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Exploring Openness - Inter Country Style

by Sue Douglas

My older daughter, Sonia, was five and a half when I adopted her from Honduras in August of 1985. Even before I saw her picture, I fell in love with her shy, husky voice the day we spoke on the telephone from her attorney's office. She was not an orphan, the attorney's wife told me - she was being relinquished by a family that lived in a small village. The pictures arrived soon after showing a winsome little girl with big brown eyes and bangs that curled every which way. Holding her hand was a woman whom the attorney's wife said was Sonia's "natural" mother. She was staring straight ahead, her face unreadable.

The two months I had to wait until I could travel to Honduras to meet Sonia crawled by. But at last I went. While I was in Honduras for that first visit, my attorney told me that Sonia's father and stepmother (it was she who was in the picture) were in town and wanted to see Sonia one last time and to meet me. Secretly, I wanted to meet them, too. I wanted to tell them that I would love Sonia and would be the best parent I knew how to be for her.

I especially wanted to be able to get to know her father a bit, to have a feeling of who this man was who had given me his child. I wanted to be able to ask him questions about Sonia's early life, to find out more, if I could, about why he was relinquishing her. I wanted his answers to help me help Sonia understand what was happening to her, and help me ease her hurt and feelings of abandonment if I could.

But I was afraid, too. My adoption had not yet been completed. What if he saw me and said, "Forget it! Find another mother for Sonia!" Maybe I would lose her if I met him. Fear won out, and I said no.

I did tell my attorney, though, that I wanted to be able to write to Sonia's family once in awhile and send them pictures. He agreed to forward any letters I wrote to her father. So I tried that. Once or twice a year I wrote a letter and sent snapshots. But I never heard anything in return.

Sonia, meanwhile, went through rocky times adjusting to her new home and her new life. She missed her first family tremendously and was very angry much of the time about having had to leave them. For the first three and a half years I was firmly convinced that, if I'd given her plane fare and a ride to the airport, she would have been on the next flight

to Honduras. Whenever I wrote letters to Sonia's Honduras family, Sonia wrote letters, too. Her letters also went unanswered. I was sad for her. She was very hurt, and there seemed to be no way to heal the hurt. Eventually, though, she did begin to heal. Her longing for contact with her first family was still there, but she began to learn to live with it.

Two years after I adopted Sonia, I started looking for Daughter Number Two. It took four attorneys, 15 months, and the loss of more money than I like to remember, but at last we had a referral that worked out. Initially, we had tried to find another little girl from Honduras. Instead of being from the same country, however, my two girls ended up having the same name - Sonia!

I went to Guatemala in December 1988 to see Sonia #2. I found her as irresistible as Sonia #1. I also learned that Sonia #2 had a little brother, Oscar, who was being adopted by another family in the Bay Area. Once again, fear kicked in. This could be wonderful for Sonia #2 (soon to be called Sonita). But how would Sonia #1 react to having a little sister who had a biological brother living five miles away? I pushed my fears as far underground as I could get them and decided to look upon this as an "opportunity."

Back in the Bay Area, our adoption agency put me in touch with Norman and Brenda, Oscar's parents-to-be. Within the week, we had dinner together and started building relationships, preparing to be part of each others' lives from then on. It was important to us to have Oscar and Sonita growing up not only knowing each other but being "family."

Norman and Brenda went to Guatemala to be with Oscar during the time it would take for his adoption to be completed. While there, they learned that Oscar's and Sonita's birth mother wanted very much to meet the people adopting her children. She had heard the stories about children being brought to the United States to be used as donors for organ transplants, and she wanted to know that her children would be safe and happy. Norman and Brenda embraced the chance to know their son's birth mother. They met Teresa several times while they were in Guatemala and even made a videotape of the meeting.

Once back in the United States, they shared the videotape with me, so I had a chance to "get to know" Teresa as well

as Pati (Oscar and Sonita's older sister) before my trip to bring Sonita here. When I went to Guatemala for the second time (with the adoption completed at this point), I, too, met Teresa. I can't describe the experience well, except to say I was crying, she was crying, we hugged one another, and we took pictures. I have never, before or since, felt what I felt when I was with this woman who was (and will always be) the mother of my child. I gave her my address, she gave me hers, and I promised to write soon and often.

How have things turned out in the two and a half years since? Overall, very well. Our family and Oscar's have grown close. We've met each others' extended families, exchanged child care, and have even taken a vacation together. Oscar and Sonita (tired of being "little Sonia," her nickname is Lisby now) think of each other as brother and sister. Yet they are clearly bonded to their own adoptive families.

Each family corresponds frequently with Teresa, letters going to or from Guatemala about once every month or six weeks. Teresa has given up her initial, very formal manner with us and is "Tere" in her letters. She's sent pictures and even her recipe for tamales, which Lisby and I made with friends recently (very good!). Last January on Oscar's birthday, the two children even had a chance to hear Tere's voice on the phone and say a timid "hola" in return.

I'll admit it's been scary maintaining such close contact - worrying that, with such frequent contact, Lisby would remain so bonded to her "mom in Guatemala" that she would never accept me as her mom, too. I often wonder how our bonding would have been different without Teresa in the picture. But we're close and very much a family. I've managed to be philosophical about the rest. And there have been many advantages to compensate. Lisby is perhaps spared some of the anguish that can be caused by abandonment by knowing that her birth mother does still love her. And I've had the advantage of having her mother tell Lisby in her own words, on paper, the reasons she made the decision to relinquish her.

And what was it like for Sonia? How did she respond to so much family, here and in Guatemala, surrounding Lisby? Not easily, all of the time. She felt left out of things at times, especially when there seemed to be "too much" contact back and forth. But Oscar's family really reached out to include Sonia. The little kids (including Lisby) adored her. Norman and Brenda were always warm and loving with her. And she even acquired some new "cousins" near her age in their extended family.

Still, Sonia's longing continued. So, I decided to try contacting her family of origin again. I telephoned Sonia's Honduran attorney to ask if he would contact the family and ask them to write to us. He agreed to try. Seven months later, after much prodding from us, we finally received a letter from Sonia's stepmother. We've had three more letters from her since and two phone calls. Pictures of Sonia's family now stand next to those of Lisby's. They include a picture of a sister, Martha, born since Sonia came to the United States. Martha looks so much like Sonia, it's like having a baby picture of Sonia at last.

Sonia seemed relieved when her family of origin came into her life again. I think she felt more complete and more healed. Paradoxically, I think the contact has also enabled her to be more at home here in California. A while back, when talking about her Honduras family, she observed, "It's hard to keep caring as much about them when I know I might never get to see them, except if we go to visit them." Now she says, "I wish I had more communication with them, but I've let go of my anger, and I'm getting on with my life. I have boys and friends and other people in my life just as important to me. But I will always have a spot in my heart for them."

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