

Search & Reunion Etiquette: (The Guide Miss Manners Never Wrote)

by Monica Byrne

There are as many adoption search and reunion scenarios as there are people involved. Everyone who has worked in this field, who has been part of the process, or who is a member of one of the supporting families will tell you that this is a world of shifting sand and unclear rules - a minefield of potential disasters. Who in his or her right mind would embark on such a perilous journey without a map and compass? In fact, why would anyone leave the safe harbour of the known to travel to this unknown land?

The answer to this question lies deep within the heart of the matter. The "matter" being that at some time and in some way, the natural course of a family's shape and structure has been disrupted by the removal of some fundamental part - the parent of its child or the child of its parents, brothers and sisters of each other and grandparents of their grandchildren. These disruptions may occur for a variety of reasons not to be examined here, but the end result is one of an imbalance in the order of things and a need experienced by many people to regain that order.

I liken the reunion process to watching a beautiful mosaic spread out before us. Into this picture one throws a new tile-a tiny piece of marble-and every one of the hundreds of little tiles must shift and move to accommodate that new tile. The picture will change in many subtle ways. But after this fundamental shift, order does not come easily or without cost. Each one on this very personal journey will need to understand the variables. And each will need the help of a guide or a support system. This is where the rules of the game enter the equation.

First one has to differentiate the "search" from the "reunion." These are two separate and distinct parts of the adoption journey. If you think the search is hard.....wait until you try the reunion! Many reunions take from five to eight years or more to "normalize" and reach a stage where the participants have built up shared memory and familiar relationships. Each reunion therefore, must be studied and planned with a careful, almost military precision if the goal of the exercise is a long-term relationship with the new-found relatives.

The Search

It is important to remember that the onus of the search will fall on the searcher. It is his or her responsibility to learn as much as possible about reunions, to read as much as is available, to talk to experienced people, to listen carefully to the advice that is given and to work out a careful game plan. The "search" knows none of this. He or she will not be prepared. He or she may be shocked at being found and may feel like the only adoptee or birth parent in the universe who has been in this situation. Many books have been written

about searching and search techniques. Often these books are just lists of state or provincial laws and information on the availability of personal information with addresses for various offices and organizations. There may be some "typical" form letters to copy, but not much direction on what to really say! The books describing what to do with information that you now possess - the name and address of your birth relative, the location of your surrendered child's new family - are few and far between. Although each case is very different, there are some basic rules around searching that never lose their truth. Miss Manners might recommend the following:

In no particular order.....

Do arm yourself with knowledge about adoption laws in the area you are dealing with. Know your rights. If you are the birth parent, be sure you request and receive copies of everything you signed and everything you are entitled to. This may include Relinquishment documents, Declarations of Parentage or Consent to Adoption forms or Adoption Orders. Try to find out what is rightfully yours. These documents will not necessarily help you to find the person you seek, but they will help you to understand and internalize what really happened so long ago. Ask for help from your supporters who have come before you, or look for the current laws on the state, provincial or territorial government website. This time you will be strong.

Do remember that every source of information you use may be of use to the people coming after you. They would like that resource to remain available, so do not talk too much about how and what you are researching. Some libraries and archives are very willing to assist a "genealogist," but not an "adoption searcher." Some people do not agree that adoptees and their birth parents have a right to find each other. Even when people are not helpful a searcher should remember that others will come after them and your reaction to the non-helpful person may colour how that person will react to the next searcher asking for "genealogical" information.

Do make good search plans and keep good records. All original documents should be photocopied and the originals stored in a safe place, such as a safety deposit box. Keep a search binder with clear plastic sleeves for the pages you are likely to look at again and again. Be sure to keep good notes of whom you call, who you speak to, what was said and when. You do not want to repeat parts of your research because you kept poor records. When you meet your son, daughter or birth parent this careful system will show how very committed you were. In addition, it will serve you as a "diary" of your journey.

Don't assume anything. The other person may not be as thrilled to be found as you are to find them. There may be much more to the story than you have ever guessed. Every family has its own special dynamic.

