



## REUNITING WORLDS: ONE ADOPTEE'S THOUGHTS ON BIRTH FAMILY REUNIFICATION

MICHELLE MADRID-BRANCH



Originally published in *Chicago Now*.

I'm an explorer. As an adoptee, I have explored the depths of my soul to find a meaning to the earliest parts of my history. I have ventured out, and within, to seek unknown parts of myself. I have tracked many a mile to uncover my true identity, and to dismantle the false titles given to me by others. Titles that did not serve me toward a positive life outcome.

I believe that all adoptees are explorers. In some way, we are all searching, seeking, and looking for answers to who we are and why we're here. We're trackers of truth.

At some moment in our lives, a severing took place that catapulted us into a situation we had no control over. Free falling—or so it seemed—we landed into lives that we were not born of, but were destined for.

Earlier worlds unravel and somewhere in our distant minds, our first families are kept as memory. Reunion, or the thought of reunification, gets stored in a mental file called *fantasy*. A place where we probe the "what if" of someday reconnecting with our birth family.

Sometimes, fantasy becomes reality and we find ourselves face-to-face with that unraveled world. A world that—on some level—unnerves us and, at the same time, delights our senses. Might someone, connected to us by DNA, offer us the gift of coloring in all those pieces of ourselves left blank? Could members of our birth family fill in the holes within us left hollow by abandonment? Secretly, we hope so. And, quietly, we pray.

I did. I prayed and I hoped. For years, I wanted someone to help me understand the mystery of my story—a mystery that held me distant from myself. Therefore, I put much stock into the idea of reunion as a vehicle to aid me in arriving at my truth.

And, so I wrote a letter while in my teens. It was addressed to my birth mother in England. I didn't have her physical address—only her name. I sent the letter to the main office of the Royal Air Force, where I knew that my mum's husband once served. The letter began something like this:

*If you have opened this envelope, I want to say thank you. If you are reading my words, I want you to promise not to throw this letter away. You see, I need an angel right now...*

I went on to briefly explain my situation and the story of my earliest life. I wrote how desperately I needed to find my birth mother in order to reunite and, as was my prayer, to heal what had been broken inside.

The letter was mailed and several weeks passed. Then, on one sunny afternoon, I received a reply from my birth mother's husband—the man who helped secret me away into foster care.

The letter read:

*If you are my wife's daughter, and I hope that you are, I will need some proof in the way of a birth certificate. Forgive me for asking, however, my wife suffered greatly after letting you go and I would not want to give her hope only to have that hope shattered.*

My birth certificate was sent giving proof of my name. Arrangements were then made for me to fly to England, alone, to reunite with my mum. I was nervous, excited, and more than a little scared.

After a long flight, and as if past years had melted into mere seconds, I found myself standing in a busy Heathrow airport surrounded by a sea of strangers. In a jam-packed crowd, I saw her and, within moments, I was standing face-to-face with the woman who had let me go as a child.

An awkward and uncomfortable sensation came over me—one I had not experienced before. The emotion was one of anger. My first thought was to run toward my mum with arms extended, not to embrace her but to cast her into a place where children like me—tainted and unwanted—are sent. The place where innocent children are silenced and made to feel responsible for being left behind. I wanted my mum to join me in this place and to feel this kind of emptiness.

As I moved closer to my mum the anger began to fade, as her face became more distinct. What I saw was my face in hers, and the moment melted me. To resemble, physically, someone else had been a long-time dream of mine.

And now, I was standing across from the woman who shared my face, my body, my smile, and even my laugh. Our complexions were different—hers of peachy creams and porcelain and mine of dark browns and olive, like my birth father. Yet, there was intense similarity between mum and me, no denying. Moments later, in a bustling arrival hall of Heathrow, my mum held my face in her hands and cried.

Trust does not come easy after abandonment. Honestly, trusting has been the most challenging obstacle for me to conquer.

So, in my mother's home, during that initial reunion, I would rest my head on her shoulder as she stroked my hair at night. In some way, I believe, this act of connection was in effort to make up for lost time, an exercise in trust. It was also an attempt to fill the cracks that separated us—building back those bridges that had been burned.

On some days, while outside, I would close my eyes and imagine the first me (the girl I was prior to being adopted) playing and dancing in my mother's garden. This exercise seemed to open up feelings of bonding, or attaching with my mum, and trust slowly trickled in. That is, until on one warm day when a neighbor entered the garden to say hello.

*Well, who do we have here?* There was a clumsy silence that penetrated the lightheartedness of that moment. I looked to my mum, ready for her to claim me as her daughter. My mum stumbled over her words and fidgeted her fingers through the grass. *Well, this is Michelle—she's a ... a... relative from the States.* I choked back tears as I faked a smile and shook the hand of my mother's neighbor.

When the introductions were finished and the neighbor walked back home, I asked my mum, *Why did you introduce me as your relative and not as your daughter? Why did you not tell the truth?* My mum's reply was, *It's none of her business and no one really needs to know.*

The meaning of reunion changed for me on that warm afternoon in England. The fantasy of the experience shifted to a hard, but healthy reality:

*No one outside of myself can make me whole. Wholeness comes from within.*

I had come to England hoping that my birth mother would—like a fairy godmother waving a magic wand—make the pain of the past disappear. I wanted my mum to offer me the identity of her daughter. It was not an offer that she was prepared to make.

As the years passed, communication between my mum and me ebbed and flowed, until her death in 2109. I surrendered to that rhythm. I've come to my own knowledge of who I am, what I'm worth, and what happiness means to me. This knowledge of self is not dependent on

anyone else. It's an authentic and truthful identity—the one I had hoped and prayed for as a child.

My advice to adoptees on reunion is this: go into the experience understanding that your birth parents are human.

Love them for who they are, forgive them for what they did. Don't expect them to heal you, because they don't hold that kind of power. Your birth parents made choices—often excruciating ones—and these choices do not define you. Sometimes they made mistakes—gut-wrenching ones—and these mistakes do not determine your potential.

Please understand that you cannot control nor predetermine the outcome of an adoption reunion.

Make sure you approach the experience with the knowledge that—whatever the result of birth family reunification—you'll come out of it healthy and whole because you entered it that way. See the opportunity as a chance to learn of your history and grow closer to yourself. After all, coming home to *you* is the reunion that will, ultimately, assist you in realizing a life of happiness and joy.

I have finally forged the two worlds of biology and biography and, through the ups and downs of the journey, I've grown stronger and wiser as a human being. I've let go of the girl—the child—who was hurt by abandonment. The girl who thought she needed the love and acceptance of her birth parents to heal her and make her whole.

I've allowed the emerging of me—the woman who was made stronger and wiser by the experience of reunion. The woman who came to realize that what she truly needed, all along, was to love and accept herself.

