

Search: 10 Questions to ask

By Hollee McGinnis aka Lee Hwa Young

As adult adoptees our adoptions did not end the day we were placed in the waiting arms of our adoptive parents. It was only the beginning of our lifelong journey of self-discovery and the very beginning of our adoption journey. Our adoption journeys have not always been clear, nor have they been simple. Often we fumbled unknowingly in the dark, but today adoptees have an unprecedented opportunity to share the wisdom gained from our individual experiences.

The decision to search for one's birth parents is one of the many milestones in our adoptions. Although we might try to create a road map based on another person's search, the reality is when you were adopted, the age you were adopted or relinquished, what orphanage you were first placed in, what agency you were processed through, and the circumstances that led up to your relinquishment all affect your search and, ultimately, what the outcome will be. Every search is unique.

I thought it would be useful to offer ten "moment of truth" questions I have gathered from listening to other people who have searched and united with their birth families, with illustrations from my own experience of meeting my birth family. The first five questions relate to searches and the last five questions relate to reunions. These questions are useful not only for those who want to search but for any adoptee who is engaged in understanding their own adoption.

Question #1: "What are you searching for?"

Research on Korean adoptees who search for their biological parents indicate that all adoptees, as we become older, gradually begin to have an interest in different kinds of searches. Motivated by our interest in learning more about our roots, our first search is typically for our birth culture. Lastly, after possibly visiting our birth country, we begin to consider the possibility of searching for and uniting with birth parents. Often a search is about the act of searching—and not the actual reunion. So it is important to distinguish whether your search is for your birth culture or your birth family.

I did not search for my birth family, they sought me. I was adopted when I was three years old from Korea and when I was 13 my adoptive parents received a letter from my paternal grandfather asking for pictures of me. My family was divided on whether they should show me the letter or wait until I was older. After speaking with an adult adoptee, who recommended they wait until I was older, my parents showed me the letter when I was 20.

It was October break from college and I sat at the dinner table. Suddenly the atmosphere got very serious and my Dad said, "Hollee, there is something I need to talk to you about." My mind raced as I tried to think of anything wrong I had done. I was not prepared for what they actually had to tell me. My mother was afraid I would be angry because they waited to show me the letter. I was simply overwhelmed. I peered at the grainy photo of my paternal grandfather and grandmother and it was like looking at a National Geographic photo. They were strangers. And yet they were connected to me by blood.

I believe I would never had embarked on a search for my birth family had they not searched for me first. I was content with the life I had and the only family I knew. Until I received that letter I never thought about Korea and at 20 I was not ready to meet my birth family. When I received this letter, I suddenly felt like I had to go to Korea, but I knew nothing of its culture or language. It would take four more years exploring my American, Korean and adoptive culture before I would finally be ready to travel to Korea and meet them.

Question #2: "Why do you want to search?"

There are many reasons that adoptees search for their birth family. Some are simply curious or feel a need to find more about their identity, while others are motivated by a need to feel complete. Others want medical information or want to find their "real" parents. Many want to find their birth family to simply let them know that they are okay.

It is vital that you understand your motivations and why you want to meet your birth family prior to beginning a search. After receiving the letter from my paternal birth grandfather I felt I had to meet them, but I did not know why I wanted to meet them except for the fact they had contacted me. My adoptive parents never pressured me and respected the fact that the decision to meet was mine. It was not until I was 24 that I understood my motivation for meeting my birth family: I wanted to let them know I was alright. And in the chaos of returning to Korea, meeting my birth family, and learning more about my past, I was able to hang onto this one truth.

Question #3: “What are your expectations?”

I think all adoptees create a fantasy about birth parents, whether we are conscious of it or not. When I was growing up I would bounce between two extremes. On the one hand I thought I must have been a princess and my birth parents were royalty. My older sister would tease me and say, “Yeah you always were a princess—spoiled!” On the other hand I thought maybe my birth mom was a prostitute. I thought what if they did give me up because they did not want me? I simply did not know.

What are your expectations and what are your fantasies? Do you imagine that when you meet your birth family you will automatically connect, that you will find the “real” parents you have been always hoped for? Are you willing to give up your expectations and childhood fantasies? Many adoptees have told me that after meeting their birth family, they realized their real parents were the ones right here, the ones who had adopted them.

Question #4: “Are you ready to confront your adoption?”

When I went to Korea for the first time I was forced to confront my own adoption. No longer could I pretend I was not adopted. I was returning to my birth country. One of the reasons I delayed going to Korea was because of my fear of how my parents would feel. I feared that if I met my birth family, the only parents I knew might feel I did not love them. I did not want my reunion with my birth family to negate the years of nurture given to me by my adoptive parents. On the night before I left for Korea I sat with my parents on our back patio, my fears locked in heart. And with a few simple words my Dad dispelled my worries by saying, “We always knew we had family in Korea.” They accepted my Korean family as they had accepted me 21 years ago. There was no competition for my love.

Are you ready to confront the knowledge about your past? For many adoptees the years prior to our adoption are masked in mystery that we fill with our fantasies. I ended up learning about the circumstances of my birth and I was not born a princess. My birth mother had been a prostitute. She had also been orphaned when she was nine years old, lived with an aunt until she was twelve, and survived by sheer will on the streets. She loved my birth father who took her away from the brothel. They gave birth to me and he promised to marry her, but never did because Korean law forbade couples with the same last name to marry. When I learned this I had to struggle with how this information fit into my life and defined who I was.

Question #5: “Are you ready not to be in control?”

