

THE BASTARD SPAWN SPEAKS

In which biological son MICHAEL RUSSELL reflects on his post-adoptee search, his astounding good fortune, and the ground rules (as he sees them) for any adoptee looking for his/her birthparents

Written circa February 2000

My post-adoptee birthmother search, in its entirety, took about 10 minutes.

I'm probably being a bit facile in writing that. The actual *act* of searching took 10 minutes — I put in a phone call to my adoption agency, asked if my birthmother was on the agency's "reunion registry," and got a call back that said she was — but the seeds of action had been germinating in my head for about three years prior. And the seeds of curiosity had been germinating before that for pretty much my entire life.

I was extremely fortunate that my post-adoptee reunion went very, very well. I'll never deny that, and I'll further admit that my success affords me a vantage point from which I can make some pretty strident remarks about adoption and the reunion process — remarks I might not be making if things had gone badly, or if I'd been stymied in my search.

Following are my recollections of my reunion with Shelley Smith, and what I feel are the "ground rules" for any successful adoptee/birthparent reunion.

I. BUT FIRST, HERE ARE MY BIASES GOING INTO THIS ESSAY, ADDRESSED TO THE ADOPTEE:

(1) I always knew I was adopted. If that knowledge had been sprung on me suddenly when I was a teenager, I might feel somehow cheated.

(2) That said, I don't think the adoptee has an inalienable right to meet his/her birthparents. In most cases, the birthparent(s) performed an utterly selfless act in giving a child up for adoption, and they often pay a terrible price for that selfless act in the form of lifelong regret and suspense. While reuniting with the adoptee may occasionally alleviate that regret and suspense — though there's hardly a guarantee of that — I firmly believe the birthparent(s)' obligation ends when they pay the terrible price of giving the adoptee up for a better life. If I ever felt a twinge of anger or victimhood about my

adoptee status (which I never have), I'd just remind myself that abortion was always a possibility. When considered in that light, every day of my life is, in effect, a gift.

(3) I'm not a big fan of "open" adoption. In my opinion, it's simply fraught with risk. What if a young, flaky birthmother suddenly changes her mind about giving the child up while she has these divorce-style "visitation rights"? While there are many open-adoption success stories, it can be a recipe for chaos — particularly for a young child already struggling with a shaky definition of "parent."

(4) As mentioned before, I've reunited with both birthparents, and it went well. If things had gone badly, I might have a different perspective.

II. HOW (AND WHY) I CAME TO MEET SHELLEY SMITH

In her essay, Shelley made one particularly astute observation:

[Michael] perhaps had something to gain — answers to questions about himself, his origins, and numerous other curiosities — but nothing to lose. If I turned out to be crazy or disinterested, he still had a family that loved him. I, on the other hand, had a hole in my soul that could only be filled with his presence....

Shelley's absolutely correct. I'd known my entire life that I was adopted, and I'd had a pretty stable, definitely loving upbringing. My parents reportedly put me to sleep as an infant telling me how grateful they were to have been able to adopt me. I literally have no recollection of ever not knowing; the truth of my adoptive status was as natural to my identity system as my hair color, and in fact I relished the fact that I had some possibly cool secret history; it was great conversation fodder growing up. For me, searching for my birthparents (when the notion finally ensnared me, around age 19) was more about satisfying my *curiosity* than anything else:

- I was terribly curious about what the bio-folks *looked* like — much more, quite frankly, than I was about what sort of people they were.¹
- I was also curious about resolving the whole nature/nurture argument for myself: I'm wildly different in temperament and interests than my parents (by which I mean the people who raised me), and have been all my life.
- I was curious about any inherited medical anomalies I should be aware of.
- I was curious about how I came to be — whether I was a small-town scandal or a hippie love child or (perhaps most horribly) the by-product of a rape.

¹ I've often wondered if this has something to do with my apparently "visual" brain wiring; I'm a cartoonist and newspaperman by trade. I mean, if I were a more tactile person, would I wonder what they *felt* like?

- And finally, deep down, there was just this wicked sort of undistilled curiosity at play — that secret, dare-taking part of a person that just wants to open Pandora’s Box and see what springs out.

My curiosity started getting the better of me when I left the nest and went to college — eerily, the same college Shelley went to, in a town I’d felt strangely drawn to from an early age. When I was 19, I took some bold first steps by (a) getting “non-identifying birth information” from my adoption agency, and (b) writing a 100-page paper on how to find your birthparents.

