



**Inter Country Adoptee Voices**

# Search and Reunion: Impacts and Outcomes

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## ICAV PERSPECTIVE PAPER

# The Experiences and Views of InterCountry & Transracial Adoptees

*Published, Edited & Compiled by*

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## Introduction

It is the year 2016. Intercountry and transracial adoptees, like me, face far greater possibilities of successfully finding our original families than ever before. Thanks to advances in technology, countless forums and social mediums (*FaceBook, Renren, YouTube, Twitter, Google, Cyworld, and LinkedIn*) have enabled the world to be more accessible and connectible, giving us adoptees more perceived control over our destinies. There are hundreds of thousands of us inter-country and transracial adoptees scattered all over the world. Many of us living our lives, wondering whether we'll ever know the answers to our basic questions.

After 60+ years of inter-country adoption occurring around the world, we should be learning from past lessons and ensuring governments put in place adequate processes and support to facilitate our life long journey of adoption. Governments need to recognise and respond ethically and appropriately - taking into consideration the depth of research which acknowledges adoption does not stop at the single transaction that occurred when we are handed over to another family as babies or young children.

With advances in technology and the vast amounts of money exchanged in inter-country adoption arenas, we should expect basic technology like DNA testing be included in every relinquishing process. This would help in the long term for a child growing up to one day have the option to more easily find their original family. This would enable our right to our truthful and unaltered identity, as enshrined in Article 8 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Ethically, all types of adoptions need to be open and include education and support to our families who are left behind.

Until such a time, you will see in the experiences we share that most of us have to rely on figuring out the search process by ourselves, stumbling along by chance, hoping our good fortune or a helpful person will assist us in finding our origins!

I was originally contacted by a researcher who had an interest in understanding the impacts and outcomes of intercountry adoptee searches. Given there is very little documented about the impacts and outcomes, I was motivated to capture this from our perspective. Our experiences cannot be measured nor portrayed completely by scientific research. The emotions experienced and the soul journey we travel varies immensely. Like all aspects of our adoption journey, this phase is but one and despite the misconception in mainstream media, the adoption experience does not end at reunion, nor is it necessarily wonderful. Our experiences can be best described as a kaleidoscope.

Our wish is to move away from the simplistic and sensationalised media coverage of reunions that portray happy-forever-after fairy tales. We wish to show our realistic journeys captured by over 40 ICAV members who have willingly and honestly given insight into their lives.

We also wish to raise awareness that there exists even less formal services and supports for our original families at *all* stages of their journey since our relinquishment (voluntarily or not)!

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We come from 14 sending countries: Algeria, China, Colombia, Ethiopia, Haiti, Hong Kong, India, Pakistan, Peru, Romania, Russia, Sri Lanka, South Korea, and Vietnam; and we are adopted into 10 receiving countries: Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, New Zealand (NZ), Scotland, Sweden, the United Kingdom (UK), the Netherlands, and the United States of America (USA).

My personal and huge thanks to the 40+ people who contributed to this paper! Without your honesty and openness, this paper would not be possible.

Also, thank you to all the members and groups within ICAV who are proactive in sharing the voices of intercountry and transracial adoptees worldwide, trying to make our journeys a little easier! It is activity like this which will continue to push the boundaries and demand change in how intercountry adoption is occurring around the world!

This compilation is dedicated to the hundreds and thousands of intercountry and transracial adoptees around the globe, who face this part of their journey with very few formal services to adequately provide the comprehensive support and assistance needed.

Many intercountry adoptees share in this paper how useful it would have been if they had been able to seek input and guidance from those who have travelled this path before. My hope is this paper will help to alleviate this need.

*Lynelle Long*

*Founder / Director*

***InterCountry Adoptee Voices (ICAV)***

July 2016

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## Ahna-lee Yates

I was adopted from a South Korean orphanage at 6 months old, to Australia in 1979. I was to be the youngest of 4 children in an Australian family.

I always told myself and anyone who asked “I will search for my birth family one day”. I had some information on my birth parents and the general area I was born but the language barrier made searching a completely overwhelming thought. In truth I was petrified of what might happen! What if I decide to find them and can't? What if I find them and they don't want to meet me? After all, this wasn't a book or a movie, this was real life.

Over the years, I tried talking to a few people who were close to me but they didn't “get it”, not that they didn't try but because this wasn't a black and white situation for me. I didn't have the references to explain what I meant or how I felt and being bubbly and optimistic about deciding to search was not me at all. I found this train of thought rather frustrating and un-realistic. No-one had answers to my questions, they did their best but it was never enough. I knew I was loved and I always felt part of the family here in Australia so I learnt to put a lot of these unknowns into a box and I put that box on the shelf for decades. It helped to protect me from hoping and wondering. This was my life and that was theirs, and that was totally fine.

I found myself working with a Korean man Eric and naturally told him my story. His wife Chloe was also Korean and was planning a trip home to visit her family and wanted to help me search from the moment Eric mentioned my story. I met Chloe for coffee, just a few short weeks before she was to fly out. I gave her the information I had, I remember thinking “nothing will probably come of this”. I found the meeting with Chloe very emotional! Talking about my adoption to someone I'd just met was not something I usually did. After the meeting I was thinking about it all and decided I didn't want Chloe to speak to anyone directly. I wasn't sure who I was looking for or how much the people involved would know about me, I didn't want to disrupt someone's life and turn it up-side down. I just wanted to make a connection to my heritage without it being too much trouble.

After meeting Chloe there was nothing to do but wait so I put my thoughts, feelings and growing concerns back up on that shelf. Two weeks later I received an email saying she'd found them! And by them, I mean both sides of my birth family as my parents were not together. Due to the way Chloe had found my birth family they couldn't keep it as discreet as I wanted, however this was not a problem as people from that area knew of me. My eldest Korean brother has vague memories of me, as he was little when I was born.

I received an email from my brother with photos of our mother. His family and they wanted to meet me! Sadly both of my birth parents have passed away, the trip was bitter sweet from the beginning! I never realised a person could have so many conflicting feelings all at once. I was relieved they wanted to meet me, sad I wouldn't get to meet my parents, nervous, excited and petrified of the whole thing!

So I planned to meet my Korean family with the help of Eric, Chloe and Chloe's entire family and support from my family here in Australia.

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The trip was a whirl wind, it was for 10 days. I don't think it was enough time but I also don't think I could have stayed longer for the first visit. It was so nice to meet family who looked like me - I always notice when brothers and sisters look the same. I've never had that experience before and now I do, it makes me smile.

I will forever be grateful to Chloe's family for making it happen, they welcomed me like family. I was given a crash course in Korea and my first visit back was just so wonderful, I couldn't have felt more at home.

My relationship with my family here in Australia hasn't changed, we are still us. My family is and always will be my family. However, I would be lying if I said I hadn't changed.

It has been a roller coaster of emotions: confusion, grief and anger. What took me by the most surprise was the grief. I know now it was grief but at the time it was really difficult to understand what was going on. To grieve for someone I have no memory of was profoundly confusing for me and impossible to explain. I wasn't the greatest believer in counselling but now I know it's vital to find the right one for your situation. Once I found a counsellor who specialises in inter-racial adoption, I got my "Ah-ha" moment.

I haven't been in touch with my birth family since the reunion, it's so difficult with me not speaking or writing Korean. I had this expectation it should come 'naturally'. It really doesn't. I so look forward to the day when I can have a one-on-one conversation in Korean with my Korean families!

Since my reunion, I would like to learn more about Korean customs and history. I had not had any interest in any of this up until now. Identifying as Australian for the majority of my life, I have been rather closed off to anything Korean. When I think back on this now, it makes me rather sad.

I think there needs to be more support for adoptee's including counselling and perhaps some interactive support groups for children. A support group for parents of inter-racial adoptee's within Australia would be great too. Everyone needs to be supported and everyone needs to feel heard. For me, being heard by an audience that could really empathise not just sympathise, was when progress and healing was made.

I see how far searching for family over the last 20 years has changed and evolved. Ironically, I didn't use any traditional searching methods in the end. There is also a long way to go and I know the conversation is already out there - so it's just up to each person touched by adoption to keep it going.



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## Aimee M

I'm adopted from South Korea at age 14 months of age to the USA.

I first searched for my birth family from a desire to meet my older birth sister and to find answers about my medical history. I struggled with undiagnosed depression since middle school and when I finally got help my senior year of high school, the doctors thought I might have a genetic pre-disposition for depression. I wasn't interested in searching for my birth mother or brother since I have two older brothers here. I saw how close my brothers were and I really wanted that connection with my sister.

I always wanted to meet my sister. I didn't know how our father died when I was six months old. I figured he died from a heart attack. I also thought it wouldn't be too difficult to find them because they left so much information. I felt like they wanted me to find them because my adoption paperwork had my parents and siblings names, ages, places of birth, education, and my father's occupation.

I went to Korea twice during my college years. The first time was for a 4 week Korean culture program at a university in Gangwan-do. The social worker who handled my adoption, who I was seeing for post-adoption counselling, told me about the program. I visited Eastern Social Welfare Society and they read me my file, which included information that said my birth father took some pills, got sick and died. I didn't know how to interpret that exactly. Was it suicide? Six months later, I returned to Gangwan-do to teach English and stayed with the woman who started the Korean adoption program at my agency in New York. She used to bring her social work students to NY and my family hosted some of them. She still interacts with the four international adoption agencies in Korea and she called Eastern and asked them to do a search for me since I was already in Korea. I arrived on December 26 and approximately 3 weeks later, she informed me they had located my birth family who wanted to meet! She came with me to Seoul to meet them.

I met my birth mother, her younger sister and brother, my aunt and uncle. After we reunited at Eastern's office, they took me and my social worker host out to dinner at Outback Steakhouse which was a big treat in Korea because it was an American restaurant, so it was expensive! When my birth family saw me, they immediately said I looked like my older sister, DaRae and it was so powerful to hear those words. I looked like someone!

