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

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Unkown: I Was Adopted

by Liza Steinberg

When people ask what it would have been like if I had known my birth family from the beginning, it is like trying to imagine what it would feel like to walk on the moon. I don't know what it would have been like know my birth family — but I know what I wish it would have been like, and, looking back as an adult, what I think it should have been like.

I'll never forget the first time I was old enough to go to the doctor by myself. It was a new doctor, one I had chosen on my own. I went through the usual process, filling out the forms we've all filled out before, answering the way I always do.... Have I had this? Have I had that? Yes. No. Yes. No. Then, where the family medical history questions are, I wrote my usual answer, "Unknown, I was adopted" in huge letters, and slashed a line through the rest of those questions. It occurred to me that, although my adoptive parents had told me that my birth parents had told the agency that they had no health problems at the time of my birth, what about after my birth? As people grow older, their medical conditions usually change. Knowing that they were in perfect health when they were 18 didn't give me much to go on.

Next, I was ushered into the doctor's office. The nurse came in and weighed me, took my temperature, my blood pressure and then gave me the gown we all know and love. She said the doctor would be right with me. The doctor came in, introduced himself and looked at my chart. The first question he asked was, "Does anyone in your family have a history of high blood pressure?" I felt many things in that moment. The usual "Unknown...I was adopted" wouldn't work anymore. This was a yes or no question and I didn't have the answer. This is the first time I was confronted with a specific medical question that I couldn't blow off and in which the answer was important to my health. Instead of feeling like a self-confident person doing an adult thing for the first time, I felt like the doctor tore off my mask. I had to admit to him, and myself, that I didn't know what most people knew automatically and that it did matter. "Unknown...I was adopted" wasn't sufficient for the doctor: but more importantly, it wasn't sufficient for me. In that moment I realized that, whether I knew anything about my medical history or not, I was a part of my birth family. Who I am and the medical issues I face was influenced by them. Whether I had the information or not, I now understood that I was a part of them and they were a part of me. So then I said to myself, Now what? What do I do next? I once read a statement from Jean Paton, saying: "The adoptee who is searching for his original family is a person moving to complete himself, to achieve wholeness to escape his prison of anonymity. Though the impulse toward the original mother may be undefined in his mind, he knows that through this contact he will become real. The biological mother is the single, reliable source for the answer to the question, 'Who am I?'"

This was exactly how I felt. I realized that the next thing to do was to search for my birth family. Let me clarify here to adoptive parents that I identified with that quote not because I was searching for a mom, but for the answer to the age-old question, Where did I come from and how did that contribute to who I am? I have always been very clear that I have a mom and that a mom was the one thing, along with a dad, that was never lacking in my life.

But what if I had known my birth parents while I was growing up? I would have known my medical history, just like everyone else, along with 5 billion other things that it hurts not to know.

Because of my personal experience, along with that expressed by many other adopted people whom I have talked with, I am thrilled to know that adopted children today now have the option of never not knowing, never having to say "Unknown...I was adopted." When I think of the opportunity for parents to know their child's birth parents but, for whatever reason, choosing not to benefit from this possibility, I wonder if they know that they are taking part of their child's identity away. I know that they must never have felt what it is to have to say "Unknown...I was adopted." I believe, I have to believe, that if they did know, they would never compel that experience for their child.

Mae C. Jemison said, "Failure to recognize possibilities is the most dangerous and common mistake one can make. My advice to adoptive parents is that I know it is easy to sometimes be so caught up in our current circumstances that we blind ourselves to the possibilities that are there. If we do see them, we quickly convince ourselves that it would be too hard to make them work (a successful relationship with your child's birth family). Let's first determine the dreams we are willing to work for (a healthy, confident child) and then figure out how we can make them reality."

I guess I can't think of how my life would have actually been different, but I do know how it would have been easier. Since then, I've been lucky enough to connect to members of my birth family and am still building relationships with them. The process of knowing them has helped me understand things about myself I would have never understood without them.

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