

Would You Like To Compare Our Genomes?

Adoptee Lauren Pittman shares her notes and advice on corresponding with DNA relatives.

I know I got lucky.

I hit the adoptee jackpot when I submitted my saliva sample to 23andMe and found my birth father a few weeks later. It was a total surprise. A little bit of a miracle, really. He wasn't looking for me. He didn't even know I existed. He got the surprise of his life when I wrote to him and told him he had a daughter.

Imagine writing *that* letter. What do you write to a man you've never met, but whose chromosomes you share? (The long story answer, including letters, is included in [Genetic Testing: Miracles and Science](#)). The short story is, it took some convincing that our match was not a mistake. My biological father, Jackson, never imagined he had a 50-year old daughter. When we initially exchanged information, he explained that he joined 23andMe hoping to learn more about his own biological father's family. He'd been told that his father died when he was young, and so his mother raised him alone. As Jackson got older and asked more questions about his origins, she never gave him any meaningful details. So there he was, like me, trying to fill in holes in his family tree. So I helped him, and hope to help you too by sharing some advice on what I learned in the process.

Once your sample is processed with 23andMe, you'll be notified that your results are available. First, you'll want to check out your Ancestry Composition, which estimates what percentage of your DNA comes from populations around the world, broken down by geographic regions to show the origins of your ancestors going back many generations.

Then, if you're interested in making connections with potential relatives, you'll want to opt in to 23andMe's DNA Relatives feature. This is where the correspondence begins.

Once you opt in, you will most likely receive requests from cousins and other distant relatives building their family trees (although, in some cases, like mine, you might find a father or mother immediately). Often times, cousins may have no idea there was an adoption in the family. They might ask you for surnames so that they can determine where you fit in their family tree. Your adoptive surname, however, will have no relevance to their tree, so you'll need to be prepared to tell your story.

For example, I received this request from a 2nd to 3rd cousin match. He asked the typical questions, using a template provided by 23andMe:

Hi—Through our shared DNA, 23andMe has identified us as relatives. Our predicted relationship is a 2nd cousin. Would you like to

compare our genomes? By sharing genomes we can compare our DNA using ancestry features and discover clues about how we are related. Surnames in my family: Mann, Bailey, Schmidt. I live in Northern California now, and I'm in my late 50's. This is my first experience with 23andMe—interesting! —Andy M.

As expected, none of those names meant anything to me. The only way to find out how we were related—and perhaps help my biological father solve his own mystery—was to share my story with this virtual stranger, so I wrote:

Hi Andy—23andMe is most definitely “interesting!” Here is the information I have about my biological family—maybe you can help me put some of the puzzle pieces together and see how we may be related.

Unfortunately, the surnames you provided don't mean anything to me, but there is a reason for that. Perhaps they will mean something to me after we exchange information (I am hopeful!).

I was adopted as an infant. Hubachek is my adopted name, so it won't help you with your relative search. But I do have some information that may be able to help you.

I was able to locate my biological mother 25 years ago. Her name is Margaret Michaels, born in Chicago in 1945. Her mother's name is Eve (maiden name Beryl). I do not know her father's first name, but I assume his last name was Michaels (I was born “Baby Girl Michaels”). Margaret never told me whom my biological father was (she has refused contact with me—it's a complicated story), but I was able to find him through 23andMe. His name is Jackson Summer and he currently lives in Washington State. He was born in 1943—I'm not sure where, but he grew up in Santa Barbara, CA (as did Margaret).

Perhaps you are a match with Jackson? If there is any other information I can give to you, I'd be happy to. Perhaps the surnames I've listed here mean something to you. Looking forward to hearing from you again. —Laureen

My advice to anyone pursuing a search for relatives through DNA testing is to respond to all types of contact requests. Someone out there knows your truth. They may not know they know, and you may not think that these distant relatives can provide useful information, but you never know when a scrap of information will help make random clues come together.

I didn't hear from Andy for about six months. Then this:

Hi Laureen—Have you been in touch with Jackson Summer? My 88-year-old mom recently wrote to me. Can you forward this to him? Hope

you're doing well. – Andy M.

* * * * *

From my mom to me [Andy]:

Jackson is the son of my Uncle Richard, your grandfather's older brother who had come to this country before your grandfather.

Richard Schmidt was married to Katherine and had 2 children: Franz and Marybeth. Living in those days many miles apart, I believe I only saw him once when the family drove to Southern California when I was very young.

After WWII, I lost track of what Uncle Richard was doing. It wasn't until I was married that I learned that Uncle Richard had had an affair while married to his first wife, Katherine. Of course, everything was very hush-hush. He and Katherine were divorced and the "other woman," whose name was Mollie Summer, had a child.
– Heide

Wow, Andy shared my information with his mother, who recognized the name "Summer." Mystery solved! I had not only found my biological father, but I was able to help him find his biological father (my grandfather) and complete my family tree.

Sometimes adoptees searching for relatives through DNA testing spend months or even years waiting for a life-changing match, and sometimes it happens quickly, so send out those contact requests. Respond to requests sent to you. Share your story. Share it over and over again if you have to.

Soon I'll be meeting Jackson for the first time, and his 88 year old cousin, Heide, too. The woman who shared her knowledge of the past and opened up the future for Jackson and me.

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[Adopted Children Learn What They Live](#)

Years ago my adoptive mother proudly hung a famous poem in our home titled

"Children Learn What They Live," by Dorothy Law Nolte, Ph.D., a person who was keenly aware of the benefits of positive youth development. It remained there for years. Now that I'm post 50 and discovered at age 48 that I'd been adopted, I've wondered about that poem, wondered "positive youth development for who?" We need to remember that it means positive for the adoptee and from their perspective since they are the ones who are going to be living their lives.

This is my twist on that poem, my hope and dream for what a truly positive message for adoptees might look like –

ADOPTED CHILDREN LEARN WHAT THEY LIVE

If adopted children live with parents who are called their "real" parents, they learn that they came from "unreal" parents and that they're rooted in something unreal, untrue, and unworthy of acknowledgement.

If adopted children live with labels like "chosen" or "lucky," they learn that they were first unchosen and unlucky.

If adopted children live love defined by "your first mother loved you so much that they gave you up for adoption," they learn that real love means being given away and to fear being given away every time they are told how much they are loved.

If adopted children live as "the answer to their parent's prayers," they learn that their sole purpose in life is to make others happy or risk a second abandonment if they don't.

If adopted children live "Forever Family," they learn that they're like an adopted puppy or kitten, something to be acquired.

If adopted children live that finding first family is wrong, they learn that their deep need to know about their origins is wrong as well, and despair, sometimes waiting until it's too late to find their truths.

If adopted children live with secret adoptions and no access to their original birth certificates, health histories, and heritages, they learn that they are not valued for who they were and question if they're as worthless as the paper their amended birth certificates are printed on.

If adopted children live that adoption is only a blessing, they learn that their feelings of loss are invalid, and there must be something wrong with them for feeling that way.

If adopted children live that their trauma is real and their sadness over it is normal, they learn that their feelings are important and appropriate too.

If adopted children live with the opportunity to grieve, they learn they can survive and even thrive after loss.

If adopted children live with validated feelings, they learn that others genuinely care and value them.

If adopted children live with knowledge of their original identities, they can live authentically as themselves and not have to pretend to be someone else to be loved.

If adopted children live within an honest familial and societal system, they learn that they are more than a baby to be acquired and trust that they are valued just as they are.