It turned out my birth mother did not give me up for adoption nor know I was put up for adoption. After my birthfather died by suicide, my siblings and I went to live with my paternal grandparents and my birth mother went back to live with her family. She was poor and her in-laws did not like her. My birth mother didn't see any of her children, her daughter 7 and her son age 4, until we were all adults! She had only recently gotten in contact with my siblings and was not close with them. They reunited after my paternal grandparents died.

I always thought my birth mother gave me up after a few months of being a single mom and she couldn't raise 3 kids on her own. I was the youngest, I had the best chance of being adopted. I also needed hernia surgery so I was considered special needs. In

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actuality, my paternal grandparents raised me for longer than I thought and then I went to the adoption agency and into foster care. My older sister says our grandparents went back to get me from the adoption agency but I was already promised to a family and they couldn't get me back.

I am so incredibly lucky not to have had any obstacles in my search and that it was so fast and easy. Eastern Social Welfare Society did all the work after my social worker friend, who is the Dean of Social Work at a Korean university, called them.

I was really lucky, I met my birth family soon into my six month stay in Korea. After I finished teaching English during the winter break, I moved to Yonsei University in Seoul. My birth family live about a 10 minute taxi cab ride away! My aunt owns a restaurant where we met for dinners and events. I got to meet them frequently. I connected with two cousins who spoke English and I mostly communicated with them.

I felt like the reunion happened so fast, I didn't have a lot of time to process it until I returned home to the US.

My adoptive parents were very dedicated to including Korean culture in my life for my whole life and my brothers' lives too. They were very supportive and arranged play dates with other adoptees and attended parent groups. My mom was very involved in NY states children's coalition which included a lot on adoption and foster care.

My adoptive family was so supportive and excited for me to find my birth family. They encouraged and supported me the entire time. I think it made us closer because I realised how lucky I was to have two loving families. I also got to see how life was for my siblings and know I have the better deal. When I was younger, I would wonder if my birth family would be proud of me or think, "Yes, we made the right decision to give her up for adoption because she's had a better life." My birth family was so proud when I was graduating with my bachelors degree after my semester at Yonsei and I was going to get a masters degree. My older sister and her husband saved up and paid for my brother to go to community college.

I actively connect with Korean speakers who are both friends and translators. Thanks to technology, I can text message via KaKao Talk with my cousins, sister, brother, niece and even nephew! I use to write emails and have friends translate them until I learnt about KaKao Talk. I sometimes still do group chats with my Korean friend who can do real time translation or we can call my family in Korea and they can translate.

I didn't talk with my brother much while I was in Korea. Just last month, he texted me on KaKao Talk for the first time. My sister told him I wasn't feeling well and he was concerned. My husband said, "that is such a brother thing to do, only reach out when he's worried." It was an amazing experience. We sent each other photos and chatted. He and my sister have become closer with our birth mom. He sent one photo of him and our mother and I told him, "You look like mother" and he said, "Noooooo!"

In 2014, I got married and my birth family came, all 8 of them! My birth mother, her younger sister, her husband and son (who is my age and visited NY before), and her younger brother with his two teenage sons and wife. I honestly didn't believe my cousin when he said they were coming. I didn't believe it until I got their itinerary, which took a

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long time to get and I had to get it translated. My husband planned our entire wedding so I could concentrate on their visit. They were going on a tour of the east coast that ended in NYC where we were getting married. My husband is an ABC (American Born Chinese), so we had a traditional Chinese wedding banquet after the smaller ceremony and tea ceremony. I arranged to have as much translated into written Korean in advance, even though my birth mother can't read or write in Korean. I had a Korean adoptee who was a Korean analyst with the Air Force and a Korean-American friend be there to translate. We ran into an obstacle on the day of the ceremony when my birth family was 20 minutes late to the ceremony!

The first time my parents and family met my birth family was wonderful and overwhelming. It was so beautiful to see and feel so much love. We arranged to have one dinner at a Korean restaurant and my cousin didn't like it so he chose a better Korean restaurant. It was fun to see my parents eat Korean BBQ and my uncle got my husband tipsy on soju. My birth mother wanted my husband to follow Korean drinking traditions, which he didn't know about so I had to tell him he is required to pour for my mother and uncle and drink every time they did.

Our rehearsal dinner was shabu shabu or hot pot which I had eaten with my birth family in Korea but my family here in the US had never tried. My birth family and my parents and older brother went to the Empire State Building after dinner. My uncle paid for everyone to take a limo back to Queens and found it so exciting because they don't have many limos in Korea. Both of my families had a blast!

One difficulty occurred this Christmas. My nephew wanted a Nintendo game for Christmas. North American video games are not compatible with the Korean systems, they are region-specific, so I couldn't buy him a game here. I had to have my cousin buy the game and ship it. It was so hard to communicate with my sister about this because she didn't understand Nintendo systems, neither did my friends who translate. Turns out, he not only wanted the game, but the Nintendo system, which he did not own. I think they thought I was a rich American aunt. I couldn't afford the system. My niece, who is a few years older, only wanted a sweatshirt.

I think my search and reunion gave me more confidence in who I am and my history. I have a better sense of who I am and my family story. I feel more at peace. I can easily text my family if I have a question about a medical history question, which is so relieving. I can't describe the feeling of being able to access that information.

I still have some unresolved issues related to the adoption that I am constantly working on. I have come to terms with my birth father's suicide, no longer blaming myself for causing it. I used to think he was disappointed I wasn't a boy or that I cried too much and was too needy. I am still working on my relationship to my birth mother. I sometimes take it for granted that I connected with her and that she wants a relationship with me. During my time in Korea, I felt frustrated she couldn't read or write in Korean and I didn't even try to understand her Korean. I told myself I couldn't understand her southern Korean accent with what I was learning in school. She couldn't take the subway by herself because she couldn't read all the signs and I could but she wanted to help me.

Post adoption services need to be set up and available in both the birth and sending countries. These services are so critical. The Korean ancestry visa that is available is

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great and I hope more countries offer this kind of visa for adoptees and later generations whose parents are from that country. Birth countries should provide cultural exchange programs and financial scholarships for adoptees to return and provide or support services that assist with the birth family search and other post-adoptive services for adoptees who live in the birth country.

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## Alex Gilbert

### Founder of *I'm Adopted* based in New Zealand

I was born in Arkhangelsk, Russia in 1992. This is right at the top of Russia with a population of 350,000. I was adopted into a New Zealand family in 1994. I was only 2 years old when I left the orphanage in Russia.

Growing up, I have always wanted to know who my birth parents were. I was always curious to know what they did or what they looked like. It was always a wonder for me! I would constantly ask my parents if they knew anything of my birth parents but they didn't know anything about them, only their names. Throughout my childhood, my parents have always said to me it would make them very happy if I found my birth parents.

In the late 90s I was young and so I was simply curious. I am happy that I decided to do a search when I did in 2013. I think that was a good time! I didn't have many expectations. In fact, I was expecting to find nothing at all. I thought it would be impossible but I hoped anyway! I just had to think on how I was going to try and find them.

I decided to pull out my old birth documents. It had my birth mother's name on it which was all I had about her. She had not left any photos or any other information. I started translating her name and having help from some Russian speakers who were able to suggest where to look. I searched all through Social Network websites in Russia like vk.com and ok.ru. I managed to find some information of my birth mother after sending a message out to a community that I was looking for her.

Searching through social network websites was very helpful. I figured my birth mother probably did not have access to internet or phone so I knew it was not going to be easy. Incredibly, I managed to trace one of her friends who lived in the same town as her. I don't really know how it all happened. I just sent out some information to a community group in Arkhangelsk asking if they knew of my birth mother. People responded telling me they knew she had left to live in a different town. At that point, I then did a search in the new town she had moved to. That is when I managed to find some new information.

As a result of my search, I have managed to grow my entire family. My mum and dad here in NZ along with a family in Russia! I couldn't ask for anything else. Everyone was very happy with the outcome of me meeting my birth parents. It was a family connection we never thought we would have!

After visiting Russia it has made me realise how lucky I am, where I am. I am happy with the choice my birth mother made for me at the time. She is a strong lady and I do think about her a lot and with what she had to go through. She has impacted my life and meeting her and seeing her life and my birth father has been incredible!!

My adoptive family, I always call mum and dad. They are the people who raised me. Our relationship is still going strong. We talk about Russia from time to time and they can't believe the journey I have gone through. It keeps going!

In terms of obstacles in searching and reunion, I found the language barrier to be an issue. It is hard to have everything translated when you want to know so much. I also

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had issues with trying to keep in touch with my birth mother. Not so much my birth father. He is very easy to keep in touch with! The communication isn't as strong with my birth mother because she doesn't use modern technology. I do send letters to her via her friend from time to time to keep in touch. I wish her happy birthday on her birth date and I try to let her know how my life is going. My birth father is always in contact with me and uses social media and keeps himself updated with my life.

Another obstacle I've encountered is I get asked a lot about my birth family in Russia. People always ask if I will go to Russia to live there with them or why I don't refer to them as mum and dad. They are simply my biological connections and they are the people who brought me into this world. I am very happy that I made a connection with them.

It has been incredible learning about Russian culture, seeing the country twice in the last few years and learning the language. Everything is new to me and different. Before I started a search for my birth parents everything felt very different. It has been an incredible journey!

Searching and reunion has made me want to help others who have been adopted - to help them share their stories too! I feel everyone adopted should know who their birth parents are. The connection is all you need! I think it's all positive! My outcome has changed the way I think about things. People seem to complain a lot about their everyday lives. I have seen what it is like in Russia and compare this to NZ, it is very different. Like I said, I always am thankful for what my birth parents did. They brought me into this world and my mum and dad here in NZ raised me in a beautiful family.

Professionals and governments could better assist by working closer with adoption agencies and in this day and age, help with social media. Help adoptees in anyway possible even if it is still through the old methods of investigated search! Anything is possible. Every search is different. Things can be upsetting and it can be very hard to find information, but never give up!

