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## Looking for Their Children's Birth Mothers

By MAGGIE JONES

A few months ago, in an office near Guatemala City, a woman known as a searcher spread out a large map across her coffee table. The map was dotted with about 250 tiny, hand-drawn circles, each one representing a place where the searcher had tracked down a birth mother who had placed a child for adoption. Sometimes she found a birth mother after knocking on a few doors in Guatemala City. In other cases, she traveled for three or four days to remote indigenous areas in Guatemala or farther afield to Nicaragua, Honduras or El Salvador.

I heard about the searcher, who because of the sensitivity of her work asked me to identify her by the first initial of her name, S., more than a year ago on an adoption listserv. That is when I began scouting to find my own daughter's birth mother. One reason my husband and I chose to adopt from Guatemala more than three years ago was that we knew families who had met their children's birth mothers at the adoption finalization and had a continuing exchange of photos and letters and, in some cases, made occasional visits to them in Guatemala.

In our situation, though, the potential for an open adoption proved to be more complicated. Before we went to Guatemala to adopt our daughter Lucia, we told our agency we hoped to meet her Guatemalan mother. But it was never clear that she was given the option of meeting us. An agency representative in Guatemala did tell us that the birth mother wanted us to send photos of Lucia. But months after we mailed them, the photos sat in the representative's office. The birth mother had moved, and no one, it seemed, knew how to find her.

Like a growing number of parents, I was inclined toward some form of open adoption in part because of the experiences of adoptees born into

closed, secretive domestic adoptions in the 1950s and '60s, as well as those adopted internationally. Many of these adoptees say they yearn for more information about their genes and their birth families: What does my birth mother look like? Do I have biological brothers or sisters? Why was I placed for adoption? I knew too that adoptees like Lucia, whose ethnicity and skin color are different from their parents', may crave seeing themselves reflected in blood relatives.

Some of these issues have diminished in domestic infant adoptions, where today a vast majority of adoptive and birth families have had contact with one another, according to Adam Pertman, author of "Adoption Nation: How the Adoption Revolution Is Transforming America" and executive director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, an education, research and public-policy organization. And there is increasing evidence that openness is a good thing.

In a 20-year longitudinal study of domestic adoptions, Harold Grotevant and Ruth McRoy, professors at the [University of Minnesota](#) and University of Texas at Austin, respectively, found that birth mothers in open adoptions experienced less adoption-related grief than those in closed adoptions. And all of the adopted teenagers in the study who had continuing, in-person contact with their birth families wanted those relationships to continue.

For many reasons, though, creating openness at the outset of an international adoption is often difficult — and sometimes impossible. In part it's because birth mothers typically face great stigma, and while there are increasingly exceptions, many adoption agencies offer little or no help for parents who want to initiate these relationships. Instead, searching for birth families 2 or 10 or even 30 years after the fact has become an imperfect alternative.

As I contemplated whether to search, I scoured listserves dedicated to adoptive parents who had searched or were considering doing so. They debated when to do it: while your child is an infant or a toddler and when a relationship with a birth mother has a chance to become a

natural part of your child's life? Or later, when your child is old enough to express whether she has any interest in finding her birth family?

Meanwhile, I knew that some adoptees argue that parents shouldn't search at all; the decision should be left to adoptees, when they become adults. "There is so little we have control over in the process of adoption; searching is one of them," says Susan Soon-keum Cox, vice president for public policy and external affairs at Holt International Children's Services, who was adopted from South Korea in the 1950s. Cox was in her 30s before she searched for her birth family. As it turned out, her birth mother died just before the search, but Cox eventually met two half-brothers whom she sees when she goes to South Korea for work and corresponds with by e-mail a couple of times a year with the help of a translator. Until the search, her brothers never knew of Cox's existence. "Imagine how that made them feel," Cox says. "But can we have a conversation about that? Never. We are very fond of each other, but it's polite." Being in touch with her birth family, she says, "is a great blessing in my life, but it is also emotional. It's not just the search, but the day after and the day after and how you navigate the complexities of the relationships."