By Joanne C. Currao born Tracey Elisabeth McCullough

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[The Perpetual Child, An Adoptee's Thoughts on Voice](#)

The Voice We're Given

Adoptees sit at the bottom of the adoption power rankings. Maybe initially it's economics, the adoptee purchased by the adoptive parents; or the players' ages at the time of that transaction; or the historical context, that, at least transnationally, adoption is young and most adoptees are young. But the lingering truth is that adoptees remain subject to that power structure far into adulthood. The structure persists in how their (our) voice is valued. The adoptee voice seems always to be positioned either in contrast to or in agreement with the adoptive parent's (or agency's) voice—that is, perpetually in reference to those in power. It is an oft-overlooked danger of the Perpetual Child problem: the pretense of valuing the adoptee perspective while determining that value according to a *disempowering* context.

Let's think of this in another way: a rhetoric scholar I know said recently that she didn't like her African American literature course because it used different terms for things she knew by other names in other courses. She wanted everyone to use the same terms, to make it easier on her (as, it must be said, a white student) She mentioned that this was the only time she was ever going to take an African American literature course, because it didn't intersect with her studies (of course), implying that the theories would be more relevant if they were part of the majority discussion. To his credit, the professor of record was quick to point out that African American literary scholars needed to create their own terms, at least at first, in order to break free from being seen only in relation to the majority, and from using terms that already belonged to someone else.

Or let's get away from academia, and think about how this applies to real life.

The Voice We Give Ourselves

I would argue that the adoptee, or at least the transracial adoptee, is often bullied by other children as much for his similarities, or for daring to think there might be similarities, as for his differences. Probably he doesn't even realize this. The adopted child is often feared, often becomes a sort of reflection of insecurities. The adoptee often becomes Jung's Beast, the Other who needs to be accepted by the (accepted) Beauty in order for his own beauty to exist.

When I was growing up in my white town in Connecticut, I was so focused on my own fears that I barely recognized the fears other people had of me. Maybe this was why I bought into one of the great lies of bullying, that it was *I* who caused the teasing and insults and fights—that something wrong with *me*, not something wrong with how people *saw* me, was the reason I was singled out. If someone fought with me, the other person might change but I remained the common variable.

I was just as ready as anyone to hate the side of me that wasn't the white kid I wished so badly to project (and be)—so badly I even denied to myself that I was not him. And this isn't to say I was an entirely unpopular kid; I was somewhere in the middle. I had my friends, but with those friends I didn't always feel entirely comfortable. One of the differences was that I seemed to have enemies no one else in my friend group had. I was in the middle, but to some, because I was adopted, or because I wasn't white, I would always be at the bottom.

I remember I had a friend who would constantly pick fights with me—I didn't know why. We would end up trying to get each other in a headlock at someone's birthday party, and then would laugh it off as having fun. I wasn't having fun. I don't think he was, either, but whenever I tried to avoid him I found him pushing at my wounds even more. When he fought with me, he got attention. He knew enough about me, as my supposed friend, to know exactly how to hurt me. I don't think I knew as much about myself in many ways. Sometimes it is the people who most want to hurt you who dig the fastest and deepest to your buried truths.

This friend had a shrink for a father and the daddy issues that perhaps went along with that. He was often shooting things with his BB gun or otherwise going through a prolonged stage of torturing animals. These were things about him we thought were cool: his interesting father, his violent urges. I can see now how insecure he was, but at the time the mask with which he covered that insecurity seemed enviable. Masks often do. Or they do for me. Maybe some part of me was impressed by the way he could be someone else on the outside.

Once, we got into a wrestling match at another friend's house—I was in high school by then, I think, and still having these fights—and I felt my anger come on more strongly than it ever had in previous encounters and with a

determination I only had when I felt most wronged and justified, when I finally realized something was not my fault. Usually, I was happy to slip away as soon as possible, but this time, I tried harder and harder to hurt him. I wanted to do some lasting physical damage, to do something that would put an end to what I must have understood eventually, or on some level, as torment. In fact, I would dream of this friend doing crueler and crueler things to me—the scenarios we played out in real life were also stuck in my subconscious.

This time, this fight, I threw elbows and tried to lock his arms and legs and get my arm around his throat. I got angry on the level of desperation, as if this was some last chance I had. I had to show him that he couldn't do this to me. And though I wasn't able to do any real damage (he was always stronger than me, or more aggressive with his strength, or more efficient with it, which he knew, of course), I think that for the first time, I scared him a little. I could feel that he was struggling, and that I might have eventually gotten the upper hand, when he broke away.

What he said then, though, is what I remember most well, and my answer to him is what really continues to torment me. He complimented me, as if this was all a game to him and he was happy to see me rise to the challenge, or as if he was some Mr. Miyagi and I was his pupil finally earning his respect. And in one of my worst moments, I felt proud of myself for that compliment. I *felt* respected by him. I felt my utter inferiority and a ridiculous pride that I had even come close to him.

It's difficult to write about how much I looked down on myself.

This wasn't even the friend who hurt me the worst for my seeming inferiority, not the one who turned his back on our friendship and pretended it had never existed as he climbed the popularity ranks, or the friend with whom I thought I was extremely close but who I have realized over many years never believed the same. This friend, the BB gun friend, was a friend who seemed the entire time to believe that we were friends and that this was our (natural) dynamic.

Now, maybe obviously, we are not friends anymore. I'm sure he has realized that we were never friends. We were afraid of each other. It wasn't just me, I see now. Or we had recognized in each other something about ourselves that we were afraid of. If I look at the parts of myself I'd rather not see, even now, I think I must have located in him a boy whose father could have understood him if he had only let him. I think he recognized in me a boy who had his same violent urges, that same deep-seeded rage, under the mask I was trying so hard to wear. Maybe he was trying to draw me out as a way of drawing himself out.

Or maybe I really was the only one with the issues. How can one ever be sure?

This friend eventually made a point of not inviting me to his wedding, though we were still supposedly on good terms then. I didn't invite him to mine, though I didn't invite most of my friends from childhood. I was still not over the way I saw *myself* in my relationships with them. I'm still not over that.

I don't know what I would do if I saw this friend now. I hate being reminded of that time. I hate that I will still regress to who they thought I was, to the dynamics we had then. I hate that they can define me in their ways, without my having any input, from something they must see as inherent. I will probably never go to a high school reunion. I have only one good friend remaining from high school, and whenever she suggests we try to have a little get-together with other classmates, she seems to know ahead of time that I will turn her down. I know that to be around those classmates, I will feel as if I never grew up.

The Voice We Take

The power structure with that friend, where I only felt on even ground, and where I congratulated myself for reaching that even ground, when he finally acknowledged me—I see this same power structure (this same *beasting*) played out in many adoption essays I read online.

Even in the current adoption climate, the adoptee is caught between, spoken for, treated as a purpose, or a context, as a way to improve the adoptive parent or agency, as something to be learned from or ignored, as less an individual with her own agency and more a contribution to the agency of someone else. Of course children may start out being (and providing) a purpose, in some ways. Adults decide to have children (sometimes). Adults decide to give children up (sometimes). Adults decide to adopt. But valuing adoptees means actually valuing adoptees' voices, letting them talk for themselves and not interpreting what they say for one's own purpose.