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## Amy Jung

I was born in Busan, South Korea in 1984. I was surrendered at birth and adopted at 4 months of age to Australia.

I never had a burning desire to do a birth family search. This may have been for many reasons, but the three that stand out are:

1. My adoptive family (dad and stepmother mainly) were unsupportive and abusive so a lot of my early life was more about living than thinking about anything else external;
2. I spent so much mental and physical energy on just trying to "fit in" at school, family, society, etc, and I didn't really care to think about my biological parents;
3. I was already here so it didn't feel like it would make a difference to know them.

My adoptive mother was a positive influence as she was always really keen on me finding my family, but she passed away when I was twelve. When I was 18 years old, I met another adoptee by chance and she had just met her family for the first time. She gave me a phone number for the team at the Department of Human Services (DHS) whom she was working with. I kept that number for about two years before actually contacting them to begin the search. Given my ambivalence to doing birth family search in the first place, I had no expectations. Actually that's not true, in the back of my mind I had thought my parents would be found but only one of them or perhaps both had died. This was such a unique position to be in, I don't think I could even begin to develop expectations because I had literally no idea what to expect.

I began my search in 2003 (I was 19 years old) and if I hadn't had met the adoptee who had found her family, I would have had no idea where to even start. In retrospect, my own search seemed so easy, straightforward and minimal - consisting of me contacting the team at DHS, meeting with them and then writing a letter of introduction to my biological parents, including some photo's of myself and my adoptive family. DHS then sent this letter to "Eastern" in Korea and all that was left to do, was wait. Perhaps because I was not pushing for the search to happen, I can't say I experienced any obstacles.

If I had been more hands on, I know I may have encountered some obstacles, especially as in the last few years I tried searching for other adoptees or adoptee groups and I had a really hard time finding anything. During this research, I don't recall coming across any birth family search related results and I find this really discouraging as it makes me realise how lucky I was to have found someone by chance who could point me in the right direction. I do also wonder if I had pushed for the search more, what obstacles I would have encountered as I know now my family never moved from the place where I was born. It makes me wonder what it was that made it take so long to find them. I quite literally forgot that the search was going on in the background and when I finally did hear back, it was quite a shock!

The outcome of my search was successful - my biological parents are married and I have a full biological brother and sister (both younger). At the time I was shocked but I was not in a position to travel to Korea to meet them. The knowledge they existed and were out there became just another part of me as a person. I think this keeps with the attitude I already had of not being that interested in knowing them - not in an angry way, but I still



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had the sense that my life was my life - and nothing could change the fact I am adopted, so I just kept on going as normal.

I had not really involved my adoptive family in my search. I had only mentioned it to my adoptive sister and not to my adoptive dad or stepmother. She came with me to meet the social workers at DHS where I was given letters from my biological mother and brother. We never really discussed it and it was relegated to the background. My adoptive family have never been good with the emotional stuff and adoption was never spoken about so this wasn't unusual but I did find myself feeling like I needed to console and comfort them. I sensed they were afraid of a "new family" coming in and taking me away. It wasn't until I did meet my family in 2014 that I was finally able to grieve, celebrate and understand it all for myself. At the time of my visit to Korea I was no longer in contact with my adoptive family which allowed me to take it all in.

My biological family and I are in very sporadic contact with each other. We are friends on Facebook and I have sent some parcels with presents to them but I haven't had anything in return. It is a very strange relationship - they have played a major part in my life but I don't really know them. It is also quite hard getting to know them as I don't speak Korean and my biological brother is the only one who can speak English. For me, this is ok as I was never looking for a relationship with them. I am content knowing we know each other and that they are there. It was helpful though, to speak with other adoptees about their ongoing experiences with their families and to know that maintaining this kind of relationship is difficult and it's ok.

After I returned home from my visit to Korea, I was quite emotional and I probably wasn't really prepared for it. Mainly, I was so angry I had been given away to a family who were abusive and who should never have had children and upon seeing how loved my biological brother and sister were, this really hurt. I grieved for about two months for my life that felt like a parallel universe. It made me see the lie that people tell themselves about adoption - that you're helping a child have a better life, otherwise they'd grow up poor, etc. Seeing my family treat each other so lovingly and with respect, it made me realise perhaps I would have grown up poor, but I would never have suffered the mental hangups and emotional scars I have now because of being adopted. Whilst I love being Australian and I thoroughly enjoy my life, the emotional scars are lifelong. Whilst I have come to terms with my identity and am mostly content, I know I will never feel truly at home in Australia nor Korea.

Looking back, I wish I'd had contact throughout my childhood, adolescence and young adulthood with someone who could provide me with information regarding birth family searching. I also don't have my adoption documents and whilst I can get them, I have to pay for them and I feel this should not be the case.

I would have benefited from counselling about what to expect for a first trip home and meeting family. I knew logically it would be quite emotional but I wasn't prepared for *how* emotional it was, what emotions would come up and why. It would also have been helpful to have access to information on *how* to actually search. I was completely in the dark about where to start. This information needs to be given to families so the child knows who to talk to if they would like to search. Another suggestion is to have a social worker checking in with the adoptee at intervals through out their life.



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## Anh Đào Kolbe

I was born in Sài Gòn, Việt Nam and adopted to New York City, United States of America when I was eighteen months old. My adoptive mother found me when I was six months old.

In terms of what made me search, my roommate at the time was Caroline Kieu Linh Valverde and was one of the co-founders of The Vietnamese Women's Forum. Through that online community I met Indigo Willing who ran Adopted Vietnamese International (AVI) and from there it began. I had always been curious but never had the opportunity to invest in going back to the motherland until then. I didn't have any expectations except to take some amazing photographs of my birth home since I am a photographer.

Indigo Willing was pivotal in getting me started in going back to Việt Nam. I wasn't looking for any family since my documentation belongs to another orphan who probably died during the war - so my birthday is not mine, none of the information on it is mine. One obstacle I encountered was getting my visa and having the embassy in California give me a hard time because they didn't think I was Vietnamese even though my U.S. passport states I was born there.

I found the two orphanages I stayed at when I was an infant, To Am and An Lac. I felt that I got a sense of closure in seeing where I lived. I learned that To Am was for the sick and dying and it reiterated how I am a survivor of war. My adoptive mother felt a sense of relief when I returned as like all adoptive parents, there is the worry that their adopted child will leave to find their biological roots and never return.

I don't have a relationship with biological family since I am still waiting to see if I can find someone who is at least a first or second cousin. I have a long list of fifth and a handful of fourth cousins. I am in constant contact with one fifth cousin who has been adamant in getting to know each other and staying in touch. It's been quite the gift that I enjoy continually unwrapping. I wouldn't say it's been useful in navigating any parts of my life per se, but it's a nice feeling that I am biologically related to another person and have access to them.

I never looked for my past in the sense of wanting a reunion since my papers do not belong to me and trying to find two people in a country of many several thousands seems to be a waste of energy, but again, I am appreciative of having a DNA connection with someone even if it's so "watered down."

To help assist us intercountry adoptees, governments, agencies and organisations should keep working towards being helpful in the process of reconnection by making access to birth records more readily accessible.

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## Anonymous

I am from Korea and was adopted to the USA at 4 months old.

I started thinking about identity issues and Korea in a concrete way during college and decided to do study abroad at Yonsei University during my 3rd year for a summer semester. I told myself it was mostly because I wanted to know more about my family health history since it seemed a more safe, logical, and not emotionally charged reason. In hindsight, I definitely had a desire to find out more about my birth mom. I also had a strong desire to find other people who looked like me. I had no idea what to expect.

I asked for help with my search through GOAL in Korea. They were able to contact my adoption agency (KSS) and helped schedule a meeting for me with a KSS social worker. The major obstacle I encountered was KSS had my file but refused to disclose identifying information about my birth family to protect their privacy.

During that meeting, in 1998, I heard the information about my circumstances and birth family. I had been born in a women's clinic and my Korean name was the same name as the clinic. I had four older sisters and I was told my mother's name and the year of her birth. This was a shock at the time since I had seen very limited information in my paperwork. I had not previously known I was found on the doorstep of a police station with a note attached to my clothes stating my date of birth. Unfortunately, this was all the information KSS was willing to share at that time, but it was still a great deal more than I had anticipated.

I continued to write letters to KSS and continued to work with GOAL to try to get the identifying information for my birth family for several years afterwards but with no luck.

Finally, in 2004, I worked with INKAS to arrange an appearance on the Korean television show Achim Madang as a last attempt to find my birth family. I had been planning to be in Seoul that summer for a large gathering of Korean adoptees and wanted to make this final effort since I wasn't foreseeing any other trips to Korea afterwards. Before appearing on the show, I went to KSS again to make a final plea to share the information in my file with me and even brought letters from my adoptive family conveying their support for my search. At the meeting, the social worker told me they had been able to locate my birth family through the assistance of a local police officer and they would be willing to meet me that week. I cancelled my appearance on Achim Madang and a couple of days later, went to the meeting where I met my birth father, mother, and three of my older sisters and two of their husbands.

My adoptive family has always been very supportive of my wanting to search, which has certainly made things easier.

It has been challenging to maintain a relationship with my biological family because of our language and cultural barrier. My parents have only reached out to me once in the twelve years since being reunited. They sent a letter to me after I sent them a Christmas gift the first year we had reconnected. One of my sisters, the unmarried one who lives at home with my parents, stays in touch with me on a semi-regular basis through Facebook. I think trying to maintain some level of perspective about where they're coming from and where

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I'm coming from has helped in navigating this. My birth parents have been married to each other and our family has been intact for the entire time so their lives have sort of gone on in a very normal way. I don't think they experience some of the same type of longing and emptiness that single or divorced Korean birth mothers may have.