While Cox found her birth family after placing a single newspaper ad, searches are often much more difficult. In indigenous regions of Guatemala, for instance, after decades of government violence and discrimination, as well as increasing controversy about placing children for foreign adoption, outsiders are sometimes unwelcome and information is not easy to unearth. And if searching is difficult now, I, like many parents, feared it would only grow more so as time went on, and our fragile trail of leads ran cold. Worse, there might be no birth mother left to find: indigenous women, like Lucia's birth mother, have shortened life expectancies because of poor health care and other problems. By doing nothing, in other words, I might be making a decision for Lucia.

That idea, along with the image of Lucia's birth mother longing for photographs, tipped it for me last year. When Lucia hadn't yet turned 2,

my husband and I sent our paperwork to S., the searcher in Guatemala. I enclosed a packet of photographs of Lucia and a letter telling her birth mother that Lucia was safe and healthy and deeply loved. I also wrote that we would be happy to send pictures regularly — if that was something she wanted.

My hope, in part, was to gather bits of Lucia's first chapter of life: photographs (in addition to the two tiny photos we have of her birth mother — one an ID picture and another from the DNA test she and Lucia underwent for the adoption), some medical history, perhaps insight into her Guatemalan mother's and father's personalities, as well as the circumstances around Lucia's adoption. My other motivation for searching was to try to create a pathway for continuing contact, so that Lucia could have the option of a relationship later on. In all of this, I was making an educated guess, based on earlier generations of adoptees, that Lucia would, in fact, be curious. But it was also entirely possible she wouldn't want to know. It was possible she would wish I had left the information unturned.

In some cases, searching not only doesn't answer questions; it also raises ones that parents and children aren't prepared for. That's what happened to a New Jersey mother named Cece. For the past few years, Cece's 11-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, has periodically released Mylar balloons into the sky to China with messages to her birth mother. "I love you," one of them read, "and I want you to know I'm happy. My parents love me." But one evening two years ago, Elizabeth emerged from an adoption therapy group telling her mother that many of the kids there — most of whom were adopted in the United States — had met their birth mothers. She desperately wanted to meet hers, too; she begged her mother to search. Through a network of contacts, Cece, who asked me to use her and her daughter's middle names, found someone in China to place an ad, with Elizabeth's birth date and a baby photo, in the newspaper of the province where Elizabeth was abandoned. "I had this image we would have this wonderful relationship, and if they needed help, of course we would," Cece says. Instead, a man came forward claiming to be her birth father and explaining that he had had an affair

with the birth mother, resulting in Elizabeth. The birth mother, he said, died less than a year earlier. Then the story grew more tangled. After the man agreed to a DNA test, the results showed that he was not the father. Upset by the news, he stopped responding to Cece's searcher. Was he a fraud hoping to extract money from Cece? Or had the birth mother had another lover? Or was there a different story altogether?

Cece eventually came to feel that she was glad she searched, in part because her willingness to do it seemed to comfort Elizabeth. But immediately after the DNA results, when Cece was struggling with what to tell her daughter, she wondered whether scouting for Elizabeth's origins was a bad decision. "I wished I had never done it," she told me at the time, "and we could be happily sending balloons up and feeling hopeful and good."

In an essay called "Walking Down the Village Path," which has circulated on adoption Web sites, Jane Liedtke, the founder and C.E.O. of Our Chinese Daughters Foundation, warns that even nosing around for details of a child's roots — whether it's visiting an orphanage or the spot where a child was abandoned — can uncover information that parents never anticipated or wanted. "It's not another sightseeing stop on an itinerary," Liedtke writes. "This is not a walk for curiosity seekers. This is not an entitlement as an adoptive parent. . . . This is a life we're talking about — your child's life." As Jane Brown, an adoption social worker in Scottsdale, Ariz., puts it, once you open the box, "you can't always seal it back up."