It's like this: sometimes I read these articles by adoptive parents talking about their kids as blessings, as gifts, and saying what they have done for their kids, taking them back to their homeland and how good that's been for them, for the kids and for themselves. So often, this is all second hand, all the parent's account. Sometimes the parent talks about what she has learned about her child's original culture, how having an adopted child has opened *her* eyes to Asia or so forth. It's unbearably parent-centric—all aimed at what the parent can (or rather, *has*) learned. And when an article is actually about the adoptee and yet written as if the adoptive parent *knows* what is going on in the adoptee's head, how do I believe that? How does that parent believe that?

I can write an entire book about denial, and even if I knew exactly how I felt, I would not have wanted to make my parents pity me, or feel confused about me, or, worse, try to explain or to fix me. I suspect it's like that for others, though of course I am loathe to do what I am arguing against: to put words in other adoptees' mouths, no matter how I think I understand. My point is that the adoptive parent is not the one who should be judging whether the adoptee really understands or does not, is happy or is not, is adjusting or is not, is Beauty or is Beast.

It is a problem of its own that adoptees ourselves have trouble telling how we really feel. But how complicated that becomes when held up to the standard and scrutiny of the adoption power structure.

I was at a talk recently on education, where the speaker was discussing how people had been wrong to think an early education program had failed—at the time they hadn't been able to study the long long-term results. They were measuring the results via testing. In the short-term, the tests seemed promising, and in the medium-term, the tests seemed to show nothing, or only temporary improvements, so researchers had thought the program was a failure. Yet years later, studying those children, it seems that early education had extremely deep-seeded effects, resulting in children being less likely to do something that ended them up in jail, less likely to become pregnant at a young age, and so on. Even when the test scores seemed to show that the effect of early schooling went away by the time they were teens. The education system wasn't an effective way of measuring the education system.

Maybe it is a matter of what we are subject to. For it is not that I think these adoption articles, these evaluations, these studies, are a problem of empathy. I'm not saying adoptive parents are wrong to think about how their kids feel, or even to imagine those feelings. I believe these parents when they say they love and cherish their children. I believe they are trying and I can believe that they are trying to see things from the adoptee perspective. I believe they talk to their kids, that their kids say what appears in the articles. I even believe that writing about their kids could be helpful to empathy, could help them understand their sons and daughters through the mere act of trying to put themselves in those shoes. The problem is, it reinforces the idea that the adoptive parent has the authority over the adoptee, and even the adoptee's feelings and thoughts and growth. It reinforces the idea that the adoptive parent is the one who tells the adoptee's story.

What makes me saddest, though, is when I read adoptee essays in which the writers seem to assert the same. When they have to explain themselves in comparison or contrast to the adoptive parent. I have been there. Often this stance is by necessity, is important in thinking about one's audience. Often the adoptee writer has to write an entire essay of, "That's not how it is," or even, "Don't speak for us." I may have even done so here. It takes so much space before the essay can make its own territory, until the adoptee writer can escape the (e)valuation of the power structure and wonder for herself. That is where the adoptee has a power and a context of her own, where she can say, this is a question outside of any (granted) authority.

This is a question I am asking myself, not for you to legitimize or strike down or make real, but because I have to ask it and it is mine to ask. And if I am asking it also for you, then consider what I don't know on my terms, not as a plea for help or acceptance. The adoptee voice matters because the adoptee says so.

Editor's Note: This essay was originally written for the anthology *Perpetual Child: Dismantling the Stereotype* and is reprinted here with the author's permission. Image Credit: Evan Forester.

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[PACER of Northern CA: Helping Those Impacted by Adoption Since 1979](#)

PACER (Post-Adoption Center for Education and Research) was founded by Dirck Brown in 1979, well before most of society even recognized the need for support and education for adoption-affected individuals.

Brown, an adoptee and successful college dean, knew firsthand the lifelong impact of adoption, and after searching for and reuniting with his birth parents in 1976, began an adoption support group in his own living room. His trailblazing idea blossomed from there. The organization was unique in that it provided support for all members of the adoption triad: adoptees, birth/first parents, and adoptive parents.

PACER has been a leader in Northern California's adoption support community now for over 35 years. It is a nonprofit, grassroots group led by volunteers. PACER's offerings include support groups, referrals, mental health services, community events, and educational resources for anyone affected by adoption. The group advocates for open records and transparent policies, as well.

April Topfer, PhD, is PACER's current president. She is an adoptee and pre-licensed Psychological Assistant who has been in reunion with her birth father since 2012. Recently, Dr. Topfer offered to answer some of our questions about PACER's impressive history, accomplishments, and offerings for fellow adoptees.

Secret Sons & Daughters: When PACER was founded in 1979, openly discussing adoption issues was still a bit taboo. Some thought babies were blank slates who should blend in seamlessly with adoptive families with no desire to search for roots. What were PACER's first years like and which triad members first embraced the group and its' ideas?

Dr. Topfer: You could say openly discussing adoption was a bit taboo, or a *lot* taboo, at the time! Mental health education, practice, and research about adoption issues was not familiarly known, studied, or talked about.

For instance, we consider Sorosky, Baran, and Pannor's seminal book *The Adoption Triangle* and BJ Lifton's *Lost and Found* as being classics in the field but they were actually written the same year that PACER was founded.

Also, adoption expert Dr. David Brodzinsky was just beginning his research about adoption loss. Before this, the only book written by an adoptee about her experience was *The Search for Anna Fisher*, a 1973 memoir by ALMA founder Florence Fisher, who blazed the way for open adoption records, search, and reunion.

This gives us insight about the social atmosphere when Dirck Brown and his colleagues launched PACER. Basically, there were still a lot of unknowns and gross misperceptions about adoption triad/constellation members' experiences.

Surprisingly, however, the first and largest group of members who embraced PACER was adoptive parents. They were extremely influential in obtaining large funding, grants, and sponsorships. Dr. Joe Davis, a physician from Stanford University Medical Center – and not an adoption triad/constellation member – also embraced PACER and its mission early on. Others were therapists and first/birth mothers.

Secret Sons & Daughters: Did you get any negative feedback from certain groups?

Dr. Topfer: No, I have not heard or read any negative comments about PACER from organizations or individuals. In fact, I've only heard very positive feedback.

There may have been negative feedback toward PACER members actively involved in the CA open records movement, though. PACER had not, until recently, committed itself to legislative and lobbying efforts for open records.

In the past, PACER was afraid they would alienate adoptive parents if they took a public stand against closed records. That has changed, however, since my time as president.

Secret Sons & Daughters: Are PACER members and participants mostly adoptees or do you have interest from birth and adoptive parents, as well?

Dr. Topfer: The majority of our board members are adopted persons. One first/birth mother is a board member. However, we have a large first/birth mother member population, especially in Sacramento.

Unfortunately, we don't currently have adoptive parents on the board or any active adoptive parent groups. PACER is interested in changing this and has consulted with NACAC (North American Council on Adoptable Children) about how to reach out to adoptive parents.

Also, I've been soliciting interest from several therapists who are also adoptive parents. Therapist and adoptive parent Nancy Verrier (author of *The Primal Wound*) is one of them.

I think the biggest reason adoptive parents have not been involved with PACER is the disparity in experiences between adopted persons, first/birth mothers, and adoptive parents. Adoptive parents have always been the leading force in the adoption industry, as agencies, policy makers, and the media give their

experiences more precedence than adopted persons and first/birth mothers. Adopted individuals' and first/birth mothers' voices have not been front and center.