The non-identifying info was, of course, wildly unsatisfying and slightly maddening. That single-sheet, double-sided form with its sketchy, vague facts was the post-adoptee equivalent of being given a nibble of a chocolate bar and then told you can’t have any more — even as the remainder is dangled in front of you. Shelley was described in it as “a little girl with a bright pixie expression,” and that’s just about it. This half-assed “revelation” left me thinking of Audrey Hepburn with pointy ears cavorting about in a Peter Pan outfit.

Sweating out the college research paper was *much* more productive, or at least more emotionally satisfying. My thesis ended up being: “Adoptees and birthparents face a number of legal and moral obstacles as they search for their ‘lost’ blood relatives; however, several options and organizations exist to make that search easier — by helping searchers and battling the law.” I cited 51 sources, and in the process of my research did everything from combing through government documents to attending a meeting of a “search and support group” called “Family Ties” to uncovering some of the, ahem, “less-ethical” search methods that existed at the time.²

By the end of the “Information Gathering” course, I was basically armed to track down my birthparents at any time. But I wasn’t ready, nor was I sure I ever would be; I was caught up in the barely controlled chaos of student life, travel and the thermonuclear meltdown of a college romance. In retrospect, I think I intuitively knew that opening the can of post-adoptee worms is a game for the emotionally stable — and I was anything but.

By late 1992 — a few months out of college and settled into a cubicle-culture lifestyle that was, by comparison, stupefyingly dull — I decided to make the fateful phone call that let me know Shelley wanted to meet me.

This was terrible knowledge. I sat on the information for a few months while I sorted out my feelings (and, quite frankly, put a little distance between myself and my grief over the aforementioned relationship gone bad). By January 1993, I felt stable enough to proceed.

I also had a plan of attack. I spent two weeks writing a letter that attempted to absolve the birthmother of any guilt she felt by assuring her that I’d turned out fine. I also tried to lighten this message with some humor. I designed it to be more or less self-contained,

² And all of this was pre-Internet, in 1989. I can’t even *imagine* what shady resources are available to searchers today.

and concluded by telling her that no reply was necessary, though I certainly wouldn't mind one. And I enclosed a photograph — partly to sate her curiosity, but also to prompt her to sate mine.³

Having contemplated the worst possible scenarios, I also took a few mild security precautions. My letter was delivered by proxy, using the adoption agency as both intermediary and return address. This buffer, I felt, took pressure off the birthmother — and made tracking me down a little more difficult in case she turned out to be unstable. After a few contacts, I lowered my guard — but only after explicitly setting some relationship boundaries. I rather bluntly told Shelley during our first phone conversation that I didn't want or need a second parent, that I wasn't out to capture a "lost childhood." It wasn't fun to say (I'll never forget the brief silence and slight modulation in Shelley's voice that ensued), but I needed to define those boundaries for myself.

III. REVELATIONS IN THE AFTERMATH

In her essay, Shelley beautifully distills the reunion that followed, and I'm not sure I can add much more to her chronology. Suffice to say, I've been delighted with the ensuing relationship. It was, of course, immensely gratifying to relieve any guilt/suspense that was haunting Shelley (and, later, the birthfather), and I feel a bit more at ease with myself these days: Now that my strengths and shortcomings and eccentricities have a genetic explanation, I feel a little less like an anomaly and a little more like a rooted person. If I may be a bit over-dramatic, I no longer find an empty room when I look into this corner of my life.

That said, I'd advise someone on my end of a reunion process to make room for a few new definitions.

Adoptees and birthparents go through a period of uncertainty as they try to slot each other into what's essentially a new (and relatively rare) relationship category.⁴ For me, the closest approximate is that the birthmother feels like an extremely cool aunt with whom one has a stunning amount in common. (For the non-adoptee who wants to empathize, I'd suggest he/she imagine knowing his/her parents without all the built-up

³ Later, when I contacted the birthfather, I used very nearly the same letter, albeit with a more irreverent tone, based on what Shelley and others had told me about him. My conclusion went, and I quote, "Thanks for having sperm, Michael E. Russell."

⁴ One paper I read on this subject actually stated that in some documented case there was a brief surge of *erotic* feeling during that definition process — a sort of mini-Oedipal complex without the usual societal dampers. It's shocking stuff, but it's also fascinating reading — Greek tragedy by way of Jerry Springer.

resentments and Pavlovian baggage that come with time: You'd probably find you have a lot in common with them and, as a result, really dig each other.)