**While my husband** and I wanted as open an adoption as possible, some parents are drawn to international adoption for the opposite reason. Not only is an "unknown" birth mother unlikely to reclaim her child across oceans (in fact, disruptions of U.S. adoptions are also rare once the adoption is legally finalized), but she can also seem like less of an emotional danger — as if physical distance creates psychological distance.

But in the last decade — in addition to search services for adult adoptees — an industry has sprung up catering to adoptive parents who do want contact. Virtually every country from which children have been adopted has at least a couple of searchers and in some cases more than a dozen, with fees ranging from a few hundred dollars to \$2,000 or more per search. In Guatemala alone, more than 350 parent-driven searches have taken place since the late 1990s, and parents have initiated at least 2,000 searches in former Soviet bloc countries.

Even in China, the country where it is probably hardest to search because children are typically anonymously abandoned, there is talk in the adoption community of starting a voluntary DNA database of children adopted from China. The database would, among other things, help connect adopted birth siblings to one another and perhaps one day link children to their birth parents.

But do birth mothers want to be found? Though many parents told me adoption agencies discouraged them from looking for birth parents, saying, among other things, that they could put birth mothers at risk, searchers I spoke to in India, Guatemala and Russia offered a different perspective. Tony Carruthers and his five colleagues have performed more than 600 searches in Russia. He says that they never initiate contact with the birth mother by phone or letter. (He had heard about two cases when search letters read by birth mothers' family members — who didn't know of the adoption — resulted in the woman's being beaten or thrown out of the house.) "We have never compromised a birth mother," he says. And in S.'s eight years and 261 successful cases, she knew of only one time a birth mother was harmed; her husband mistook the searcher for someone connected to her ex-boyfriend and beat her.

When S. does show up bearing news and photographs of a child a mother hasn't seen in 2 or 8 or 20 years, she says, women have varying responses — shame, happiness, pain and, often, relief. "Many say there hasn't been a day they haven't thought about their child," she says. Only 8 out of the 261 birth families S. has found wanted no further contact

with adoptive parents, usually because the birth mother's family or new husband didn't know an adoption had taken place.

When Marcy, a Chicago-area mother, hired S. to search three years ago, she had no idea how her son's birth mother would react. Like many adoptive parents, Marcy wanted to meet the woman at the time of the adoption. But despite requests to her agency and to the Guatemalan lawyer assigned to the case, the two women were never connected.

Meanwhile, the birth mother, Alma, had been wondering what had become of her son, or even whether he was alive. For years, rumors have circulated in Guatemala that some adopted children are harvested for organs, and a neighbor told Alma that her son was probably dead.

Then S. brought her Marcy's letter about her son Reed: "I am writing for several reasons," the letter began. "First, so you know that he is well and very much loved. Second, to make sure that you and your family are well, and third, to know if you would like to stay in contact with our family. . . . We think that as Reed grows up, he will want to know more about his family in Guatemala, including where his personality and his talents come from. We consider you part of our family, even though we have never met." Included in the package were several photos of Reed, who was 2 at the time, with a head of soft, dark hair and gleeful eyes with lashes that practically curl onto themselves. "When I saw the pictures," Alma told me by telephone through an interpreter, "I started to cry. I could see that he was very loved. And it really filled my heart with happiness." A year later, Marcy and her husband traveled to Guatemala, where they were adopting another child, and spent six hours with Alma, her mother and two of Alma's children. The two women talked about their children and looked at a photo album Marcy had brought of Reed, who, Alma said, looked just like his birth father. As Marcy told me: "There was that initial big feeling of, This is the person who brought your child into the world. But there was nothing about that day that was awkward for me. We came to trust each other in a new way after that."

Following the visit, the two families began e-mailing or talking every couple of months with the help of a cellphone that Marcy bought Alma and a network of friends and professionals to translate.

