within the AAC, would do a great deal to bring the still-fearful group of adoptive parents into our welcoming midst.

Help in Facing Our Fears

If we all agree that the happiness and welfare of the adoptive child is paramount, surely all adoptive parents will want to be part of this life-changing milestone of reuniting with birthparents.

If adoptive parents have a closed-hearted attitude, ("Don't tell me about it; I don't want to know and I don't want to meet them."), that means they are fearful and angry. Fearful that they might lose their son/daughter to his/ her birthparents, and angry that the day has come when they will have to face that fear. Such people would be surprised to know that, when they face their fears by meeting the birthparents, the fears dissolve. Birthparents are ordinary people living typical lives, not rivals for first place in their son/daughter's heart.

No, the adoptive parents don't want to be left out. The best way is for them to discuss a possible future reunion now and then through the years. But what if they haven't done that, and suddenly the child is adult and a reunion seems to be in the air? They don't want a negative attitude to drive it underground into becoming another secret; that's not healthy for anyone. To avoid that possibility, they need to try a new way of talking with their adult son or daughter, to talk things over *as friends* over a glass of wine. Strive to be calm, unemotional and relaxed; try to avoid any criticism or passing of judgment. Say nothing harsh or cruel that you will never be able to take back. Try hard to put yourself in the shoes of your daughter or son as you talk about a possible reunion with birthparents. After

all, how would *you* feel if you had never seen the man and woman who brought you into being, if you never knew what country your grandparents came from, or of what diseases your family members died? Above all, say you understand and will be there to help if help is needed. Say you would be honored to meet any blood relative of your son or daughter, especially the woman loving enough to entrust her child to you. From a courageous talk like this come rich rewards.

I encourage all AAC adoptive parents—especially those who are reunion graduates and have become friends with the birthparents—to actively recruit their counterparts into AAC and to invite them to attend support groups with them. We need to speak out gladly and reassuringly about reunions and about the American Adoption Congress, where all members of the adoption triad can learn to cast out fear and replace it with love and understanding.

Dorothy Morrow was born in Vancouver, Canada, and adopted by a childless couple in their forties. Reunited with her birthmother in 1978, Morrow went on to find the birthmother of her adopted daughter, Lynn, in 1986. These very positive reunion experiences led Morrow to research and write Blood Family Found: True Adoption Reunion Stories. This as-yet-unpublished book recounts ten diverse stories ranging from euphorically happy to shockingly destructive, plus a chapter entitled, "SomeAdvice." The book is dedicated to reassuring and educating adoptive parents so they can deal with their reunion anxieties and reap the profound rewards of helping their adult children to form an extended family by blending adoptive and birth families. Morrow may be reached at 724 E. Pacificview Drive, Bellingham, WA 98226, by voice at 360-671-3121, by fax at 360-738-3863, or by email at sproatlake@aol.com.

Footnotes

1. Co-author of *The Adoption Triangle* and *Lethal Secrets*
"In place of *shame* we need to give *honor* to birthparents for loving enough to plan for the future of their children through adoption and to *honor* adoptive parents for devoting themselves to making that future *happen*."—Dorothy Morrow