For me, knowing I have a biological family in a very concrete way, knowing I have four older sisters and two parents, nieces and nephews, and brothers-in-law makes me feel somewhat more grounded and secure. I don't have to wonder or create stories about what my birth family is like so I feel more relaxed about that part of me.

It would be helpful to have more standardised laws and processes for adoption agencies to follow when adoptees are seeking their information. There is so much inconsistency with how even the same agency deals with adoptees at any given moment in time, which is extremely frustrating. It would also be helpful if laws could be passed in our respective birth countries to give adoptees access to their files. Lastly, it would be great if there was more support for adoptees in terms of counselling, translation and other types of assistance to adoptees who are searching and reuniting.

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## Anna Kopeikin

### Founder of *Adoptee Lighthouse* based in Australia

I am adopted from the Philippines to Australia at 19 months old. From as young as I can remember, I have contemplated searching.

I realised I had already tormented myself so much about my adoption growing up and by the time I was 21 years of age and actively searching, I deliberately approached my journey without "expectations". I ventured through it with openness to whatever would arise. I love the quote, "Hope for the best but prepare for the worst".

Although my reunion was recorded for a documentary, the producers and crew were very respectful and left the "search" to me. I had emailed the Director at ICAB in the Philippines, introducing myself and my known details with a request for information and reunion. I was extremely fortunate my birth mother had not listed my adoption as a "closed adoption" which would have prevented any further information being released and blocked any attempts of contact. My birth mother had also made attempts to "contact" me in the past, so she was easily contactable.

ICAB consider all aspects of adoption very carefully and act responsibly so initially they only allowed "letters" (aka emails) to be passed with them as the mediator. When both my birth mother and I had expressed "good intentions" of a reunion, we were then asked to both seek counselling before being cleared and approved for a reunion. I was personally pleased ICAB had request this to ensure both parties were in the best place possible for a reunion. Once we had both been cleared by a counsellor, it was then discovered her husband (not my biological father) was known to be "aggressive" and at that stage he was unaware of my birth mother's request for a reunion. ICAB had identified this might be problematic and did not clear us for a reunion until it was completely "safe" for my birth mother to do so. My birth mother had then told her husband "some" of the details and all appeared to be ok for us to actually meet.

Once I arrived in Manilla in the Philippines, my birth mother and a half brother were also brought to Manilla (from Davao) where ICAB had arranged us to meet. From there we all travelled back to Davao to visit my city of birth and get to know one another. There was a point in Davao where I had been invited by my birth mother's husband to visit their home. Initially there were concerns of how "suitable" and "safe" this situation would be but it appeared to be alright.

So for my "search process" it was really through email correspondence with ICAB who acted with great care and diligence for all the parties involved. The only obstacles where the "considerations" around my birth mother's safety with her husband being involved.

I had a very positive outcome. It was an extremely emotional and challenging time of course. My birth mother and I experienced some very challenging stages after our reunion as the cultural and personality differences became very evident, even resulting in a time where I had to cease contact with her and the family. Issues have since been worked out and like every relationship, there is never just "one outcome" and things change over time.

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To play the \*cliche card\* - adoption is a life long journey and even to this day I have fresh revelations of my adoption. The "general" impact has been one of profound empowerment which arose from great anguish.

I was always very fortunate to have adoptive parents who always respected and encouraged me in my adoption struggles. My parents were given the opportunity to come with me in meeting my birth mother but they made the difficult decision to simply support me in my own journey. This definitely strengthened our relationship! However, I'd be lying if I said we have been without challenges - but we have all moved on and grown in our relationship. Oddly, it's my extended family that now choose to maliciously outcast me for various reasons (so not completely because of "adoption reasons") which unfortunately puts my parents in the middle ... ah the irony!

In terms of getting along with my biological family, we have a "strained" relationship, nothing too sinister. I think they expected me to be more family orientated and expected money from me then became angry when I didn't comply. The cultural differences became very evident. The personality differences caused confrontation and discomfort. We now have very limited contact and I make a conscious effort not to have deep or serious conversations with them. I have one half-sibling who rejects me and I have another half-sibling who became too interested in my life.

It was devastating for me to realise my birth family are basically strangers and if I wanted a relationship with them, I would have to sacrifice the life I built after they rejected me and re-alter the identity I have struggled to develop, just to fit into their expectations. I have learnt to sincerely love them for who they are but have established within my own boundaries, those I chose to have a relationship with.

The biggest obstacles for search and reunion in my experience have included:

- being a tourist in my country of birth (something I'm guessing even non-adopted people encounter?) I found it surprisingly confronting and difficult to have people of the same nationality assume I was one of them and then having to explain my adopted situation.
- post reunion ie., working through the consequences of opening the door to the past - it is irreversible! I should have been better prepared and better supported for the post reunion aspects and consequences.

In navigating this part of my life, it has been my faith that has held me together and given me hope.

It took many years to properly come to terms and to get my head around my adoption after reunion. It has undoubtedly affected my identity and the course of my life for the best. My adoption has become something I have grown to appreciate and evolve with. Learning my life should have ended before I was even born, has made me incredibly grateful and motivated to do something with my life.

Although I had a session with a very good psychologist before my reunion, I still feel there was so much more I should have been made aware of. I wish I had been directed to other adoptees willing to share their experience of their reunion with tips, advice and support.

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## Arun Dohle

### Director of *Against Child Trafficking (ACT)* based in Brussels

I'm adopted from India by German adoptive parents at 6 weeks old. I have no clue as to what made me want to search. The desire started at an early age.

I had no expectations. I started by using the resources of my adoptive parents. In vain. Later in 1999 the internet opened the world for me.

Most people would discourage me and this was my biggest obstacle. In terms of outcome, unfortunately I hit a brick wall and in 2003 started litigating against the state of Maharashtra. It took until 2010 to win access to my file.

Since then, I started assisting other adult adoptees and my own reunion became kind of secondary.

Despite some heavy fights, I think at the end it strengthened the relationship with my adoptive parents.

It's difficult to maintain the relationship to my Indian family over such distance, over language and cultural barriers.

The outcomes of my own search has led me into the work against child trafficking and for correct implementation of the UNCRC. Further, I've assisted many adoptees to find their Indian families. That has impacted me the most.

Since I turned to Ethiopia and helping younger adoptees, my complete view of my identity changed. I see much clearer now to where I belong.

The government of the receiving countries ought to acknowledge that a search should normally be easily possible. If it is not possible, than it is due to faults in the receiving countries.

I suggest a cheque of USD\$10,000 should be given to every adoptee by the Central Authorities of the Receiving Country. Adoptions are heavily subsidised. With that amount the adoptee can decide how to conduct a search and competitive services will likely be set up in the sending countries.

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## Brooke Arcia

### Co-Founder of *Lankan Affairs Australia*

I was adopted as a newborn from Sri Lanka to Australia.

Having my first child made me want to search for my birthmother. I always thought I wouldn't search because I had been led to believe my birthmother would not want to see me (cultural shame) and that she may have passed away. I never spoke to anyone about searching and no one spoke to me about it. I wonder if I would have searched earlier if I had not been told these things or had been encouraged to search.

I have a friend who helped me with my search as she had contacts in Sri Lanka but it was not an easy process. What was most lacking was support and guidance. There was nowhere to go to for 'help'. I spoke to a Government department, not for profits receiving Government funding for the provision of adoptee-related services and also chased down my own avenues. I felt everywhere I turned for help with the search, I got a knock back. I had to work out everything myself by contacting random departments and organisations.

Whilst the staff at government departments and not for profit were mostly kind, they did not know how to help me as I am an intercountry adoptee. There are limited resources for intercountry adoptees. I couldn't receive the state government funding given to adoptees undertaking searches either – the not for profit endorsed by the government did not have any reliable person conducting searches in my country of birth. So they couldn't help with the search and I also had to pay for everything related to the search. It ended up costing me a lot of money. It was worth it but frustrating to realise what little help there was! The NSW government funding for searches was also not available to me.

Despite all this, I was able to find my birth family and I found it very easy to connect with them. The bond was almost instant. I have a great relationship with them, though of course some things are very complex and difficult. For example, dealing with family members who pushed for my mother to give me up is a very difficult and painful thing to have to do.

I have found most people I know prior to reunion do not understand the experience of intercountry adoptees or what it is like living as a minority. We are minorities even within our own families. Many people do not understand the complex nature of adoption. It can make our search and reunion a very isolating process. I found people were very accepting of my search initially but not many have been truly accepting of me deciding to have a continued relationship with my biological family. Some people don't seem to understand why I want to connect with my culture.

Reunion can also lead to us adoptees to want to change other parts of our lives and many have trouble accepting we have 'changed' even though we may actually be feeling more like our real self than ever before.

It can be difficult to maintain a relationship with family due to language barriers, time differences and other family commitments - not to mention trauma for both parties! My experience shows despite these difficulties, it is definitely possible to have a strong and natural relationship if everyone involved believes a reunion can succeed and everyone is



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prepared to be understanding of one another. For me, I found it felt very strong and innate to bond with my biological mother. I felt my biological family have been waiting for me to 'return'. There was a place for me and maybe that has made reunion easier.

The most useful supports in this journey have included counselling provided by adoption counsellors at the Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC) and connecting with other adult adoptees to share our experiences.

Reunion has changed my life completely! It has helped me in many ways. Firstly, it has allowed me to have a relationship with my mother and other family members. It is amazing to connect with them. I realise now I have always missed them – I just didn't know before that this was what I was feeling. Reunion has allowed me to deal head on with the lifelong experience of being adopted – including dealing with the losses involved. No one talks to adoptees about our losses growing up – only about the gains. I tried to get help for depression and anxiety issues many times throughout my life but therapy was only like a band-aid and worked for set periods of time. Since I have had post-adoption counselling, I feel like therapy actually works. I have a more complete sense of self and my self-esteem has definitely improved after my reunion.

I feel better simply knowing there are people who look like me, think like me and have some of my quirks. It makes me feel more like a human being and less like someone who fell from the sky. It is hard to explain how relaxing it is to know there are other people who are like you. It's also very relaxing to know I have genetic ties like every other human being.