Not all relationships go so smoothly, though, and several searchers told me they are frustrated by adoptive parents who vanish after the initial contact. In some cases the parents, or their children, are uneasy with the facts a search uncovers — adoption corruption or alcoholism or a birth mother who abused her child. But other parents simply get what they need and don't want more. "We get phone calls from birth mothers begging for some more photos or news of the child, but the adoptive parents do not respond," says one searcher in Russia.

Even with the best of intentions, parents on both sides often struggle to bridge the enormous gulfs that are inherent in most international adoptions. "Usually they are very quiet," S. says describing birth mothers during their meetings with adoptive families. "I need to keep reminding the birth mother that she's entitled to ask questions." S. recounted a recent reunion between a birth mother and her 12-year-old daughter. The girl sang her a song and talked about her ambition to be a singer. Then the girl asked her birth mother what she dreamed of being when she was a young girl. Confused by the question, she told her daughter she dreamed about her two weeks before the visit. "I had to explain to the girl that the birth mother couldn't answer a question like that," S. told me. "People here at that socioeconomic level don't really think in terms of dreams and ambitions."

**One recurring theme** among adoptive families searching for birth families is money. I thought about this before ever contacting S. What would I do if Lucia's birth mother asked for help? Would I say yes, but only under certain circumstances? Or would I simply offer to help, regardless of whether she asked? Also, was it possible that my money could encourage another woman in the community to relinquish her child in hopes of receiving financial support from an adoptive family one day? If I said no, how would I answer Lucia if she asked why I hadn't helped support her birth mother?

“Some birth mothers would never accept any money from adoptive families,” S. says. “And adoptive families can say no if birth families ask. But if we’re talking about what they *need*, money is what they need.” When one family gave a birth mother whom S. had found \$200, she bought a TV set with it, infuriating the adoptive family. “But to her it was a gift she could spend however she wanted,” S says. “And if she spent it on two months of food, after two months she’d have nothing left.”

S. says she works with about 100 families who provide support to birth families, usually by paying for the education of other children in the family. (Public school in Guatemala, which costs about \$5 for enrollment and another \$150 annually for school supplies and uniforms, is out of reach for many birth families.) Also, at least a half-dozen adoptive families are now building houses for birth families in Guatemala, including Marcy and her husband, who recently completed a house for Alma. For years, Alma, her mother and children have lived in a one-room house with a dirt floor and no running water or electricity. Next month, they will move into a new, concrete one-bedroom, one-bathroom home.

Not surprisingly, though, money can also sour relationships, as it did for years for Belle and her daughter’s birth mother, who met when Belle first adopted her daughter in Guatemala. It wasn’t long after that that Belle, who asked me to use her nickname, learned that her daughter’s birth mother had ambitions of finishing her high-school equivalency — an aspiration in stark contrast to those of many Guatemalan birth mothers, who are illiterate or read only at a first- or second-grade level. When she asked if Belle would help out, Belle said yes: Here was a chance to put more than Band-Aid on a family’s poverty; here was a chance to change a life.

Belle hired S. to handle the logistics of paying the school tuition. But less than 24 hours after S. put down the deposit, the director of the school telephoned S. and told her the birth mother had returned to withdraw the money. “I remember my heart just falling,” Belle told me in the

living room of the house near Boston where she lives with her husband and two children. “This image we had of a wonderful determined woman who was our daughter’s mother who we hoped to help, and this idealistic and hopeful story took a very bad turn.” Belle was angry and bereft not only at the loss of trust but also at the loss of her image of the birth mother of her 9-month-old daughter. “It was wonderful to think of our daughter’s birth mother in this certain way,” Belle said. Letting go of that, she said, was one of the challenges and risks of having the relationship.

