pact's point of view
The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Twice A Mother... Unexpected Paths

by Rachel Angeline

Elliott, my rambunctious two-and-a-half-year-old adopted son, has finally crashed for the night. Alone at last, I am thinking of the many years during which I never heard the sound of children, although I knew my child was out there somewhere. Mother's Day makes me think of my daughter, who will be turning seventeen years old this summer. I placed her for adoption when I was 20. Now, as an adoptive mother, I cannot help but wonder what Elliott's birth mother is feeling around this time of year.

For me, the first several years were the hardest. Not only did I have no information about where my daughter was, or who she was, but I wasn't allowed to know how she was. Forced by such extreme conditions to live in a fantasy realm, all I could do was wonder, "Is she still alive?" "Do her parents really love her?" "Does anyone ever think about me and do they realize that their joy with her would not exist except for my pain?" For many years, they were my "enemy," because they had my beautiful girl and I had only the few photographs I had taken in the hospital (as well as plenty of stretch marks).

In order to give up my daughter, I had to accept the myth that she would be better off without me. Yes, I was a nice girl with plenty of potential, but I was sure making a mess of my life as a late adolescent. What did I have to offer her? Her birth father was a well-meaning alcoholic who encouraged me to keep our baby. In fact, he wanted to marry me, but unfortunately would always fall off the wagon right before we thought about going for a blood test. My parents were completely opposed to me keeping my daughter, for they were convinced that they would be compelled assume the burden of her care. They were also concerned, wisely, that things between me and the birth father would continue to escalate in a negative direction. So I did what the social worker said was the "right thing to do."

For the first 10 years, I was devastated by my loss and had few ways to heal the pain. I felt no closure and had no healthy outlet for my grief. A saving grace was finding various support organizations for birth parents and meeting people who had survived the experience. It was in those rooms that I felt acceptance, understanding and validation. I was intoxicated by the idea of searching, but the thought was also capable of producing a sense of extreme depression. Although intellectually I believed I had a right to search, in my heart I didn't think I had any right to do it. I didn't think I could ever find her, and I didn't believe I deserved to have the information. Luckily, not everyone agreed with me, and they encouraged me to go forward.

Making the decision to search was a major turning point. This incredibly healing experience occurred when my daughter was 11. I elicited the help of a searcher, and the process went pretty quickly. My daughter has a name, Kathleen, an address, and even a birth certificate, of which I now have a copy. It amazes me that our society, humane as we believe it is, can continue to perpetuate closed adoptions. Information is basic, germane to any sense of reality around the birth experience. Yet closed adoptions continue to be practiced to this day.

From that point forward, I have continued to ride an emotional roller coaster. The question now is about making direct contact, and it is sensitive because she is a minor. I really don't want to mess it up. I also haven't wanted to face any potential rejection. My moment of joy after the search was pretty short-lived. Today, though, I have a greater sense that we will one day meet and that I will know the right thing to say and do. She is my daughter.

My inability to conceive another child brought me down the path of adoption again, this time as one of "them." Since I had searched, I no longer felt angry and bitter towards her adoptive parents. In fact, it was through my own experience with infertility that I gained compassion and a sense of feeling "equal" to them. The option of a very open adoption had an immediate, instinctive appeal to me. It was too late, in my daughter's case, to participate in a movement that dignifies the adoption experience. As a prospective adoptive parent, I felt I had a chance to make a difference. I was determined to make this adoption one in which all parties would feel as good as possible about their position in the adoption triangle. Our first adopted daughter was reclaimed by her birth mother and our next serious lead fell through. And our son's adoption is closed! We were told the young birth mother preferred it this way. Both David and I were exhausted, confused and financially stretched by the time we heard about Elliott. Initially, I questioned how I, as an advocate of open adoption, could participate in a closed one. I felt I might be "selling out." The reality was that our stamina was limited.

Two and a half years later, we still have not received any acknowledgment from Elliott's birth mother of the letters, cards and photos we have forwarded to her through the agency. His grandmother did write once and expressed her own gratitude as well as that of her daughter. Elliott's birth mother is very young and I hope she will change her mind over time. I know it is important to continue to pursue her for Elliott's sake. Someday I hope to be modeling a post-reunion relationship with my birth daughter which Elliott will observe and which will perhaps spark an interest in him with respect to his own birth mother. Should he decide to search, I want to make it as easy as I can for him. He has an inalienable right to know his full history at the appropriate time in his life. I, too, am so curious as to where he gets his traits, personality and great looks.

Sometimes when I see people with their birth children, I am amazed at how strongly they can resemble one another. It reminds me that Elliott is not my birth son, a fact that is easy to forget during the hectic process of parenting him. I hope my daughter's parents share these feelings about Kathleen and her connection to me.

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