PACER has shifted this power dynamic, giving adopted persons and first/birth mothers the support and a forum to express their experiences of loss, anger, guilt, shame, bewilderment, etc.

Secret Sons & Daughters: What are typical reasons adoptees first contact PACER? Do these reasons vary greatly between men and women?

Dr. Topfer: The main reasons adoptees first contact PACER are for issues around search and reunion, and a desire to be supported by others who understand their experience.

I haven't noticed or heard that these reasons vary greatly between men and women. However, there are more women than men regularly attending our peer-led support groups.

Secret Sons & Daughters: Can you describe some examples of "breakthrough" or "a-ha" moments for new members seeking support?

Dr. Topfer: Good question. I don't know the "breakthrough" moments for other members but I will speak about my own first experience as a PACER member.

I had attended a PACER adoptee group several times over a two-year span before my breakthrough moment. It took that long because, admittedly, in those first meetings I was intimidated by others who openly shared their search and reunion experiences.

I was still deep "in the closet" in terms of my search and reunion and exploring my adoptee identity. It wasn't because I hadn't searched before; it was because 15 years earlier when I had contacted my first/birth mother, there was not a welcoming response. So, in those first meetings, I didn't feel I could contribute significantly to the group.

Now I wonder if other adoptee newcomers have felt similarly? After finally mustering the courage to talk about my adoption – which felt necessary for my own mental health and wellness – at this same time, I attempted to make contact with my first/birth mother again. As I opened up more, the PACER adoptee group felt less intimidating and more helpful.

As time progressed, I participated in other PACER events and even went to my first American Adoption Congress conference. At that point, I clearly saw the

benefits of being with others who had similar feelings and experiences.

Secret Sons & Daughters: What sort of advice or support do you offer for someone who has had an unsuccessful search or rejection from found relatives?

Dr. Topfer: This has been my experience with my first/birth mother and her family. The best advice and support I can offer is to practice patience and letting go.

This doesn't mean giving up – quite the opposite. It means continuing to hope that a connection will develop but not holding on so tightly that other family member opportunities are missed.

I see this pattern with adoptees: Their first, and usually only, primary focus is on their birth mother. It's natural to have this sort of tunnel vision because as adoptees we didn't receive the genetic bond and love from our first/birth mothers, and we desperately needed it!

Despite the importance of a mother's bond, however, an adopted person must realize that he/she has *two* whole entire families with separate members who may be welcoming, warm, and accepting. In fact, it is other family members who are more likely to extend open arms because they don't have the loss, shame, guilt, and grief of first/birth mothers.

As I stated, my personal experience included a restricted "birthmom tunnel vision" for years.

At the first contact attempt, my first/birth mother screamed and yelled at me. She was in hysterics. This scared me off for another 15 years but I still thought about her often.

Then, during a therapy session one day, it struck me that I have not only a mother but a father, as well. This felt revolutionary! My therapist was very supportive of my search for him.

Less than six months after I shifted my attention away from my birth mother, my birth father found *me*! It's been two years since we connected and we have a great relationship.

Secret Sons & Daughters: Your site has an excellent, comprehensive list of articles and suggestions for finding an adoption-sensitive therapist. Have you found an increase in the number of mental health professionals that have joined in the belief that adoption has a significant, lifelong, evolving impact on an individual? What type of training is sought by adoption-savvy professionals?

Dr. Topfer: Thank you. I worked hard on gathering useful articles, videos, and other helpful resources for the website. Many articles are borrowed from C.A.S.E. [Center for Adoption Support and Education, which generously offers free use of information] and other sources.

In regards to adoption-savvy professionals, I haven't found a noteworthy

increase in mental health professionals and organizations embracing adoption's significant, lifelong impact. Most therapists recommended on our site have been exploring adoption issues for a while.

I will add, though, there is increased *discussion* in the adoption community about adoption competency for professionals. It's slowly trickling into mainstream mental health. The Donaldson Institute recently released a report about the "Need to Know – Competency in Adoption Therapists" and the APA has an Adoption Practice and Counseling Special Interest Group (SIG).

A recent California bill proposed that mental health professionals must be certified in adoption competency before obtaining adoption agency referrals. Unfortunately, the bill was gutted and now only states the need for training. Overall, these factors indicate the need for adoption competency *is* on the minds of professionals aware of adoption's complexities.

Regarding training for adoption-savvy professionals; what I do know is that trauma-informed therapy is becoming the standard focus of treatment for not just adults but for children.

Adoption-sensitive professionals understand the aspects of trauma in adopted and foster children. They acknowledge long-term trauma caused by closed records in adopted adults, too. This opens up different modalities that a practitioner can use to help achieve levels of healing and development—neurological and neurobiological, attachment-focused, somatic, mindfulness, transpersonal, etc.

In this sense, adoption-savvy professionals perhaps will seek trainings that are trauma-informed, empirical, and experiential.

Secret Sons & Daughters: Do you have unique support options for individuals affected by various types of adoptions – infant, older/foster child, international, open vs. closed?

Dr. Topfer: No, not specifically, although we know our group members do have a wide range of adoption experiences.

We do see the need for more specialized groups, including "professionally-led" meetings, which we hope to start in fall of 2014. They will be facilitated by a professional, be fee-based, closed, and scheduled for a specific amount of time.

Our current groups are peer-led, drop-in, open, and not fee-based. During professionally-led groups, members will be able to explore their adoption experiences more intimately in a small group.

Secret Sons & Daughters: What do you think the future holds for open records laws within states and perhaps on a national level?

Dr. Topfer: The trend has been for states to finally open records but with conditions – a waiting period in which a first/birth mother can opt out of contact. Ohio, Illinois, and New Jersey have unconditional vetoes in place. Maine, Oregon, and Alabama do not have vetoes.

PACER does not have an official stance yet on conditional or unconditional records but we lean toward no compromises and no vetoes.

A representative from CalOpen, the leading open access organization in California, recently stated: “States that have passed conditional bills are ruining other states’ chances of passing unconditional open access bills. They are unfortunately sending a message that it’s fine for some adoptees to have access but not all; ultimately, that is not okay!”



Personally, I lean toward an unconditional access bill. I used to agree it was okay if some adoptees’ OBCs were sacrificed if the majority got theirs. The compromise seemed acceptable – until I realized my own first/birth mother could redact my OBC, despite [Ohio’s recently passed open access bill](#).

I was born in Ohio and supportive of the bill (am still partially supportive), but when I read that my birth mother could take away what is truly mine, my heart sank. Those who act too quickly to put conditions on open access bills have not looked deeply enough into this dilemma.

Secret Sons & Daughters: If you would like to learn more about PACER, visit their comprehensive site: pacer-adoption.org.

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[Concerned United Birthparents Offers Insight and Support](#)

In 1975, a Massachusetts birthmother named Lee Campbell attended an adoptee support group with a few other birthmothers. As she listened to adoptees swap stories, she wondered if mothers who had surrendered children for adoption might benefit from separate discussions about their experiences. The other mothers she’d met agreed. In the year that followed, Concerned United

Birthparents (CUB) held their first meeting at (ironically) The Church of the Immaculate Conception on Cape Cod, and incorporated a few months later. During CUB's first eight years of operation, they answered 45,000 letters, half of which were from adoptees, many of whom were testing the waters on meeting a birthparent. Keep in mind, this was the late 70s/early 80s when most adoptees didn't think reunions were possible, let alone a socially acceptable option.

