

Like Mother, Like Daughter

*A mother searches
for her daughter's
Kazakh birth mother*

By Beth O'Malley, M.Ed.

For me, not knowing was the hardest part. I wrapped my thoughts and feelings around gray space. Wrestling with wondering always made me crazy. I told myself stories that changed over time, asking myself why, until I could no longer care. Why want or chase the impossible? A better solution was to detach and let go of wanting to know about my original family.

When I was in my thirties, I started my search. Actually my sister started my search. My adoptive older sister decided that search was a good thing for me. Having only sisters, she thought I might have a brother somewhere out there.

To placate her, I contacted a local search organization and sent them a check for \$200. Six months later, I received a letter with the telephone number of a paternal in-law, vaguely connected to my birth mother. Fifteen minutes later, the sea parted, and I glided through effortlessly. At the end of the path was my birth mother.



SNUGGLING UP with her daughter Polina after swimming, Beth O'Malley struggles with making the decision to search for her daughter's birth mother.

I now had a face, facts and two birth sisters. I had layers and layers of adoption in my life from adoptive families to birth families to genetics, and even an adoption-related job. Adoption was my life, except that I myself had not adopted.

In 2002, my husband and I jumped through the hoops of adoption paperwork and became certified pre-adoptive parents. In 2003, we traveled 3,922 miles to Kazakhstan, a country nestled between Russia and China, and we adopted an 11-month-old baby girl named Polina.

There she was, with her fat little cheeks and heart-shaped lips. I was her mother. Initially, none of my adoptee instincts crossed over to adoptive parenthood. Emotionally, I was stuck at

square one. I did not want to tell my baby about her biological mother; I wanted to be her only mother. I wanted the adoption issues to go away.

The early placement days are a blur. They were filled with a delicate melting and merging between mom and baby. "Help me be a good mother," I prayed.

Finally, when I started to think about her beginnings and her Kazakhstan mother, something interesting happened. The gray space I sensed when I thought about my birth family when I was growing up reappeared.

It didn't seem fair. Polina would have to go through life not knowing, too. Would it make her as crazy as it made me? After all, I had the chance to search later in

life. This would no doubt be impossible for her because the orphanage had so little information.

In early 2004, an increasing number of interesting tales surfaced on the Internet. It seemed that adoptive families were using private detectives found online to look for birth families in Russia, Kazakhstan, Guatemala, Cambodia and other countries open to adoption.

How could I not at least make the attempt? Someday she might ask, "Mom, did you at least try?" I wanted to be able to truthfully answer, "Yes."

A friend of a friend of a friend on the Internet gave me the e-mail address of the U.S. contact person for the detective. Her

name was Anna. Anna sent me a list of references that I diligently contacted. The best part was that no money exchanged hands prior to the search. Plus, I only had to pay if the detective was successful.

Turns out, this detective was actually a translator for Anna when she adopted her child in Eastern Europe. Anna, an adoptee herself, wanted to locate her child's birth parents before they moved or somehow became impossible to reach.

The week before Mother's Day in 2004, Anna e-mailed me. "We are close to finding Polina's birth mother," the e-mail said. "Please send pictures and a letter."

What should I say to the woman who gave birth to Polina and then placed her for adoption? What would I want to know if the situation were reversed? Was this search a good idea?

There didn't seem to be any choice in the matter. For Polina, I needed to push and connect with this woman. It was my gift to my daughter. In addition, it was hard work.

I hope as a teenager she doesn't say, "Mom, that was my search — how could you?" After all, not every adoptee wants to search. But having basic life facts seemed a human right. Answers to the haunting question, "Why didn't she keep me?" goes a long way in mending matters of the heart. Search wasn't about seeking a relationship as it was getting information.

Practical matters were also a consideration. If I waited to let her make the decision, the trail

could be 20 plus years old and cold. It wasn't like she could hit "Google" and find the address via the telephone. There weren't even telephones in parts of this country.

Interestingly, I didn't struggle one bit over what type of information I might find. What if her father was in jail for murder? Or her birth mother was mentally ill? My personal birth parent

Resources

Birth Parent Contact list: This list is for those who have adopted internationally and are contemplating birth family contact. It is also for those who have already established contact with their child's birth parents or family.