Do be patient! Rome wasn't built in a day, and a search can take a very long time and require painstaking application. Not everyone is ready to be found at the same time as the searcher is ready to find them! But searches can also reach a point of "critical mass" and

just take on lives of their own. When that happens there is sometimes no turning back. You must just hang on and ride to the end of the line!

Don't phone everyone in the phone book with the same name, especially if it is a rare name or they live in a small community. A searcher should exhaust other options first before resorting to this. Use search tools such as Internet sources instead of contacting everyone indiscriminately. The moment people start asking questions in some families, everyone knows. The person being sought may feel defensive.

Do be careful about making phone calls. Try to get it right the first time. Make sure you are speaking with the right person or with someone who will definitely pass on your message. If you get the right person, this may be your only chance to speak directly. Ask if it is a good time to speak with that person. Have a prepared list of the things you wish to say and the questions you wish answered to jog your memory. Calling back a second time may be unsuccessful. In some situations phoning at all may be the wrong move. Your enthusiastic call to your son or daughter may not be greeted with the same enthusiasm by the adoptive mother or father. If your child is still living at home, is still dependant on the adoptive parents financially and emotionally, he or she may have strong loyalty feelings. She may reject your call because she feels to accept it will be disloyal. If your call is to your birth mother, she may feel the need to talk with her husband or other children before accepting more contact. This call may also end in a rejection if your birth parent has kept you a secret for many years. Try to prepare by reading about the birth parent experience generally, the social climate at the time of your birth and the family attitudes and events around your birth. Your birth mother may have layers of personal issues to get through before she can face the reality of your return into her life. Don't expect this one phone call to do it all!

Do be very discreet. If possible, do not discuss the adoption story with anyone except the person you are seeking. Many, many times searchers are so excited about finding a family member, that they will blurt out the whole reason why they are looking for "Millie". The person contacted will now be in possession of information that Millie may prefer to discuss herself. You may be talking to a relative that "Millie" does not even like and does not wish to know her secret. Sometimes, discretion means being economical with the facts. Some sources of information can be very helpful, but the discretion rule applies 100%. It is not necessary to tell the whole story to everyone! Birth mothers in particular, having been silent for so long, may feel an intense need to share the truth with anyone who will listen. This is not always wise and may jeopardize the search outcomes.

Do seek out the assistance and/or guidance of experienced searchers and support groups. Sometimes days seem like years and waiting can be stressful, exhausting and frustrating. Birth mothers often have a lot of sadness associated with the loss of their child. A good support group is very necessary. A good search buddy can keep you from making a move that could seriously disrupt the potential reunion. Also a search and support group is often a safer and more appropriate place to share the emotions of search than with friends or acquaintances. It is important to respect the privacy of what you learn in a search and

support group. Sometimes we get caught up in the enthusiasm of a search, our own or someone else's and end up sharing information that we later regret.

Don't make promises or threats you cannot or will not keep. If you make a threat in anger or frustration to never call again and then do so, you lose credibility. You need to be consistent and realistic. Sometimes a request for 'space' from an adoptee or a birth parent may be just that. They may need time to assimilate all the new information. They may have events in their lives that take precedence. Threats and demands will only push them away. We may think everything is about us or about the adoption/reunion but sometimes it's about other things in the adoptee or birth parent's life. Don't make assumptions!

Don't assume no answer or silence is a rejection. It may just be a 'plateau' in the reunion journey. Be patient. Continue to be consistent. Send cards and letters (if that is what you always did). If you are asked to 'back off' then you need to respect the other person's wishes. Just remember that from a philosophical view, nothing in life is permanent. All things change all the time. What seems so absolute this year is gone next year. The things that are important now may fade and change over time. And your son or daughter or parent who pushes you away now may change completely as their lives change and their wisdom grows.

Do be careful contacting minor children. Sometimes situations arise where you locate a child who is still a minor. Our experience shows that it is probably best to wait until that child is older before making contact. This is an area of controversy. Sometimes (especially in private adoptions) the mother may have information that makes finding the adoptive family fairly easy and vice versa. Since the child is still living at home, it would be inappropriate to try and make contact without the knowledge of the adoptive parents. Wisdom should be used here to make sure that the rights of the adoptive parents as parents do not get abused. Similar cautions exist if contacted by a searching teenager who may not share his or her search with the adoptive parents. Good search advice from an experienced group is needed!