Today, CUB is a national organization, a recognized voice for birthparents, and a valuable support resource. In addition, they're a major resource for adoption reform history and have supplied Harvard's Schlesinger Library with over 10,000 pages of CUB history.

This old Phil Donahue clip—which includes an interview with Lee Campbell—is a first hand look at that history and the heated early conversations on reunions, searches, pressure to relinquish, and whether an adopted person should have a right to his or her history. I'll warn you, from about minute 21 on, it's disconcerting to see that for as much as things have changed, we still have a ways to go.

I had an opportunity to talk with Patty Collings, CUB's current President (and a birthmother herself), about CUB's evolution over almost four decades and what they offer today, especially for adult adoptees.

SECRET SONS & DAUGHTERS: When did CUB decide to open meetings to others impacted by adoption and what prompted that change?

PATTY: Early on, when meetings were limited to the greater Boston area, CUB's mission was to create a safe place for birthmothers to discuss their surrenders. Early members developed a birthparent manual of sorts, exploring issues such as searching or not searching; following their children's lives from a distance or making contact; and how to make a comfortable niche for themselves after reunion, however that turned out. Initially, there was also an active adoptee group in the Boston area with whom we shared a few meetings.

That all changed as CUB grew to better understand birthparenthood and began to open branches across the country, especially in places where there were no active adoptee groups. Today, attendance at a typical meeting is split almost evenly between adoptees and birthparents.

SECRET SONS & DAUGHTERS: Why might someone attend a CUB meeting?

PATTY: I'll never forget one of the first meetings I attended. There was an adoptee in her reunion's early stages. I'll call her Carol. She told the group that her birthmother, Susan, had said something that upset her very much and continued to bother her whenever she thought about it. Susan had said: "When I first held you, I just thought you were too perfect for me to keep, so I had to give you up." Carol felt those words as cold and uncaring, and she felt very hurt by them.

Another birthmom at the meeting told Carol that what Susan said resonated

with her. She said she *knew* that feeling of shame and unworthiness, and that she too had felt unfit to raise a child as an unwed mother. This other birthmom explained that Susan might have thought that her daughter was so precious, so much better than her that she deserved a better mother, a better person to be her parent.

In the months that followed, Carol told us that what she heard in that meeting helped her to feel better whenever her mother's words popped in her mind, and she didn't dwell on them as much anymore. I still get choked up each time I remember that meeting and how Carol's face softened.

That experience is something we see again and again—adoptees have an opportunity to get a better understanding of their own birthparents by listening to other birthparents talk, and it goes the other way too. Birthparents gain an understanding of what their children might be experiencing when they can hear from other adoptees. And it seems easier to take in such points of view when it comes from someone unrelated yet very familiar with the experience.

We believe this is our most important service, providing emotional support and meeting people wherever they are in their journey. Sometimes it is an adoptee struggling post-reunion, sometimes it's a birthmother grappling with an open adoption that closed, and other times it might be a birthparent or adoptee wondering if they have a right to search.

SECRET SONS & DAUGHTERS: Can you describe a realization, or break-through of sorts, that might happen at a meeting?

PATTY: We often hear adoptees who are searching say they believe their birthparents don't think about them, aren't looking for them, and don't want to find them, let alone be found. They'll assume this because the birthparent has not registered with any of the mutual consent registries. They are often surprised to hear birthparents in the group explain that they were unaware of the registries, and/or that they were told by the adoption agencies that they must never interfere, never intrude on their child and the family who adopted them. So many of us were told this would be very disruptive, and that, for all we knew, our child didn't know about his or her adoption.

It's one thing to read this in a book or online, but when birthparents are face to face with adoptees and talk about how they have thought about their child every day, wondered if they were safe and happy, and how they think about that child every birthday – boy do we ever think about them on their birthdays—it has a different kind of impact.

I feel confident saying that the vast majority of birthparents want to be found. There's an interesting statistic in Jean Strauss' film about Illinois' recent open records law, *A Simple Piece of Paper*: since the records opened, more than 8,000 requests for original birth certificates have been filed. Of that 8,000, only 47 birthparents asked to have their name withheld.

SECRET SONS & DAUGHTERS: What advice do you offer someone who has experienced rejection from his or her biological relatives?

PATTY: A birthparent who refuses contact with his or her child is the most distressing situation. My personal belief is that we owe it to our children to be open to a relationship and to give them whatever information they ask for. This may include the identity of the birthfather (and his contact information if we have it). They have the right to know who they are and where they came from, their birth story, the first chapter of their lives.

Adoptees typically search for their mothers first. Birthmothers who initially refuse, but later agree to contact, often describe feeling shock after being found. This is often because being an “unwed mother” might be a long-held secret, and the shameful memories so painful that they have coped by keeping feelings deeply buried. They also anticipate that they’ll be shamed and rejected by their friends and family when the truth comes out. For some mothers who have gone through this, it took years to process these feelings before they were ready for a relationship.

So when a birthparent says “no,” it might not mean never, it might just mean not now. If an adoptee has contact information, I encourage him or her to reach out again after some time has passed, and at some point, also consider searching for siblings and other relatives.

If an agency is involved and will not release information because the birthparent withholds consent, an adoptee might consider contacting a search angel or private investigator, or sign up for registries and DNA matching services. These avenues can help someone discover a sibling, aunt, uncle, or even a grandparent who is open to a relationship.

SECRET SONS & DAUGHTERS: I’ve noticed that terminology can be a real hot button. For example, whether to refer to a mother as “birthmother,” “first mother,” or some other term, and I know there are language challenges for mothers as well. How is that handled in meetings?

PATTY: There are no rules other than people can use whatever terminology works best, whether that is “I placed my child for adoption,” “I relinquished my child,” “birthmother,” “first mother”—whatever works for the person trying to share his or her experience. The goal is to support someone wherever they are in the process.

Our founder, Lee Campbell, considered several names when she was establishing CUB—the first organization to support and advocate for mothers who had lost their children to adoption. This video details the word “birthparents” inspiration and Lee’s thought process as she considered commonly used terms at the time – first, natural, biological, genetic—and then decided on “birthparent, birthmother,” as one word, like grandparent. It was a label she hoped would unite mothers of adoption loss. The rest of the title for what Lee called her “unique band of sisters” came easy after that. Lee adds: “I envisioned us birthmothers ‘united’ in our ‘concern’ about our children, and that’s how “Concerned United Birthparents” fell into place.

SECRET SONS & DAUGHTERS: Tell me a little bit about fathers—did birthfathers attend in those early years, and has their participation changed over the

years?

PATTY: Fathers matter, and we have long invited their participation. Our birthfather membership is lower than birthmothers, but we know that many men may not even be aware they have a child, or that the child was given up for adoption. Also, we have heard from fathers who, years after walking away from their partner's unplanned pregnancy, realize that they feel shame too.

On a separate note, the recent focus on illegal adoption lawsuits filed by Utah attorney Wes Hutchins on behalf of birthfathers whose children were adopted without their knowledge or consent, or under fraudulent circumstances, may encourage even more fathers to come forward. We encourage them to join us.

SECRET SONS & DAUGHTERS: Do meetings also focus on helping adoptees and birthparents search for one another?

PATTY: I joined another group, ALMA (Adoptees Liberty Movement Association) in 1997. I joined CUB in 2001. ALMA is more focused on advising people how to search, and on forwarding open records legislation. In addition, they also maintain a mutual consent registry for birthparents and adult adoptees. While CUB supports these registries and legislative efforts and shares search resources, our primary focus is support and awareness.