Reunion has allowed me to get back some of my culture, to learn my medical history and my ancestry. It has given me a lot of good things and made me feel better about myself but it has also caused me sadness, grief and loneliness. Whilst adoption involves loss and I know now it is normal to grieve those losses, I think some of the negative emotions would be easier to manage if there were more support for adoptees during search and reunion and in general. It is hard to cope when there are no support networks or systems.

I wish I had been able to start the search process earlier. It is very hard to go through search and reunion once you are already an adult, with your own established family and career. Reunion changed me – but it didn't change me into a new person. It changed me to become more like who I always felt I really was, deep down.

Professionals, Governments and agencies could do many things to help intercountry adoptees during search and reunion! We need professional support from counsellors, psychologists and psychiatrists who are specifically trained in addressing intercountry adoptee issues. They need to understand what it is like to be an adoptee *and* what it is like to be an ethnic minority.

We need more access to counselling. I keep worrying that funding will get cut even further and then I won't be able to access post-adoption counselling. A helpline for all adoptees would be useful. Adoptees tend to search as they get older so any helpline needs to be available for adoptees of any age, not only small children or adoptive parents.



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We need avenues and forums in which adopted people can share their experiences. We need to hear about other adoptees' experiences with search and reunion and we need to connect with other adoptees to gain peer support and reduce feelings of isolation.

We need connections to be made between Australian government departments and government departments in our birth countries. This would make our search and reunion process more straight forward. Adoptees can then deal with the emotional aspects instead of worrying about both the emotional aspects and the logistics of searching.

We need funding for adoptee services such as translation assistance and language lessons which would help adoptees have some control over their reunion process. Right now, the search and reunion process for intercountry adoptees has very little control or independence – we are reliant on everyone else for help and cannot even speak our birth language. It is a very emotionally debilitating process that does not empower adoptees nor allow them some dignity. It would be great if we could receive support in order to change the current situation.

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## Corrine

I was born in China in 1989 and adopted by a Canadian family (Québec province) in 1990 at the age of 13 months.

Since a very early age, I have always wanted to go back to China. In my childhood, my parents made sure I was proud for having Chinese origins, whatever that meant. I would look at photo books of China's scenery, take mandarin classes and watch Jackie Chan movies. As you can see, my interest was very light and was mostly fed by curiosity and candid exoticism of China rather than the desire for searching for my roots. Also, I was told all my life it would be impossible for me to find my biological parents and I've almost considered them as non-existing.

As I entered Fine Arts at University, I quickly understood my story and my actual condition was something to explore artistically, emotionally, intimately and to be shown to others. I went through my adoptions papers, I scanned photos from the trip for my adoption. Later I saw the opportunity to go to China for the first time through the University Student Exchange Program - a personal and artistic opportunity. I thought about doing a performance and call publicly for my parents but I did not have any concrete expectations - other than provoking a dialogue within the local Chinese community even if they were not related to me.

I did my exchange program in Hong Kong because it was the only University giving art classes in English. At the University residences, I met Enzo, a student who studied during high school in Changsha - the city where I had been adopted. Soon, I approached him and told him I was planning to go there after the exams and asked for tips i.e., how to get there, what to visit, etc. I also asked if he could help me find somebody there who could host me.

Enzo put me in touch with Lynne, a student who went to the same high school. When exams were finished, I took the train and arrived in Changsha, welcomed by Lynne. She and her family took my story very seriously and helped me by contacting media companies. The media displayed my message on local and national television and later my biological parents called the media. DNA tests proved they were unquestionably related to me.

I did find my biological parents and we met in the countryside. I also met my two biological sisters, along with uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews and so on. The overall impact on me is very hard to grasp. I do not have deep feelings of being related to my Chinese family and conversations with my sisters remain light. I do enjoy knowing that there are people who, without putting any pressure on me, are there for me if I want to go to China on my own will.

There is another part of the story involving a lady, Mrs Huang, who found me homeless, took care of me for 10 months, breastfed me and wanted to adopt me. She already had a boy so the authorities came to take me from her when she was away. This event left a profound grief in her heart. During my investigation towards finding my biological parents, she saw me on TV and I met with her. Her attitude towards me is one of a mother who found back her lost child. Her hugs and behaviour made me feel very uncomfortable.

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My adoptive mother has shown me a lot of suffering as a result of me finding my Chinese family. She told me she feels like she has been put aside or that she does not hold the same status as before. Our conversations have been very emotional and I find it difficult to reply to her distress. Somehow I feel like I do not have to do so, not even comforting her. Thinking this has a double effect of making me feel guilty as a daughter. I know as an adoptee, I did not choose any of this. However, I still feel there is some sort of a responsibility from a daughter towards her mother, maybe just through communication, which is still something very hard for me to deal with.

Now I communicate with my two biological sisters through an app on my smartphone. I am lucky they speak very decent English as it is not the case for the majority of the Chinese population. I do enjoy the fact I can send them a message or a picture whenever I have a question about their personal lives and Chinese culture in general.

Mrs Huang often sends me text messages in mandarin on my phone but I have never translated these yet. I probably will eventually, as I feel empathetic for her horrible experience but I want to keep some distance since I cannot give her what she is missing.

I don't think I have profoundly changed since my reunion but it did make me more aware of the socio political context of international adoption. Seeing these people who took care of me made my pre-adoptive story more concrete and my origins more significant in how I present myself. I used to say I was completely Québécoise but today I always say I'm Québécoise adopted from China. I can't separate myself from what happened.

Since all of this, I have started to participate into politically engaged groups of adoptees and it has made me more aware of the problems in international adoption.

For Chinese adoptees, it is already a good start to understand it is not impossible to find your biological parents as many of us have always been told. Many of our Chinese families would like to find their lost child which was something I was not expecting. Around 40 people called the media to verify if they could be my biological parents!

Funding from the government to cover a trip back in China would be helpful. Also accessible psychological assistance is needed. There should be mandatory courses for prospective adoptive parents about the reality of adoptive children and the possibility they might want to find their parents.

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## David Redmon Nguyen

I was born in Saigon, Vietnam, and adopted to the USA when I was almost three years old.

I searched because I knew my birth family was out there, somewhere. I always had a series of questions: who, what, where, and when.

I started and stopped my search several times, beginning almost 15 years ago. It wasn't until last April 2015 when my search took on a life of its own, out of my hands.

My expectations in searching were always varied. I longed for the best, prepared – as best as anyone could for the worst, but always knew no matter what the result, I would never know just how prepared or unprepared I would be, until that day came.

I first gathered all my paperwork: my adopted parents gave me all their original papers, and I also reached out to the adoption agency I came through. I was fortunate to have a significant amount of data available.

In April 2015, my story hit the social media circuit after a friend of a friend offered to help. My story was shared over 70k times, world-wide. A private investigator in Vietnam heard of my story and reached out to me. I then engaged his services and literally six days later, he had results.

Obstacles included finding many people with the same name and similar age. One thing to remember is records in Vietnam are not as easy to come by as they are in most other well-developed countries. The investigator helping me knew where to look, how to obtain the information, and most importantly, did not have the language or cultural barriers that I had.

I found my birth family last summer in 2015 and it was confirmed via DNA testing on July 15, 2015. The impact has been profound. I visited my birth mother and family in August 2015 and now plan to bring my wife and children there this coming August 2016. The relationship has helped me answer most of those questions I had, however, some people may see this as “closure,” but in reality, it's only opened up many more questions. While I do find a sense of – relief? – I think there are still many questions I am looking for answers to.

My adoptive family have been extremely supportive. In fact, my adoptive father is coming to meet my Vietnamese family in August with us! I'm very fortunate in that regard because I can totally understand how it may negatively affect relationships.

The language barrier has been the biggest issue with maintaining a relationship with my Vietnamese family. Otherwise, I think I've been fortunate – based on hearing other stories of people who have found their families. I've experienced little to no expectations from me in terms of returning to Vietnam, or supporting the biological family, etc.

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I'm not sure searching and reunion has changed much about who I am externally; I continue to be introspective in trying to understand how those early life circumstances continue to impact who I am today.

With regards to suggestions for professionals, governments or agencies on how to better help assist in search and reunions for intercountry adoptees - this is a difficult one as adoption for both the adoptee and the birth parent, requires sensitivity. While adoptees may believe it is their right to access the information, there must also be a right to privacy for the birth parent as the circumstances are different for all. However, it would be helpful to open up and modernise systems of information to allow for online searching, especially since traveling to a foreign country for periods at a time is prohibitive to most.

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## Eden Robertson

I was adopted from South Korea and went to live in Australia when I was about 1 year old.

Growing up, I always had questions about where I came from, what my family looked like, where some of those little traits had come from. I had always thought about my birth mother but never about my birth father or any siblings at all. There was a need to find my birth mother but if I found my birth father and any other relatives this would just be a bonus. When I hit adolescence, this question became the massive elephant in the room that I could no longer ignore or sweep under the rug.

When I was around 14 years old, I was looking at my adoption papers and was talking to my mother about my adoption. She asked me in such a supportive and open way, “would you like to search for your birth parents?” At that point in time I had no qualms at all about searching. It was not something I had necessarily put on the table nor something I had completely taken off. The option was there so I decided to take it.

My mother said she had never asked whether I had wanted to search even though she had been aware I might be interested. This was because she was told that ESWS would not search for family and she was not aware of any other way to go about it. I admit, I was naïve to think finding my birth mother would be easy. My ideal was “mother meets daughter, mother loves daughter, daughter loves mother, happy ending”. I expected the story of my adoption would be precisely what was written in my papers – my mother and father weren’t married, mother couldn’t afford me, had to give me up for a better life. It was only in the process of searching and with maturity and further discussions with my mother, I came to realise this may not be the case.