One trick, for me, was to create a new relationship taxonomy with the prefix "bio." Shelley's husband, for example, is my "bio-step-dad." I initially did this to be funny, but eventually found it invaluable: It's just clinical enough to lend perspective, but also just offbeat enough to keep the mood light.

As far as nature-vs.-nurture goes, I'm shocked at how much of my personality appears to have a genetic basis. Isolated from the rebellion process that occurs when biological parents and children grow up in close proximity, Shelley and I ended up sharing a lot of interests and skills (including, as many have remarked, our writing style). Having served as a sort of Rhesus monkey in an inadvertent genetics experiment, I've come to the conclusion that we humans get our personality, our inclination towards a certain emotional reaction, from our genes — but that we get our value system from our upbringing. I'd guess that in the adoptee's case, those two elements — the personality and the value system — are more at odds than they might be for the non-adoptee; however, as a hippie love child raised by conservative parents, I also see it as an opportunity to be more well-rounded.

IV. THE POST-ADOPTEE'S RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Looking back on my successful reunions with Shelley and Larry, I now realize I was following a set of "ground rules" that I believe more adoptees would do well to consider. I've tried to distill them below. For clarity, I generally direct my remarks to the questing adoptee.

(1) The adoptee who initiates a search must realize that he/she ultimately controls the reunion situation. All too often in coverage of adoptee reunions by academia and the mass media, the adoptee is made out to be a frail victim of circumstance — a responsibility-shucking creature psychologically wounded by his or her "lost heritage." While I respect that there's real loss associated with the gap in one's genetic record (obviously, or I wouldn't have searched myself), I find this obsessive focus on victimhood to be about as fruitful as circumcised men forming support groups to lament the loss of their foreskins.

As a questing adoptee, you're a *proactive* individual, and should recognize yourself as such. Think of yourself as the host of a rather elaborate, high-stakes cocktail party: In a reunion situation, you act as the hub of a relationship wheel, with spokes radiating out to the biological parents, the parents who raised you, the adoption agency and any siblings you may uncover — plus a whole host of ancillary parties that may include long-lost bio-relatives or spouses. And trust me — you and you alone have the power to hurt, help and/or offend every last one of them with your actions.

(2) The adoptee needs to honestly ask: Am I emotionally ready for this responsibility? And the adoptee needs to answer this question with brutal clarity. As far

as self-analysis goes, I'll quote — good Lord — the movie “Ronin”: “If there’s any doubt, there is no doubt.” Seek counseling before you bring chaos into other people’s lives.

(3) Prepare for the absolute worst. Remember that you were most likely an unwanted pregnancy, and move from there. You may be the product of rape or incest. Your birthparents may be dead, ill-educated, mentally ill or in prison, or they may want nothing to do with you, or — perhaps worst of all — they may want *too much* to do with you. Once you have dealt with all of these scenarios in your mind, you’re ready — because you’ve realized that you’re not searching for a *person*, you’re searching for an *answer*.

(4) If at all possible, first contact should be written, and delivered via proxy. I cannot stress this enough. Cold-calling or physically confronting a birthparent in effect forces them to make a split-second decision about the reunion that you *both* may regret; a written missive, however, can be properly digested, reflected upon, and responded to.

I recommend that adoptees design their initial contact letter to *disarm* the birthparent; remember, he or she is very likely bottling up decades of grief and regret, and it’s the questing adoptee’s responsibility to carefully uncork that bottle. In my letter, I kept the tone as light as possible, used humor as best I could, let Shelley know I turned out okay, praised her decision to give me up⁵, and let her know that I’d like to hear from her, but that it wasn’t a necessity. It was a game of patience and tact — qualities sorely needed in the reunion scenario. That said, I believe there is one place where bluntness is a virtue:

(5) Establish boundaries early. State with absolute clarity during your first contact what you hope to gain from the relationship. If your goal is, for whatever reason, a new parent/child bond, say so; if your goal is simply to answer a few questions, say so. But *don’t expect your desired answer*. Approaching the birthparent in a state of calm acceptance is the only path that produces consistent results. In the case of my birthfather — a much more solitary individual than Shelley — this approach has served me well.

⁵ Of course, if you *resent* their decision and simply want to unload on your birthparent(s), I can’t really help you.