I think those who have embarked on a search can attest to the roller coaster ride of emotions. You will not be in control. Currently there is no simple way of finding birth parents. Many agencies are not required by law to give adoptees information about their birth. There are ethical issues about birth parent’s rights to confidentiality, which adoptees must respect. You may initiate the search, but most people find their birth parents through sheer luck and kindness of strangers, not through careful planning.

Once I arrived in the Seoul I was definitely not in control. I could barely ask for a glass of water. I had to rely on strangers and new friends to help me navigate through the foreign culture. When I had made arrangements with the Director of my orphanage, I only thought I would be meeting my birth father. I had not heard anything about my birth mother and simply assumed I would never meet her. When I called the Director two days before our appointed meeting he suddenly informed me that he had found my birth mother. I was shocked. I could barely digest the news while I agreed to meet her as well.

Question #6: “Are you prepared to meet strangers?”

I do not like to use the word "reunion" because at least for me, meeting my birth family was not a reunion. I did not remember them. It was a getting-to-know-you. People ask, "So, how was it? What was it like to meet your birth parents?" Sometimes it is good, sometimes it is bad. Sometimes it is very, very bad. I have heard of adoptees who searched for years only to find out that their birth parents do not want to meet them. Others realized that they are still the family secret. Even those who do remember their birth families realize how much they have changed since they last were with their birth families.

I will never forget waiting with the Director of my orphanage for my birth father to arrive. First my paternal birth grandmother walked in the door, a short and stocky woman. She gave me a crushing hug while she sobbed and spoke to me in words I could not understand. But I did not feel anything. I saw her and felt her arms around me but my mind could barely comprehend that she was a real person, not a grainy photograph. Then my birth father walked in and I suddenly felt shy and could not look at his face. I wanted to look but it was like confronting my own face. When the Director of my orphanage told me that my grandmother wanted me to stay with them that night (I thought I was going to stay at his home), my first reaction was, "I'm not going to go with those strangers!" And as I walked out into the coolness of the night and clamored into my birth father's car, I smiled remembering my mom warning me as a child about getting into cars with strangers.

Question #7: "Are you ready to meet possible extended family and integrate new people into your family?"

As I stood on the subway traveling from Seoul to Incheon where I was to meet my birth father, I broke down and started to sob. My friend Trilika, a mixed black and Korean adoptee, looked at me and said, "Hollee, you are making more room." And I realized that was what I had to do. When you meet your birth family, you are taking on more, not less. You open yourself up to a family that you may not remember and yet is yours by birth. It is up to you to decide how much you want to share your life with them and embrace them as members of your family.

As we left the Director of my orphanage's home my birth father mentioned I would be meeting my half sister and brother. He had married a woman who had since passed away. In addition my birth mother had married and bore three children. Her husband had been dead for over ten years. Suddenly I had five half sisters and brothers I had never known before in addition to uncles and aunts and cousins.

Question #8: "Are you able to respect your birth parents and their culture?"

It was easier for me to relate to my birth father's family. They were a solid middle-income family. My half sister was going to college and my half brother would follow. However, my birth mother was very poor. Her three children barely finished high school, and she continued to work long hours in a factory. Her home was a simple two-room shack with a tin roof and outhouse.

On one of the last nights I was in Korea, I took my birth mother out to dinner. I told my friend, who was Korean American that I wanted to give her some money. He looked at me and said, "You can't!" I did not understand. She was poor and I had a good income. He could not explain why but was adamant that I should not give her money. I thought he was being crazy. We went to a *kalbi*, or barbecue, restaurant which is an expensive meal in Korea. My birth mother could barely look at me. She said, "What kind of mother am I who gets taken out by her own children?" She was so distraught that she could not pay. Before us was a wonderful meal and all she ate was a bowl of rice with water. And that was when I understood. I could not disrespect her. I had to respect her dignity and her culture. I had to respect that she was my birth mother, even though I had no memory of her. And I understood why I could not give her money. Parents give to their children, and even though I was an adult, to her I was still her little daughter. As we departed I allowed her to press a few Korean *won*, or dollars, into my hands.

Question #9: "Have you thought about life after the reunion?"

Often the focus on a search is on the quest, but the true journey begins after you meet your birth family and are left with the question "Now what?" Are you going to continue this relationship? Or are you satisfied with the reunion and do not wish to have further contact? If your birth parents are poor, do you feel an obligation to maybe help them? Will you try to travel to Korea once a year? Will you send gifts for the holidays and remember birthdays? You have traded in your fantasies, your dreams and imaginations for reality and after the reunion you

will not be able to simply tuck these people back into the furthest corners of your mind. You have seen their faces, you know who they are, you have seen their lives.

Meeting your birth family may answer some questions but in reality raise far more questions. The search is only the beginning of the journey. Life after the reunion will be a far longer road.

Question #10: “Is this your choice?”

As adoptees we did not get to choose our adoptions. We did not choose to be relinquished. We did not choose to be adopted. Besides choosing the meaning of our adoption in our lives, the decision to search is one of the few things adoptees get to actively choose. It is a part of our adoption life journey; and while we may be able to share the experience with our adoptive parents, it is not their journey.

There is definitely a right time for everybody. It is a very individual thing. I would recommend you listen to your gut, your heart and have a clear mind. Do not listen to others who are enthusiastic about your search or reunion. Make sure the enthusiasm is yours. Do not feel pressured by your birth family or adoptive family to search or reunite until you are ready. Make sure the decision is yours. Although I could never tell anyone when the right time is to begin a search, I would advise the person be mature enough to clearly answer these ten questions for themselves.

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