I cannot remember the details of the search as my mother was really the one conducting the search on my behalf given I was under age. One of the major reasons we started the search when I was young was to allow my mother to do it on my behalf and because we just been informed that ESWS would now search for families for us.

From memory, we contacted the Department of Community Services, filled out some paperwork and sent it off. I remember the process was difficult, costly and confusing. The DoCS worker did not understand my adoption was intercountry and so originally we were sending our paperwork to the domestic adoption services. It took about 10 months to receive any documentation about my adoption.

Once we received documents from DoCS, we were put in contact with the Eastern Social Welfare worker who provided me with information from South Korea. The language barrier was difficult, limiting the extent of information and explanations I received. Once my documentation was received, ESWS started their search for my birth mother in South Korea. I had to email them every few months to find out any updates.

In 2013, I was living in Seoul for a year and my sister (also adopted) came to visit me. We visited ESWS and they told my sister they had found her family (after one contact request was made) and they wanted to meet her. At the same time, they told me after 7 years of searching they could no longer continue to look. They said they had contacted my mother 3 times with no response and assumed she did not want to be found. They did tell me the

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addresses may be wrong so they cannot be certain she has received any contact from them.

I was absolutely devastated when I was told by ESWS they would no longer search for me! I do understand my mother may not want to be found for a variety of reasons. I felt really hurt and jealous that my sister found her birth family so easily. Unfortunately her situation did not turn out well. In knowing my sister's scenario and result, it has made me feel slightly better in not finding my family. Perhaps it's better to stay naïve and believe I was given up because my mother loved me so much and just could not afford me. I don't think my search has impacted my relationship with my adoptive family at all. I am considering re-looking for my birth mother but am unsure whether I want to open old wounds.

I have definitely come to terms with not finding my birth mother for now. I have searched and respected she may not want to have me in her life. She gave me up for adoption and I have a wonderful life in Australia and a wonderful adoptive mother so I don't feel any remorse or regret after recovering from the initial pain. I think I have always been the "leave no stone unturned" kind of person and I am happy that I looked for her. I don't think the search process has changed me in anyway.

The major obstacle in my searching process has been lack of communication between DoCS in Australia and the adoption agency in Korea. Also, a lack of standardised process for which to conduct my search. Hence, I believe there needs to be more standardised processes for search and reunions for adoptees. We need to be made aware of the process, how it happens, what our options are, what the outcomes may be, and given psychological support along the way. I believe governments need to improve their relationships with adoption agencies overseas so that language barriers and red tape do not limit our ability to finding family.

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## Anonymous

I was adopted from Colombia to Australia at the age of 7 weeks old.

I have always been interested in searching as a way of further exploring my past, family history and helping to inform my understanding and feelings around being adopted.

Although I was aware that what I might or might not find could be both positive and negative, I think I expected to find someone who I looked like physically.

I initially tried to conduct a search whilst in Colombia in 2003 / 2004 and travelling with my boyfriend who was also searching. We initially discussed the possibility of a search briefly with the orphanage but they weren't very encouraging, so we literally just looked up at local phone book and found the number of a 'detective' and asked in our broken Spanish whether he would be able to help.

Later in 2012 / 2013 we came across another contact through my mother-in-law. A lady from The Netherlands had helped other Colombian adoptees in other parts of the world find their families. We contacted this lady via email and so began the process of her searching for my birth mother. Before the search began, I provided her with basic details I had of my birth mother - her full name, date of birth and ID number.

The search second time round resulted in answers and information fairly quickly. After email correspondence with the lady who was helping with the search and paying a monetary fee, I received information within 2-3months.

I felt some relief and fortune in being able to finally find my birth mother and learnt I had 5 half sisters as well as lots of other pieces of information. I was glad I was able to tell her I was okay and leading a good life.

I do remember going through a vast range of emotions (e.g happiness, confusion, sadness, disbelief, overwhelmed) and questioning whether it was all true. Initially, it was quite confronting in some ways to be suddenly presented with so much information all at once. I know now, this new information and family connections I have discovered will continue to be something I need many years to process and comprehend.

Generally, my adoptive family have always been supportive of my search.

My biological mother and some half siblings were keen to maintain a relationship. I felt lucky in some ways that they wanted to get to know me or have continued contact. On the flip side, I have at times also felt pressure to communicate, or guilt when I haven't communicated. I would ultimately like to meet them in person one day as I feel this would be more 'real' to me but perhaps more emotionally charged too!

Maintaining contact with my biological family has been particularly difficult for me due to:

- Language barrier - I think even if I did speak the same language, connecting with biological family after so many years and discussing sensitive or emotional issues has proven particularly difficult and frustrating when you can't say what you want to say. I



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have used friends at time who speak Spanish to translate or script emails for me, but I haven't wanted to always rely on this.

- Location - living in a completely different country and time zone.
- Time - without sounding ungrateful, I now have my own young family, my adoptive family, work, friends, commitments and life in Australia - so establishing these new relationships hasn't been easy.

Social media has been one way I have maintained some basic communication with my birth family.

In terms of integrating my search and reunion into my sense of who I am, this is probably something I am still working through. It is hard to be presented with so much information about one's past and work out what it means to you exactly. I still refer to my adoptive family as my family and identify as being an Australian who was born in Colombia.

Some suggestions for professionals, governments and agencies to assist in our search and reunions:

- Being trust worthy and reputable when facilitating searches and reunions.
- Provide counselling and access to support groups or individuals who have been through search and reunions before us, to better assist us.

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## Fiona Beveridge

I was born in Hong Kong and adopted at 4 months old. I grew up in Australia.

I eventually searched because I'd gotten to a point in my life where I spent a lot more time working on myself and discovering who I am. I'm beginning to feel more comfortable with who I am and I just started to wonder a little more about where I began. I'm at an age where starting a family is something I hope for in the near future and it feels like the right time.

My origins are something I've wondered about over the years - not something I've been obsessed by or consumed with but often in my moments of self reflection the idea pops up. Last year I was feeling very lost and disconnected from many things. I got drawn back to the beginnings of my life and my childhood during those times of reflection. As a child I had so many questions which are still unanswered, however, the difference is now I've learnt to accept I won't ever have all the answers .. and that's okay. So late last year I thought "why not... let's see what I can discover".

I had very little expectation at all as I had been told my whole life it would be very difficult to find anything. So I was actually expecting a dead end.

I had been in contact with Lynelle over the years regarding searching and questions regarding adoption. I didn't have any network or know of other intercountry adoptees. I asked a few questions and straight away she put me in contact with some other adoptees from Hong Kong in the network who had started the searching process.

It all moved so fast! I'd basically just introduced myself and the next thing I knew I was on the phone to another adoptee who had found her birth family in Hong Kong. It was a very humbling but overwhelming experience! I had more information in 10 minutes than I'd had my whole life! It was the first time I had talked to people who understood. I didn't know how to feel.

I utilised ICAV and some information from a few other adoptees who had also begun searching. I then contacted the government in my birth country and was directed to various different departments that specialised in searching. I had to send off a few pieces of paperwork and that's about it.

Over a three month period, I received several emails from the social worker in the HK government agency who gave me new information and confirmed some things we already knew, regarding my birth parents.

I found out some new information regarding each birth parent and learnt about where they came from. After a couple of months I received news they had located my birth mother after searching through immigration. At this point I was quite numb, as it had moved so quickly and I had not expected this outcome at all.

Having gone through this process of searching hasn't changed my relationship with my adoptive family at all - in fact it has probably strengthened it. They were the first people I talked to when I received information - they have been very supportive!

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I have for the time being decided to not connect directly with my birth mother. I have the option to write to her and receive a letter from her, however, it has all moved so fast and I really need some time to think and absorb the information. I never even expected any news at all, so for this to happen all at once, I probably wasn't entirely ready. I do wonder if I'm leaving her wondering now that she knows I've initiated the search - but I'm comfortable at the moment with my decision.

Having my family support me has been the best, knowing that no matter what happens, they're my family. They've been like that my whole life! They're always there to answer any questions and never once made me feel bad for wondering about who I am and where I came from.

I suppose the best advice I got given was that searching is a bit of a rollercoaster ride in itself and to expect the unexpected. I've learnt I don't need to necessarily know about where I came from to find who out exactly who I am. The search itself has taught me about listening to my gut, patience and living with the unknown, and being present amongst it can be quite powerful and helpful for moving forward. I'm glad I took the step to start searching but I'm also glad I've taken control of the experience and am moving at my own speed and pace - not placing any expectation on what is a completely personal experience.

I believe in my experience I would have benefited from more assistance from the government department in root tracing. I received much more information than expected but not enough advice to prepare me for what they were going to tell me or how to respond. As helpful as they are, I think they need to understand the whole searching process is quite an emotional rollercoaster ride for an adoptee and they need to be sensitive that people's emotions, reactions and expectations can change throughout, i.e. people need time to think and feel and then they will be able respond.

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## Gabbie Beckley

I was adopted from Sri Lanka to Australia at 8 weeks old.

I've always had a longing to know where I was from and what happened to my birth family and why I was adopted. I hoped and prayed every night for as long as I could remember and deep down I knew it would happen when the time was right. I didn't have any expectations, I just wanted a photo or to know why I was given up.

My mum still had some contacts in the adoption scene and we were able to track down a driver who remembered some government contacts and the government minister for the area where my family lived. My Amma had put her correct name on my birth certificate and when we searched it was a little easier to find her with the right information.

Unbeknown to me, my mum had tried to search two times while I was growing up and didn't have any luck but I guess it was third time lucky.

The adoption agency wanted to charge upwards of \$10,000 to release my information and we thought it was unethical, so we didn't go through those "official " channels.

I was able to meet and form a strong, loving and secure relationship with my birth family. I met my Amma and Thatha (mum and dad), my younger sister and brother, and later I met my brother in law and my three nieces. As a result, I am more sure of who I am, I can finally say I have my mothers eyes and my fathers nose, my fathers jokey nature and sometimes my mother's fiery temper. 🤔

My mum and I have a stronger relationship but my father isn't interested in knowing about my birth family because he thinks they are just using me for money and he doesn't understand how happy it makes me to be able to support them. In my eyes, they made the ultimate sacrifice to allow me to have a better life and now I'm in a position to help them - and for me, it's the right thing to do.