SECRET SONS & DAUGHTERS: What geographic areas can someone find a CUB support group and roughly how many people attend a typical meeting?

PATTY: We've found that the in person connection is invaluable. It can be very comforting to sit and talk with others who really "get you." And we have all benefited from hearing how others cope with ongoing searches, rough reunions, rejection, finding a grave, and learning to deal with some family members who suggest we just "get over it" and "move on with our lives."

Several California cities have active members, including groups in Los Angeles, Orange County, and San Diego north and south groups. In addition to California, there are groups in Boston, Minneapolis, Portland, Washington, D.C. and Lakeland, Fl. The meeting size varies anywhere from 7-20 participants (usually in California). Our meetings in Lakeland, Florida typically have 3-10 people. We also have a younger cohort of birthmoms that meet online via *Google Hangouts*.

In addition, members who are not close to a local group have found support through our newsletters as well as emails and phone calls with CUB members.

SECRET SONS & DAUGHTERS: Any other in person opportunities, especially for those that don't live near a CUB group?



CUB Retreat Banquet

PATTY: We host an annual retreat, usually at a hotel near a beach, bay, or a lake so that the environment is ideal for reflection between sessions. The schedule is not packed with multiple sessions that run simultaneously. Instead, we focus on a core program. This year's conference will be near Tampa, in [Safety Harbor, Florida, Oct. 17-19](#), and feature a panel on Found Adoptees, several experts on an Open Adoption panel geared to younger birthmoms who are contending with open adoptions that closed, and a panel of three (two birthmothers and an adoptee) involved in family preservation work, finding resources and support to enable expectant mothers and fathers to parent their children. We also plan to have a representative from the Philomena Project.

For more information on CUB and upcoming conference details, visit [Concerned United Birthparents](#).

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[An Ode to Father's Day](#)

Several adoptees share their thoughts on what the word "Dad" means to them in snapshots of fatherhood and odes that show just how much dads matter.

"I always assumed he was one of 'those guys,' the stereotypical birthfather who skipped town when he found out Baby Girl was on the way. I couldn't have been more wrong.

My dad hadn't wanted to give me up, and his grief over the relinquishment had been so significant that it was noted in the court file. My dad had saved everything for the day he would meet me again—from the court papers right down to the bows off the flowers he brought my mother in the hospital. He had looked for me before I contacted him.

My dad was with my mom when she was killed at age 22. He cried the day he took me to "meet" her at the cemetery. Today, he's a loving husband of 30 years and a dad to two other amazing kids. He never forgot me, and he loved me all those years I assumed he didn't care."

– *Baby Girl Stephens*

This Father's Day, for the first time, I celebrate both the father who raised me and the father I thought I would never know. My father who raised me loved me, comforted me and taught me right from wrong. He taught me to ride a bike and counseled me with wise advice. And he taught me the meaning of unconditional love through my rebellious teenage years.

I met the father I thought I'd never know the day after I turned 51. From him I learned where I came from, who I look like and where pieces of my personality come from. He has given me a heritage and roots. And he has given me his love and the gift of acceptance.

This Father's Day I honor two fathers who love me and helped make me who I am.

– Becky Drinnen

Becky is from Ohio, a state where the ability to access information on your origins changed dramatically for 400,000 adoptees this year, thanks in large part to another Ohio adoptee and her father.

Prominent Cleveland lawyer William B. "Brad" Norris, played a role in closing adoption records in the early 1960's. He wanted to seal his adopted children's birth certificates from the public, but he never intended for the law to close the records to adoptees as well. One of his children was Betsie Norris, who grew up and founded Adoption Network Cleveland.

Unaware of her father's actions, Betsie began a battle in 1989 to reverse the law that closed the records to post-1964 adoptees. After her father confessed his involvement to her in the 1990's, the two forged an alliance to push for a law that would restore access for all Ohio adoptees.

"When my Dad came to me, several years into my effort and confessed his role in closing the records, it was like a Greek tragedy where the child is, unknowingly, trying to rectify the 'sin' of the parent. From that point on, my dad partnered with us in our fight to change the law. My Dad passed away in 2006, and I know this piece of unfinished business weighed heavily on him. He didn't live to see Ohio Governor John Kasich sign the legislation into law in December 2013. But thanks to my father's help, Ohio adoptees will be able to access their original birth certificates beginning in March 2015. I

carried his picture in my pocket to the bill signing.”

–Betsie Norris ([More on Ohio's story: New Era for Ohio Adoptees Began Today](#))

My father, Willis, was a quiet man who loved his two children (both adopted) very much and we loved him the same. My father would have done anything for us. I lost him 30 years ago and still miss him dearly. Unfortunately, I was never able to meet my birth father. He passed away when I was 19 years old.

I would like to say Happy Fathers Day to my newly found uncle in Michigan–Happy Fathers Day uncle Jim! I consider myself one of the luckiest fathers this year. I've been getting to know members of my birth families and I've been blessed with a wonderful new family.”

–Daniel Koerselman ([Daniel's story: An Iowa Adoptee's Thoughts the Night Before He Meets His Birth Mother](#))

At eleven days of age, fate led me into the arms of my adoptive dad. Although all four of my parents made me who I am, I feel infinitely blessed to know my dad's unconditional and eternal love. Today, my dad is one of my best friends in the world.

–Heather Katz (my cofounder Heather's story: [Sometimes a Reunion Gives an Adoptee New Secrets](#))

I'll end this ode by saying the image above is from the card I sent my own father this year. I met him when I was 19. A few months later, he sent a card that said: “I think there is such a gap between reality and the dream in this situation. Do you know what I mean? I guess I'm trying to say that I want to be everything you want me to be, but, realistically, I'm not sure I have the foggiest idea what that is–do you?”

I didn't have any idea either, but those words and a mailbag's worth of letters over the years fostered a kinship and a second chance to have a father. From 19 to now he has become all the things mentioned in the card above. . . except maybe “fixer of things,” unless that “fixing” comes in the form of being there, through emails and phone calls, at concerts and shared beers at a pub (especially shared beers at a pub), and recently, for his wise and funny stories that give me insight on ways I can parent one of my sons who shares many of his traits.

As so many of us adoptees know, it's hard to put into words what it means to know someone who looks like you, or is like you, in small and large ways. All I can say is meeting the people responsible for my life on this planet has helped me to feel more tethered to it. And I'm more appreciative still to have this window on the invisible threads that link generations. After many Father's Days filled with longing, this year I'm counting the many blessings.

Happy Father's Day–to my own and to all you fathers out there!– Christine ([Portrait in Nature and Nurture](#))

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[Spence-Chapin's New Modern Family Center Offers Support for Adult Adoptees](#)

Today we are introducing what will be the first in a series of Q&As that highlight organizations making a difference in the lives of adoptees. First up is Spence-Chapin's new support resource, the Modern Family Center, which opened at the end of 2013. I had an opportunity to connect with Misha Conaway, Outreach Manager, who is an adoptee herself, and Dana Stallard, the center's Adoptee Services Coordinator. Dana recently gave a moving testimony in support of New York open access legislation that eloquently captured the issues at hand for adult adoptees (video included below). Here Misha and Dana fill us in on their new center's services:

Secret Sons & Daughters: What prompted Spence-Chapin to create the Modern Family Center and when did it open?