Do try to make the call or write the letter yourself. If this is really too difficult or stressful, get the help of someone who is experienced. Practice your call with a friend and try to anticipate the obvious questions.

****** Note that the previous "Do" is also one of the most controversial in the search and reunion business. Some searchers, both those who charge fees and those who do not, argue that having the assistance of an experienced mediator will go a long way to making the initial reunion connection better. They note that the experience of the negotiator may help to bridge the awkward spaces. And indeed, a skilled intermediary may be able to say the right thing and ask the right questions at the right time by sensing the "temperature" of the event. Another school of thought says that nothing can replace the spontaneous nature of the one-to-one call between principal members of this reunion. It is harder to say "no" to one's own flesh and blood than to a third party, some believe. When making contact directly the awkwardness of the questions or the moment is offset by the

tears and the intimacy that are real. As with most things in life, nothing is carved in stone. The decision to use a third party or make contact directly will be up to you. If you choose to use a third party (or if you are required to) however, be sure you are comfortable with that person's style and approach before the initial contact takes place. There's only one "first" call.

The Reunion

Reunions come in many styles and with many variations, but the essence is still the same. This is the "meeting" - the re-connection - of two people who are closely related but for all intents and purposes are strangers. Like the growth and development of any relationship it takes time and effort. There is something profoundly mystical and magical about reunions. They require lots of work, lots of concentration and above all, a sense of humour. Rules of etiquette which have been developed through experience can make things run more smoothly.

Do get a good book list and read as much as you can about adoption and reunion. Remember that chances are that the other person in this reunion is not prepared. SOMEONE needs to know what is going on, or it will be a case of 'the blind leading the blind'!

Do be honest. There have been enough lies and secrets.

Do share information when it is appropriate, both in the initial call (if there is one) and later, when you meet. Sometimes questions come as a reflex and may not need to be answered at that very moment. For example, to "How did you find me?" you might respond "It was not easy. I'll tell you the whole story sometime. Right now let's enjoy this wonderful meeting." To "Who is my birth father?" one might respond (if this is a difficult question) "I will tell you the whole story, but right now I need some time to reflect on what has happened. But I promise I'll tell you the truth." A related principle is that if an immediate answer to your questions is not forthcoming, try to be patient with the other person. Another related principle is that one should not overload the other person with too much information all at once either. This can be very overwhelming! The entire family tree and all the ancestors' photos can wait.

Don't overwhelm your new found child with gifts, messages, email or anything else. You can't make up for the lost years that way and it may only make the adoptee feel guilty or inadequate or unable to keep up.

Do try to laugh. This is a joyful situation. Don't make it into a frightening experience. There is enough inherent drama in the incredible event taking place without adding to the tension. Be prepared to go white water rafting and hang on tight! And know that while the world may feel upside down and spinning right now, it REALLY will settle back to normal in a while. Promise!

Do try to keep it simple. You don't want the initial contact to be so difficult and stressful that it spoils any hope of future successes. Plan your first meeting in a place where either party can feel confident and safe. The situation is emotional enough without adding the fear of not being able to "get away" if there is a problem. A cosy corner in a public place (behind the potted palms in a large hotel lounge) can be just fine. If you decide this is going well you can move to somewhere more private. The rule of simplicity also holds with regards to what you wear (don't wear new shoes, for example, if you plan to go for a long walk), who accompanies you (ideally no one at first) and what kind of gift you bring (small and meaningful).

Do keep the first meeting shorter rather than longer. This gives everyone time to take a breather, re-assess the situation and consider the future relationship. It is always easier meeting for the second time. The "second time" may be the day right after your initial meeting if you have to travel some distance.

Do try to avoid a huge family picnic or party as the way to introduce your new-found relative to the clan. It can be very overwhelming to meet 50 relatives at once.

Do get as much rest as you can and don't forget to eat. Reunions can leave you feeling physically and emotionally drained. This is the time to pamper you and use that gift certificate to a spa!

Do keep an open mind. Your family may be very different from the adoptive family. Try not to judge one against the other until you get to know them better.