In the past 16 years, I have developed a stronger and deeper bond with my birth family. It has helped me become the person I am today as the more I get to know my family, the more I know my self. I would love to know my mother tongue to be able to communicate with my Amma on a deeper level.

I now have a stronger sense of who I am and for the first time in a long time, I'm proud of my heritage. I pay it forward by helping other Sri Lankan adoptees search for their families. I've built a house for my family and I feel good to be able to support them and help my siblings achieve their goals, personally and professionally.

Professionals, governments and agencies could assist better in search and reunions by providing access to funding to establish long term links with our families and culture, including access to language classes. Once I have finished my masters in social work, I plan to live for a year or more with my family in Sri Lanka so I can get to know them on a deeper level. I would like to be able to have dual citizenship to allow me employment and other opportunities.

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## Gabby Malpas

I am of Chinese parentage born in New Zealand (NZ) but my mother came from a small Pacific island. No information was supplied about my father so there was confusion around my race until I was 38 years old. I was adopted as an infant into a New Zealand family of strong Irish Catholic ancestry.

I started to search when I left the 'safe' environment of my schools, neighbourhood and parish where people knew me and my family and I went to tertiary education in another city. People of course started asking the usual questions and then more probing ones as their curiosity grew. I saw an advertisement for Jigsaw in some printed media and decided to approach them. Growing up 'colourblind' and with no real Asian role models I have always wanted to see my own face and meet someone who looked like me but I did not really start thinking about it until 19 to 20 years of age.

I contacted Jigsaw in 1985 and they were unable to help as I was too young to access my records. They did not send the response to me but to my parents address. That came as a shock to my mother and I faced some repercussions from various members of my family. It hurt and made me feel extremely angry though I didn't understand why at the time – it just felt very unfair.

Years later in my 30s, my mother wrote to me and suggested I contact the woman in the Catholic Society who arranged the adoption. She was very sweet but very discouraging and the old stereotypes and assumptions came out to put me off the scent. No information or direction on who may be able to help were supplied.

In 2004 I managed to get a contact name and phone number through the same registry I applied to in 1985 and I made direct contact.

I was very lucky. My birth mother, although very anxious at first, did not turn away and after 12 years I am slowly growing a relationship with her and met her for the first time in 2004. This had a huge effect on my life and attitude. For once, at age 38, I knew I was 100% Chinese and the story around my birth. I cannot describe just how important this was to me after all those years of not knowing.

I have strengthened my bonds with my adoptive family who I consider my family. They have also seen a change in me and seen the positive effect this event has had on my life and they are starting to learn about the issues transracially adopted children face and how some things need to change.

Finally, I have a nurturing relationship with my birth mother. She has carried so much hurt and trauma in secret for all these years and I am glad I can provide some comfort to her.

It is only after 12 years that I am starting to get to know my biological family – though not as I would like to. However, given the circumstances of my birth I respect my birth mother's wishes and I am mindful. There is still much shame and secrecy but I understand that and I am starting to learn empathy.

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Although there are still issues to face and nothing is ever black and white, my attitude to life these days is extremely joyful and thankful. I did get lucky and now it's my turn to give back.

I cannot describe just how life changing it is knowing where I came from, my own history and seeing a family who looks like me. It is something just about everyone can take for granted but not adoptees. Being a different race also emphasises your 'otherness' and the ongoing comments, questioning and treatment throughout our lives is just wearying. I had been angry for most of my life and yet I didn't understand why. It's only in the last two years I have been able to understand my life experiences and even communicate how I feel about them. Although the anger is still there, the overwhelming joy is channeling that energy into my art.

I think things have changed so much since my adoption in 1966, however, there is a wish list I have for what professionals, governments and agencies can do to assist in search and reunions for intercountry adoptees:

- Documentation – we need access to our birth records – when we ask for them, not when we are over 21.
- Provide much more support for adult adoptees and birth parents. We are not going away, we have grown up and our voices are growing.
- Do not discourage searches – it is our right to know where we come from and our stories.
- Listen to us. Our combined experiences can provide a wealth of material for other families with adopted children who are also going through the same issues.

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## Hana Crisp

### Co-Founder & President of *Korean Adoptees in Australia Network (KAIAN)*

I was adopted from Korea to Australia at the age of 3. It wasn't until my mid-20s that I started to think more about Korea, my biological family and my past. I was motivated by curiosity as well as embarrassment from not knowing anything about the first 3 years of my life, rather than a burning desire. As I was too afraid to visit Korea alone without knowing anyone in Korea or speaking the language so I signed up for the "First Trip Home" program run by GOA'L. Naively, I just launched into it all without preparing myself in any real way.

GOA'L contacted my adoption agency, Eastern Social Welfare Society, and fortunately managed to find the maternal side of my birth family easily. We had the first meeting in the Eastern office in Seoul, sketchily translated by an Eastern social worker. I remember hoping to recognise myself in my mother's face but it felt like meeting a stranger. My family clearly recognised me though and I'd never witnessed that intensity of emotion before.

I experienced the typical honeymoon period of reunion and then felt very isolated when I returned to Australia. It was difficult to develop these new relationships across geographical distance, language and cultural barriers. Communication gradually slowed down and sometimes I felt really insecure about it. I think I've only managed to maintain a relationship with my Korean family because I've visited Korea regularly since the first reunion. One of my Korean brothers also came to Melbourne for a working holiday which was an enormous gift in many ways. I had the unique opportunity to get to know him better "on my turf", so to speak, and now he translates between our family and I in Korea.

The reunion undoubtedly changed my life and I feel more Korean, having links to my extended biological family and gaining a deeper insight into Korean culture by spending time with them. Still, the joys of reunion have also been mirrored by loss – recognition of the loss of culture, language, family, and identity through adoption. I was also able to answer some questions about the early years of my life and why I was adopted, although I now accept I will never know the full story, nor my Korean father's perspective as he sadly passed away before I was able to meet him.

GOA'L was instrumental in my search and supported me through the entire process, liaising with Eastern and providing much-needed translators with adoption sensitivity. We need more organisations like GOA'L with the expertise of other adoptees who have already been through similar experiences. We also need open dialogue and both peer and professional support, not only for search and reunion, but also for the challenges of post-reunion and long-term unsuccessful searching. Ideally, we also need bilingual and cross-cultural social workers who can communicate with overseas agencies and translate information for us with full context. Finally, at least in Korea's case, we need more consistent, transparent, and thorough search methods.

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## Hilbrand Westra

aka jung, WoonSeok, Chairman of *United Adoptees International* based in The Netherlands

### Birth Family Search : A Journey into the Unknown

Years ago I wrote about the importance and the development of adoptees searching for their origins, their so-called Roots. That perspective was emotionally and psychologically important but a lot of things have changed since.

#### Bloodlines

Since kingdoms came and empires ended, the royal bloodline was something which created a narrative which fed the understanding of the importance of origins. The more you belonged to a status of social importance the more the bloodline played an important role in families and marriages. Even though the explicit idea of this importance faded a bit in the Royal constitutional development of Royal families, nevertheless it is still of importance to many of them.

What many forgot in the meanwhile, primarily focusing on the material side of the bloodline, to safeguard status and economic power, it also has from origins another meaning which refers to something more in-depth and where the word Kinship is more related. It has to do with the immaterial understanding of bloodlines as a way of spiritual initiation. A path of understanding life. The natural fulfilment of, and to have purpose and meaning in a more in-depth sense of being. The central question for many adult adoptees in life is that they arrive at a certain moment in their life where they feel this deep longing for understanding and meaning. This existential longing is the essential inner movement of belonging. And it looks like this deep inner sense, so -called felt-sense, refers to our ancestors in a way which goes far beyond our rational understanding.

This bloodline thing sounds outdated and ancient but working with families in crisis and individuals with personal complexities over the years, I came further to the conclusion that most of the problems finds its source in the disconnection with their origins. The anger, the despising rage and aggression, as well the deep loneliness and emptiness. It all somehow comes back to the lost connection. Adopted or not - somehow we as humans feel the need to belong and have our own 'Royal' bloodline.

This felt-sense reality is the most important issue that for centuries, people who adopted forgot - in the meanwhile many adoptees also lost this inner understanding, being too busy surviving and needing to accommodate the comfortability of the 'saviour/rescuer'.

#### Origin is not the construction but the adoption

It's fascinating to see how many adoptees see their adoption as a natural act and their origin as the past construction. But once they are parent themselves, no one wants to give their children away for adoption.



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Why is it that many adoptees keep the narrative alive that their adoption was the best thing that could happen? Is it an echo from the most abused international mantra in the adoption world “in the best interest”? Again the argument is focussed on the material possessions and security. And I do not deny this argument is somehow valid and I won't scrutinise those who feel stable with it. But for the others who are more open and willing to explore their personal depth, I would like to challenge them to let go of their fear to find once they are able to yield to the situations of deep understanding and deep listening to their inner voice and are willing to explore the consequences of abandonment and adoption.

Also from another more sensitive and maybe spiritual point of view, once you understand the natural balance of life itself and the natural development of this earth and all that is on it, as part of the universe, you might become more humble and connected to why this deep longing for belonging is so important and driving many of us sometimes to madness.

### **The narrative of success and matter**

Many adoptees are captured by the motives of adopters and the material argument of success and economic answers in response to the need to adopt which is in reality not their own. Especially adopted men of colour, who also have to wrestle many times against the white male world, where once succeeded, will not easily let go of their won position in society and their communities. Even worse, they will defend this position as the natural thing to be and are not easy listeners to their inner voice of belonging.