Misha: We understand the changing landscape of adoption. There is no typical make up of a modern family but there are common threads that run through all of the unique families we support. Spence-Chapin has provided services to families for over 100 years. Within the last year, the Modern Family Center was created to provide more comprehensive services to all types of families, including families formed through adoption.

Secret Sons & Daughters: What type of services does the new center offer adoptees?

Misha: We tailor many of our services to meet the needs of adoptees, including providing personal adoption histories, search and reunion guidance and counseling, mentorship programs for tween and teen adoptees, discussion panels, groups, and more.

Secret Sons & Daughters: What geographic areas does the [Modern Family Center @ Spence Chapin](#) serve and where are your offices located?

Misha: We provide services to individuals and families who live in the five boroughs of New York City, Long Island, Westchester County, southern Connecticut, and northern New Jersey. We are currently in the process of expanding our services to reach those living in southern New Jersey as well. We have two offices, one located in the upper east side of Manhattan and one in Park Slope in Brooklyn. We also offer consultations over the phone or via Skype when in-person meetings are not possible.

Secret Sons & Daughters: What have adult adoptees typically contacted Spence-Chapin for initially?

Dana: Many are hoping to be connected to an adoption community and to meet others that share their experiences or identities. Others are hoping to reconnect with their birth families and are hoping to learn more information about their birth histories and where they come from. All adoptees want to be supported throughout their adoption journey and we are able to provide guidance, empathy, and understanding to this community.

Secret Sons & Daughters: What type of details does a personal adoption history include?

Dana: A [Personal Adoption History](#) provides adult adoptees, birth parents, and the appropriate relatives with non-identifying information provided in the adoption record at the time of finalization. New York State law prevents Spence-Chapin from providing original birth certificates, the adoptee's original name, identifying information for the birth parents or adoptive family members, including first or last names, birth years, or specific locations. Spence-Chapin is able to provide personal adoption history information for adoptions facilitated by Spence-Chapin, Louise Wise (non-foster care), and Talbot Perkins prior to 1959.

For an adopted person: a written narrative called the Biological Background Narrative is prepared. This contains non-identifying information about birth parents at the time that they were making an adoption plan. This may include medical or health information about the biological family, ethnicity, nationality, religion, education, hobbies and interests and why the decision for adoption was made.

For a birth parent: a written narrative called the Adoptive Family Profile is prepared. This contains information about the child's birth and early development as well as non-identifying information about the adoptive parents until the time the adoption was finalized.

At this time, there is a bill in the New York State legislature that would allow adult adoptees to have access to their original birth certificates. I recently spoke on behalf of Spence Chapin at City Hall and advocated for this bill because we believe that it is a fundamental right of adoptees to know their original identities as well as the identities of their birth parents.

DANA'S TESTIMONY HERE:

Secret Sons & Daughters: Can you tell us more about the type of support you offer adult adoptees?

Dana: One of our social workers provides individualized support to each client seeking personal adoption history, from the initial clinical intake to sharing the information prepared, either by phone or in-person consultation. Additional counseling services are also available to further discuss related adoption issues, search and reunion, as well as to process the information received. We also offer therapeutic support groups for adult adoptees where they can share their experiences and work through any issues they may be struggling with.

Secret Sons & Daughters: Those sound like excellent resources, I wish more states had them. What types of training have your counselors received?

Misha: One of the most frequent complaints we hear from adoptees that come to us is that many mental health professionals simply do not understand the experience of growing up adopted, resulting in either minimizing their experiences or pathologizing them. Our clinicians are all trained and licensed social workers or are in a related mental health field, with an expertise in adoption and family systems. MFC's Training Department provides regular professional group and individual education throughout the year, and we frequently attend relevant conferences, trainings, and presentations.

Secret Sons & Daughters: What has the initial response from adult adoptees been thus far?

Dana: Adoptees find great comfort in connecting with others through mentorship, peer [support groups](#), or workshops. They are able to strengthen their own identities through meeting others and forming an adoption community.

Adoptees often do not know that they're able to receive a personal adoption history. It can be very helpful to find out more about birth parents and family of origin. Many adoptees are pleasantly surprised that they are able to talk to someone who provides individualized, caring support and they feel they are able to move forward in a different way after receiving that information.

One adult adoptee who received personal adoption history had this to say about the experience: ". . .it was a very illuminating day for me. What you were able to convey to me has answered so many questions about who I am. I want to thank you for your time. This is a normal practice for you, but it was a very special day for me."

In general, the initial response has been wonderful and we are encouraged to try new things and develop new programs for the adoptee community. If any of your readers have ideas for us, [we would love to hear from them!](#)

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[An Adult Adoptee's Dilemma: To Search or Not to Search](#)

Imagine you are at your favorite Chinese restaurant. A bill tray and three fortune cookies are slipped on the table in front of you. Before you dig into your wallet or purse, you grab the first cookie, crack it open and read the enclosed message, "Don't wait for your ship to come in, swim out to it." *Amen*, you might think, *it must be a sign. I should just go for it.*

You crush the next cookie. "I think you ate your fortune, while you were eating your cookie."

Now, you stare at that last cookie. *This one will to be the fortune that yields all the answers.* You inhale deeply, break the cookie in half and pull out the white narrow strip—"Next time you have the opportunity, go on a rollercoaster."

When I seriously considered whether I should or should not search for my birth family, I might as well have turned to fortune cookies to guide me in the right direction. At the time, I did not know of any other adoptees wanting to make a search.

Adoption forum boards, private Facebook discussion groups, and fellow adoptee Twitter feeds did not exist. Research on the subject of searching was scarce and adoptees were expected to just be grateful that they were adopted. Although my adoptive parents were responsive to my questions—not even knowing if I should crack open the proverbial cookie in the first place, hurled me straight aboard the search and reunion roller coaster.

I was under ten-years-old, when I absorbed the meaning of being adopted from an era where adoptions were closed. I felt an internal dilemma riddled with ongoing debate and mystery.

Even though I was being raised in a loving and supportive adoptive family, I *still* yearned to fill the holes drilled into my being.

By the time I was a young teenager, my craving for answers grew. I would frequently ask myself: "Where did I come from; why was I given up for adoption; what is my birth story; what does my birth family look like; do I have biological brothers and sisters; and what is my ancestral and medical background?"

I would often seek signs from the universe to tell me if I should actually proceed with a search, and longingly look up at the stars on my birthday wishing that my birth relatives might be doing the same. When I was sixteen-years-old, I even attempted to will the name of my birth mother and father right off the page of the non-identifying information that accompanied my altered birth certificate!

It wasn't until I reached my late teens, that I asked my parents for their help to search. I felt a thrilling sense of excitement and overwhelming spell of fear. The thought of slashing into the now archaic principle—*a birth mother has the right to privacy*—caused me alarm. If my search were successful, I would have to be prepared to deal with any and all possibilities.

Even though I strongly desired to capture my missing information, I made it clear to my parents that I was not looking to replace any of my adoptive family. In fact, it was *because* I felt loved and secure in my adoptive family that I felt confident enough to search. I hoped to eventually meet and love my birth relatives, but I was painfully aware that I might not find a fairytale ending.

With the aide of my parents, a dedicated adoption search angel, and a few clues, I was fortunate to find my birth mother at the age of twenty-one—in the state of Texas—where birth records remain sealed today. Our reunion did not fill in every one of my missing holes, but I have no regrets. I accept what I'm able to know, and I'm grateful to know it.