Do try to be understanding if your newly found son or daughter or mother or father pulls back or stays away for a while. Sometimes people just need time to assimilate all the new things they have learned about you and about themselves. It's a matter of two steps forward and one step back. Pushing too much may overwhelm them. Respect their wishes, but do not assume you know what they want if they do not tell you. Let them come to you in their own time. And their own time may be much longer than you expected.

Do have realistic expectations. The moment of reunion is not the time to decide you really only wanted to pass on "medical information" or that you are not ready to pursue a relationship. It is cruel to set the other party up to expect more than you are prepared to give. Be honest with yourself and try to look at your reasons for searching and the limits of what you can accept. Sometimes, fantasies are just that, fantasy! Talk with your support system ahead of time about the limits; if you're in an uncomfortable situation, try to resolve it directly and privately.

Don't be too sensitive about names and labels. Some birth mothers want their surrendered children to call them "Mom," but adoptees already have one "Mom" in their life and may not be comfortable using that title for anyone but their adoptive mother. Likewise, some adoptees are eager to call their first mother "Mom," but she may not be comfortable being called "Mom" by a child she did not raise. Take it easy and don't make

demands that make the adoptee uncomfortable. Taking an inflexible position about who is the Areal@ mother is not wise. Good manners would also direct that any discussion of how the adoptee will refer to his or her birth relatives not take place in the presence of a roomful of relatives. One needs to be very flexible. If this issue becomes one of contention, a re-examination of expectations may be in order.

Don't try to compete with established family holiday procedures unless everyone agrees. Like the name issue, this is not worth the anguish it can cause. Keep it simple. Many reunited relatives get bogged down in the minutiae of names and festivals instead of being thrilled that they have found each other. There are lots of other days in the year besides Christmas Day! Be reasonable.

Do try to respect the other person's wishes about sharing the reunion with other members of the natural or adoptive families. In the beginning it is normal to want to keep the reunion limited to the immediate pair reuniting - mother and adult child. But, a reluctance to share information about the reunion can go on too long. Try to set limits to your impatience and wait it out. At some point you may need to re-assess your expectations and make decisions about the future path of the relationship. Advice from an experienced searcher or support group is recommended.

Do be stoic if the other party feels a need to pull back for a while. It is very wise to agree without a huge fuss, great grief or gnashing of teeth. A need to pull away is often part of the reunion process. It allows the person to take stock and re-assess the reunion and its effect on his or her life. Although very painful to the other person, it is best treated with patience and lots of reading. Support groups are great for dealing with the sadness. No one can fix anyone else. They can only fix themselves.

Don't plan on moving in with your new relatives. They may be delighted to meet you but they are not looking for a permanent house guest.

Don't take them all your money troubles or try to negotiate a loan!

Don't blame yourself for problems in the other person's life. Birth mothers often feel great guilt if the child they relinquished did not grow up as advantaged as they might have hoped, or if religion is not as important in their child's life as it is to them (or vice versa). Adoptees can sometimes feel guilty if the relinquishment experience had a negative impact on their mother's life. We cannot turn the clock back no matter how much we might want to. Your relationship starts from the day you meet again. Some birth mothers do not start to grieve until after they find their lost children. This can be very hard for the adoptee to deal with. Seek help from a professional or a support group but not your new-found son or daughter. Keep it positive.

Don't criticize the other family's lifestyle, customs, or beliefs. No matter what you think, every criticism you make will be taken personally by the adoptee. It's like complaining about your in-laws! The rule is DON'T.

Do be aware that reunions can be hard on existing significant relationships. Husbands, wives, partners and children may feel left out and ignored. You may only have eyes and ears for this special new person in your life but try explain this obsession to those around you. Your children may feel jealous and think you've traded them in on a newer model. Reassure them of your love.

Don't dwell in the past. Many birth mothers feel as though they are back being disempowered young girls all over again (especially when they deal with agencies). Be proud of who you are and that you have survived a horrible and unnatural experience. Your son or daughter has the right to be acknowledged and you have the right to tell the truth.

So.....is Search and Reunion a good thing? You bet! Should it be carefully thought through? Absolutely! Will it be 100% successful? If we knew the answer to that, we'd be setting up shop in Las Vegas!