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/BirthParentContact/>

Karen's Adoption Links: This Web site contains international birth family search resources and sibling registries for both adoptive parents and adult adoptees.

<http://www.karensadoptionlinks.com/>

Open International Families list: This list is for people who have, or are actively trying to have, an open international adoption. It is also for people who have tried and failed to open an international adoption.

http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Open_InternationalFamilies/

International Birth Search Issues list: This list is for parents of international adoptees who would like to discuss the issues related to searching for their child's birth family. This new list is focused on DNA testing issues, sibling searches, and abandoned children and is especially relevant for China adoptive families.

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/InternationalBirthSearchIssues/>

Guatemala Birth Families list: This list is focused on issues regarding the decision by adoptive families of Guatemalan children and/or the children to search for the child's birth family.

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/GuatemalaBirthfamilies/>

Cambodia birth parent search list: This list is for adoptive parents of children from Cambodia who are trying to find out more information about the birth parents of their child. This list will offer support and ideas to search.

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/cambirthparentssearch/>

Sister Far list: This is a list for parents of internationally adopted children who have found, or suspect that they have found, a biological sibling or twin.

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/sisterfar/>

— Resources provided by Karen S. Holt

search had turned up complicated information. Over time I learned how to deal with it. I never ever regretted getting that information. I had faith that time and support would offer her the same peace of mind.

I sent off the "Dear birth mother" letter. I didn't reread it before I sent it. I didn't struggle about the right words. I just sent it off and got it out of the way.

I did not feel ready for this reunion. I feared and craved it. There were no warm fuzzies as I have read some adoptive mothers have. After all, Polina's birth mother left her in a cold hospital without knowing her baby's fate. I had an adoptee's mentality, getting angry with her for relinquishing Polina.

My journal entry for May 6, 2004, reads: "The universe is chomping at the bit. No sooner did the letter go out than she was found. Boom. No wanting, no waiting, just poof! I hadn't even finished sending the photos."

I felt an earthquake in my soul, rumbling and splitting. Emotionally, my feelings mirrored those I felt when I found my birth mother — raw, elemental feelings. I could not focus or think.

A bill arrived for less than \$1,000. Was it legitimate or some sort of scam? I called my U.S. contact. She called me right back and said she was also an adoptee. I wondered if she really was or if it was an adoption confidence scam. I knew there were agency workers who represented the kids they had available, but I didn't know if there were ones who conducted birth searches.

“How will I know whether this is for real?” I asked her.

My contact, Anna, said, “As we speak, the detective is in Kazakhstan doing searches for many families.”

“Isn’t this illegal?” I asked, while wondering whether it was the right time and place to search for my daughter’s family.

Anna laughed. “No. Sometimes he even goes to the police to get help. Or to the post office or even to bus stations where the drug addicts hang out.”

She seemed genuine, especially as she talked about what it was like as an adoptee, growing up without information. I sent the money. It was a leap of faith.

Finally, the five-page e-mail



POLINA’S BIRTH MOTHER and siblings live in this small village in Kazakhstan.

report arrived. Along with 45 digital photos, I received pictures of her birth mother, brother and sisters and their small village. I scanned the material too fast, the words pouring all over my screen.

Suddenly, the original and scary

medical documents I chose not to believe made more sense. It wasn’t simply a routine birth history.

God was looking out for us. The information about her condition at birth would have scared us. How lucky we were not to know.

Now I know what a strong fighter she is and how bright, fun, fearless and strong she is.

I also know she has two older sisters and a brother whom we hope will be told of her existence. I will send them packages at Christmas. Maybe my daughter will want to learn Russian so she can talk or meet them at some point. Then again, maybe not. Regardless of how she feels, they are part of our family. And so is her other mother.

Beth O’Malley, M.Ed., is an adoptee, adoptive mother, speaker and author of “Lifebooks: Creating a Treasure for the Adopted Child.” Sign up for her monthly newsletter and lifebook lessons at www.adoptionlifebooks.com/signup.htm. This article is copyright ©2005.