Like many adoptees, my longing to potentially search occurred as a child, but according to 2007 statistics from the [American Adoption Congress](#), some adoptees are motivated only after a triggering event—which could be a marriage, the birth of a baby, or following the passing of a loved one.

Still, I have other adopted friends who have never felt the same need to seek out their pasts. Some prefer to leave well enough alone. They are either quite content to leave the past in the past, are afraid of finding something negative, fear rejection, or dread the idea of potentially hurting their adoptive families.

The adult adoptee's dilemma of whether to make that search or not, is a deeply complicated and personal preference. And thankfully, today, an adoptee does not have to make the search decision—alone. Adoption research abounds, and books, adoptee memoirs and adoptee essays are plentiful, including several that are on Secret Sons & Daughters' Adoptee Tales [“Searching”](#) page.

Sometimes just reading the stories of others can help provide a sense of a future direction that might be right for you, which can make that fortune telling scenario a thing of the past.

Stay tuned for my upcoming post on resources and tips for searching for your birth family..

How did you feel when you decided to search for your birth family? What was

your experience? Would you like your medical history without an ongoing relationship?

[The Philomena Effect—An Adoptee Reflects on Truth and Silence](#)

When *Philomena* first debuted in theaters, I'll admit I was afraid to see it. It wasn't because I thought it would be no good (Judi Dench stars in it after all). I was afraid it would be *too* good. A friend had texted: "Have you seen *Philomena*? Just saw it. SO good. Made me think of Ann." By the end of the movie's first week, two more friends had emailed, "thought of Ann through the movie."

There was no way I was going to see that film now. [My birth mother, Ann](#), passed away four years ago, and I was hesitant to trigger the very lonely, and very "complicated grief" (therapist's term) I struggled with in holiday seasons past. Why see a movie about a naive Irish teenager who had made love, got pregnant, was sent away, and then forced to give up her son for adoption and keep quiet? A trajectory that was the same as Ann's, and a son whose existence was a secret, like I was, albeit not for 50 years.

I had work deadlines, holiday shopping, a packed month of basketball games and holiday events to attend—and a determination to avoid anything that could cast a somber tone on Christmas.

And then, on December 18, after the last deadline was met, and the presents were bought, and our guests were due to arrive, I had a change of heart. We had been quietly working on *Secret Sons & Daughters* for months. I had to see the film, so I texted Heather: "Philomena –11 am tomorrow?"

And off we went. We sat in a nearly empty theatre, a few rows in front of a group of college girls home for break, and I discovered that there was everything and nothing somber about *Philomena*.

I laughed when Philomena spoke bluntly about her sexual parts, and felt my heart rest as I listened to her soft way of saying hard things in scene after scene. Ann had both those qualities. Then there was the irony—the scene where Philomena asks Martin if he could use a fake name for her in his article, "or maybe Anne, Anne Boleyn" she mused.

What surprised me most though, was that I was as captivated by Martin Sixsmith's storyline as I was by Philomena's. To me, he was sort of like Nick Carraway to *The Great Gatsby's* Jay Gatsby—a peripheral narrator whose life changes as he witnesses a story and becomes part of the action unfolding. Sixsmith's interactions and observations are what cause us to think about the

role we play in viewing our pasts, and the role of faith, as we watch Martin's faith and beliefs about human nature (or at least "human interest" stories) be tested during his pursuit of Philomena's story.

Perhaps that's how *Philomena* might change others too, not in a Martin Sixsmith journalist sort of way, but maybe in the way we decide what to keep secret.

In the days after I'd seen the film, there was one scene that lingered. It's the part when Philomena grapples with which is the greater sin—what she did, or keeping the secret for 50 years—and I couldn't quite put my finger on why until I was talking about the movie with an editor I often work with, who is also a friend and adoptive father.

Preparing to launch Secret Sons & Daughters has a strange coming out of the closet feel to it for me, I shared with him. I'm thrilled one minute, and then truly dread that someone will actually read through it the next. The site's mission goes against a natural impulse.

I'm from a generation that was supposed to keep quiet about adoption, be thankful, be loyal—why dredge up the past? Don't dredge up the past—that's the kind thing to do. And yet there's a part of me that believes that the kindest thing you can do for another person is to listen and try to see him or her, the true him or her, and honor those stories—even stand up for those stories, as Philomena's daughter Jane, and Martin Sixsmith and Judi Dench, and Steve Coogan have done with this film.

In our own small way, that's what we hope to do with each Secret Son & Daughter story shared. If you have a story to tell, we'd love to hear it. And your thoughts on *Philomena* too—what parts of the movie struck you?

Image Credit: JUDI DENCH and STEVE COOGAN star in PHILOMENA, Photo by Alex Bailey © 2013 The Weinstein Company.

[10 Questions to Ask When Searching for an Adoption Competent Therapist](#)

Provided by adoption therapist, Leslie Pate Mackinnon, who recently appeared on Katie Couric's show as the "American Philomena."

Leslie Pate Mackinnon, L.C.S.W., has maintained a private psychotherapy practice for more than 38 years and she speaks internationally on issues that impact families conceived through adoption and third-party reproduction. She has been on *Good Morning America* with Robin Roberts, and on CNN discussing

the impact of the internet on adoption.

She recently appeared on [Katie](#) as the “American Philomena,” and shared what it was like to be separated from her firstborn son. That son, Pete, whom she’s been reunited with for 14 years, appeared on the show too. During the talk, Katie asked him if he’d had a longing to reconnect with Leslie.

His response is one many adoptees might relate to: “Always. You always do. You tread lightly because you don’t want to upset your adoptive family, you don’t want to make them think you’re unhappy, but there’s just something there. . .”

We had the pleasure of meeting Leslie at a Donaldson Adoption Institute sponsored screening of Ann Fessler’s film *A GIRL LIKE HER* last year. Her personal story is included in the film, and in Fessler’s book *The Girls Who Went Away*. Leslie was drawn to social work, and in particular adoption work, after placing her two firstborn sons for adoption when she was a teenager.

Today, she works with all members of the adoption triad and educates therapists as well. “I get so many calls from folks all over the country looking for an ‘adoption competent’ therapist that I developed a questionnaire to use when interviewing potential therapists,” she said.

The following are Leslie’s ten suggested questions to ask a potential therapist:

1. What is your experience working with the triad? Are you familiar with the term?
2. Have you worked mainly with adopted children, or also with adult adoptees and birth parents?
3. Do you have experience working with international and trans-racial adoptees?
4. What are the top books you would recommend to learn more about the issues inherent to adoption? (*Primal Wound*, and *20 Things Adoptive Kids Wished Their Parents Knew* are two)
5. Since little is mentioned about adoption or foster care in undergraduate programs, have you received post-graduate certification in an adoption clinical competency program?
6. Do you attend conferences related to adoption needs and concerns? (These are typically held by the American Adoption Congress, Child Welfare League of America, and North American Council on Adoptive Children)
7. What are your thoughts on open versus closed adoption? (Should favor open across the board with the exception of very contentious situations.)
8. What is your experience with clients reuniting with their birth families? (Favorable in supporting search & reunion?)

9. What is your thinking about minor children meeting their birth parents?
(Should support; obviously with supervision of adoptive parents)

10. Do you know of any local support groups for adoptive parents, adoptees or birth parents?

For more information on Leslie's work as a therapist and speaker, visit lesliepatemackinnon.com. For additional resources, see our list of [Organizations Making a Difference](#).