It took Belle four months to write a letter to the birth mother. The first version included the phrase “we forgive you.” “But that felt like a terrible thing to say because of the power dynamics between us,” Belle says. Finally she wrote that she simply wanted to remain connected. When S. went to deliver the letter, the birth mother had moved. Until then, Belle hoped that her daughter would eventually have a relationship with her birth mother. Instead, it seemed Belle would be left with only a painful story to share with her.

Then three years later, after Belle’s sustained efforts to find the birth mother and with the help of a Guatemalan adoption lawyer, the two women did reconnect. Neither mentioned what had happened, and initially they kept any talk of money out of their letters and e-mail messages.

But when the birth mother later requested money for an emergency, Belle and her husband decided to help, this time without strings attached. Now they send about \$1,000 a year for housing costs, food or whatever else she and her family need. “People who live in desperate poverty often have to hustle, and I didn’t want her to have to hustle us,” says Belle, who has worked with poor communities for years. “I wasn’t comfortable with trying to control this woman’s choices while trying to build a real relationship.”

**This summer, in New York,** as a woman named Mary and I sat watching her 7-year-old daughter, Bekele, in a double-dutch jump-

roping class, she told me the story of Bekele's adoption. In 2003, Mary adopted Bekele, then 4, from an Ethiopian orphanage, seven years after Mary's oldest daughter, Chengyun, arrived from China. (Mary asked me to use her and her daughters' middle names.) Though Bekele barely spoke English at first, soon words were spilling out of her mouth. As it turned out, she had a lot to say. She told Mary about her memories of life in Ethiopia — the day a lizard crawled down her shirt, how she cried at the orphanage. And then one day she told Mary she had an older sister, Temame, in Ethiopia, whom she was worried about. She also said her mother took her to the orphanage when she was 3, which Mary would later learn followed the death of Bekele's father. Now Bekele wanted to find her Ethiopian family, 7,000 miles away.

Mary, a warm and easygoing woman who resembles an earthy Carly Simon, hired a searcher in August 2005. Several months later he called Mary with his report. Temame, who was 13, was alive. So was her mother, though she was ill with AIDS. The searcher also explained that since Bekele's father's death, the family had plunged into deep poverty.

A few weeks later, Mary arranged with a translator to talk to Bekele's birth mother by phone. She already had some hint of what might unfold. The searcher had told Mary that the mother wanted Mary to adopt Temame. Mary was a single mother living on a teacher's salary; her oldest daughter's college tuition was looming; she wasn't planning on adopting again. And there was the overwhelming unknown of adding a teenager to the family — a teenager who would be leaving both her mother and her country. Mary explored alternative possibilities with the searcher: Were there relatives in Ethiopia who could raise Temame so that she could stay in her country? Could Mary pay for her education at an Ethiopian boarding school?

During that first phone conversation with Bekele's birth mother, Mary told her about how well Bekele was doing in school and how much she loved her. But Bekele's Ethiopian mother kept turning the conversation to her other daughter. Finally she said, "Will you adopt Temame?" The question hung in the air. Looking back on that moment, Mary says she

had an image of a woman in a sinking boat handing her a child. “You don’t say, Sorry, it’s not a convenient time right now,” she says, though in the coming weeks Mary would wonder how well her own boat would hold up. But when the question was asked, Mary went on instinct: “It would be my honor,” she said.

In the next months, Mary would have an adoption agency representative and others talk to Temame and her mother to try to make sure the family understood what the adoption would mean for them. Mary would talk to her own daughters about the prospect of another sister: Bekele was overjoyed at the idea of reuniting; Chenyung, who knew that another child would diminish her mother’s time, was unhappy.

It has now been nearly four months since Temame became part of Mary’s family, and it is still too early to say how it will all play out. But when I spoke to Mary this month, she was optimistic. Temame is in eighth grade learning English, making friends and staying in touch with her mother in Ethiopia. Chenyung is adjusting, too, and finds ways to get the one-on-one time she needs with her mother. It is Bekele, Mary says, who struggles the most with sharing her mother with an added daughter in the house. All the dynamics, of course, could be turned on their head in the coming months and years. “I thought that whatever road it took us down, we’d figure out how to handle it,” Mary says, looking back on her decision to search. She adds with a small laugh: “I obviously had no idea how emotional and complicated it would become.”

Such instances of “found” siblings — whether they are loved and with their families or languishing in orphanages — aren’t altogether uncommon. And I knew it wasn’t entirely far-fetched to imagine that if we found Lucia’s birth mother we might be confronted with a similar predicament. What if Lucia’s birth mother was pregnant and wanted us to adopt another child? We had no plans to adopt again (Lucia is our second child), particularly from Guatemala. Though we had concrete reasons to believe our daughter’s adoption was legal, there have been increasing reports of payments to birth mothers and other corrupt

practices. But if we could be certain everything was ethically aboveboard, would we adopt Lucia's biological sibling? Or would this instead be a chance to support Lucia's birth mother, financially or in other ways, so that she would keep her child? Then again, poverty isn't at the root of all adoptions. If there were other circumstances at play, what would be best for that child? And what would be right for my own family?

**The most disturbing** search situation may be the one that reveals that a child was stolen. When Desiree Smolin and her husband, David, adopted their daughters, Manjula and Bhagya, from India, they quickly learned something was amiss. Within six weeks of arriving in the U.S., the adolescent girls, who were clearly angry and traumatized, said that they were stolen from their parents. During that first year, the Smolins, who also have five sons, weren't sure what to believe; other adoptive parents told the Smolins that the girls were probably fabricating the story as a way of dealing with their relinquishment; that older children were unlikely to be stolen; and that looking for a birth mother could put the woman's life at risk. The Smolins say they repeatedly pushed their agency to investigate the adoption. Then they found an advocate in India who offered to search. Within a few months, she had located the birth family and confirmed the girls' alarming story. As it turned out, the girls' mother had been duped into placing them in an orphanage for education, and the girls were then slated for adoption. And though both daughters, now in their late teens and early 20s, have returned to see their Indian family, neither one feels that India is home any longer. For their part, Desiree and David Smolin have become outspoken adoption-reform advocates.

Desiree argues that searching can be one way to expose corruption. And in some cases, she says, parents have a moral imperative to do it. She notes a case earlier this year in which Samoan parents were tricked into placing their children for adoption. Writing on an adoption listserve and later in an e-mail message to me, she said: "If you are an adoptive parent of a Samoan child adopted through this agency and you see the press reports of Samoan parents crying and begging for the return of their

children — do you not have an obligation to both the child and first parents to birth-search and re-establish contact?”

**Several weeks after** I sent the photos of Lucia and a letter to the birth mother last year, S. sent me a long e-mail message, describing her efforts to find Lucia’s Guatemalan mother, including the various addresses she had visited. In 314 searches, S. has located 261 birth families. We were unfortunately in the minority; she could not find Lucia’s. “I will keep the search open,” she wrote, “for as long as I keep doing this job.” In two cases, she told me recently, she found birth mothers long after her initial search for them.

While I didn’t count on it, it was certainly possible we would find Lucia’s birth family sometime in the future. For now, I would wonder how much Lucia would or wouldn’t care. Searching by adoptive parents remains too new to know anything significant yet about adoptees’ reactions to these searches and the relationships that sometimes unfold. In any case, their responses, like adoptees’ life experiences, are unlikely to be monolithic.

At the least, my husband and I could tell Lucia we did everything we could to find her birth mother. While it wasn’t my motivation for searching, the act of doing so was a way — not the best or the only way — of telling our daughter that we recognized her past. She has a first chapter and a heritage that doesn’t include us. As adoptive parents, my husband and I do believe that love matters most. But we know that blood matters, too. And if one day Lucia searches for her blood connection, we will encourage her. But before she heads out the door, I’ll probably have words of advice: Think hard about whom and what you may — or may not — find.

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