But many adoptees forget in the meanwhile that the essential question is not about the fact of whether you succeeded according the expectations of others and your happiness is based on material wealth - rather it's whether you are able to feel connected without denying your roots and origins, so happiness is no longer a material definition, but an essential rooted part of your existence.

And when I work with adoptees, and I do this now for more than two decades, I see how many of them have gotten disconnected with their inner self. They developed an externalised self. A self which is constructed on many expectations of others and world views which filled the emptiness based on the earlier loss of abandonment and adoption.

The complexity of this issues is that this development doesn't go with huge leaps and clear cut developments in life. Instead, with small and almost untraceable imprints from the outside world influencing the natural existence of the adoptee. This endangers the natural state of being, while the actual outside world is not the 'soil and body' and therefore the energy they have been born in and on. This natural matter has been swapped for something which is most of the time unnatural to their bodies and intrinsic knowledge.

### **S.O.S. versus S.C.B.**

Almost everyone knows this acronym which says literally **Save Our Souls**. In the modern rescue narrative of adoption, it says something different. Actually adoption refers to the body instead of the soul. And therefore adoption became **Save Childrens Bodies**. Actually to adopt an empty body. The painful effect of this reality is that we as adoptees have adapted ourselves in the same manner. We focussed on our material representation

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of ourselves. Our 'empty' bodies. Most of the times unknowingly rejecting and despising our natural selves in the way we really are and all that it carries; the sensitivity, the unwritten emotional and hidden intelligence, the super developed alertness of past and present danger and the deep longing for freedom from this pressure. We all threw this away to please the present picture of ourselves and that of others who filled this representation by their own narratives of adoption and rescue myths. The important and existential question is who did Save Our Souls? And what are we, as adoptees, going to do with this 'empty body syndrome'?

### **Reconnecting with our origins**

Many of us who went back to our countries of origin have had different experiences. It also develops in the meanwhile in such a way which no one had expected. In the beginning of the eighties the first international adoptees went back for the first time to their origins. This group was a relatively small number. The first wave of adoptees with climbing numbers started in the early nineties when Korean Adoptees found their way home (Jib Euro). Since then, at least 100,000 of the 200,000 Korean Adoptees have been back at least once. This development would grow to an annual migration of adoptees visiting their homeland. The numbers of adoptees living for a serious time of their lives in Korea, the so-called re-migration, grows each year with the younger population of the last wave of Korean adoptees. This is not a specific trend for Koreans as we also find the climbing numbers of adoptees from Colombia, India and other countries. But South Korean adoptees are still leading the way in terms of their own development of adoption culture regarding travelling back and forth, sharing information and channels to use. Also, it is the only country where adoptees work together structurally to try within Korea to change the perspective and political policy on intercountry adoption. This creates many emotional moments which are inevitable but the power whereby and how the Korean adoptees enhance their strength in their birth country, is both admiring as it is intriguing.

### **The complexity of reconnection and re-instate kinship**

Even though many adoptees long for a kind of reconnection with their kin, many have problems doing so. This is because the biggest population forgets they do this from the perspective of the adopted body, while the family of origin do this from the experience of loss of a child. A human being is part of the belonging of the family history. The necessary understanding of 'Kinning', the reinstatement of the pre-adoptive activity to belong, is essentially damaged for many adoptees. Especially for those who belong to an Asian origin where bloodlines and kinship are essential - they feel conflicted once they experience these cultural differences and the rejection by mind.

Some adoptees report the disgust of having the food of their mothers and country of origin and the atmosphere. The emotional response is triggered and most times the rejected body is not capable to adjust to the origin where the emotional being is invited to come down from their upbringing but back to their natural state. Many times many emotional conflicts are raised once they feel, sense and hear the differences. The emotional body immediately rejects what is natural by birth because once the body accepts this, it also needs to accept the birth as fact and the deeper bond with their mother and kinship with its culture.

The opposite also happens. Indian adoptees report for instance to feel at home in the

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'smelly' and 'uncomfortable' streets of Mumbai and other places. More and more Korean adoptees report about hanging onto their foods of origin, sharing how they cannot live without Korean food anymore. Others report a more relaxing state of their body and skin etc.. Also the 'mimic' sense of faces sometimes reinstates with the natural muscle tone from origin. The tactility of the body, feeling new senses and sensations consciously touching their own blood and skin, opens 'stored' memory of forgotten pasts. These, and other examples show us at another level, the body and its sensitivity reinstates the natural flow of understanding once you yield to its natural movements.

The most emotional part is the reconnection with the family and parents of origin. It's interesting to see that those adoptees who had not much expectations but are able to deliver themselves into the arms of their kin have most of the time, a better experience with their families, than those who have cultural problems due to their conditioned opinions and preconceptions about the reunion and culture of origin.

For many adoptees it's a hard bargain not to stay loyal with the adoptive family and the deep longing to re-energise and love their origins at the same time. This creates most of the time again another separation with the family of origin. It's sometimes an emotional picture to see when an adoptee wants so much to feel and is at the same time not able to give herself because of all this.

One of the most difficult moments many adoptees encounter is when their mothers wants to feed them or want to sleep with them in one bed. And although the response of the adult adoptee is understandable, many forget their mothers did not lose an adult but a child and the only way to care for the child, is responding primarily in this way. I have seen and heard different scenes of this repeatedly. But those who were able to yield into this motion and become a daughter again, or to drink with their fathers, are much more at ease and relaxed with their reunions than others.

To share an anecdote. One female adoptee told me once that upon reunion, she could smell her mother and feel her skin even though her adoptive mother smelled totally different and whom she loved too, but the experience made her cry for the whole evening and she did not understand why. Looking back, she later realised this was an important healing process for her and her body which she had neglected for so many years and in so many ways.

### **Not our brain is searching but our hearts**

Many adoptees are starting their search with an emotional, but mental, hope thinking in the meanwhile how to create strategies and escape routes when it becomes too tense. For them I wish to find a fellow adoptee, a so-called buddy, as we do in the Netherlands, who already went through this and can support them in this process of birth family searching and roots. It's important to have someone who understands the intensive path full of possible obstacles and emotional roller-coaster which an adoptee can go through.

But we should not forget, at the end it's not our brain which is searching but our heart and even deeper, for those who want to understand in-depth what it does to you! It saves your soul if you want to and therefore connects and reinstates the natural understanding of the flow of life and what you need, to find who you already are. In this sense, the reunion and understanding the above might help you to regain your natural you. I hope so!

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## Jennifer Bao Yu

**'Precious Jade' Jue-Steuck of Laguna Beach (Orange County), California  
Co-Founder of *Chinese Adoptee Links* based in the USA**

I was adopted at age 2 and born in Taipei to a birthmother from Jiangsu Province, China. I have been adopted to Los Angeles, USA. I am also the proud big sister of a brother from Seoul, South Korea.

I've actually never searched! People always ask me if I want to search and I find it difficult to answer. On the one hand, of course I am curious - who wouldn't be?! Do I look like my biological family members? Are we similar at all, in personality or taste? On the other hand, in all honesty part of the reason I have never searched is because I do think it would affect relations with my adoptive family. It probably comes as no surprise to fellow global citizens that I am very protective of my family's feelings.

One friend suggested searching in secret. She said, "It's none of their business. It's your life and your identity that's at stake, not theirs." But would my family understand? Or approve? I'm not so sure. I think they would feel rejected and profoundly hurt.

Do I feel like my identity is incomplete without knowledge of and from my biological family? I wish I could say, 'No, who needs to know about their genealogical past!' It's true I have my adoptive social identity. Many would ask "Isn't this enough?" The reality is, if people didn't long for information about their genealogical past, entire tourism industries in Ireland and England, for example, would collapse. The truth is - adopted or not - there is a universal human need to know where we come from. It gives humans a sense of belonging, continuity and collective understanding.

Even if we have new adoptive social identities legally created and codified by the state, the fact is the very fabric and structure of human society is grounded in the geometry of genealogical identity. To not acknowledge this social fact is to turn a blind eye to social traditions, rituals and connections encoded in the earliest historical annals of human time.

We adopted, fostered and orphaned global citizens are connected to these annals of genealogical history. It is our birthright, just as it is the birthright of every member of the human family to sit at the table of the human family tree. Failure to acknowledge this birthright dehumanises not only individuals connected to adoption but to all people. We are all intricately connected and whatever pieces there may be of our identities that are missing, it is missing not only to us but to all of human history.

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## Anonymous

I was adopted from Peru together with my twin sister at 3 months of age. I grew up in a small village in the northern part of Germany. I had a normal childhood like everyone else. At the time there weren't too many foreigners in the village. At my school there was just my sister and I and 2 or 3 other foreign children. I can't remember if any friends or other person asked me if I was adopted or why I didn't look like my parents. Once I asked my best friend why she never asked me this and she said she didn't notice the difference.

In my family we never ever talked about adoption. It was never a topic. I remember as a teenager it suddenly came up one night and my parents showed us the documents. Afterwards, the documents were locked up again by my father saying that is enough.

When I got older I sometimes thought about my birthmother. When internet became available I tried to find some information about the place she lived but the Internet wasn't as developed as today so I didn't find anything. I experienced phases where I thought about searching and was curious about my birth family - then there were times when it didn't interest me at all. I am not sure what exactly made me search for them. I guess it was just curiosity so I could finally answer questions. I never thought much about questions like do I look like them? Maybe because I have a twin sister who looks like me - so this wasn't so important.

I didn't have any expectations of my family if I found them. What do you expect from people who are strangers? It never came to my mind they might not want contact or that I might have siblings who didn't know about me. I never thought about it. I am quite an impulsive person and I don't think much about things before acting and then wonder about the consequence.

In my early twenties, I started to think more about wanting to search but I had no idea how! I was clueless! I couldn't speak Spanish at that time and Peru was still far away. It just seemed hopeless. So I concentrated on my vocational training as a bilingual secretary where I finally learnt Spanish! I just loved the language - it was so easy to learn and I was good at it. When learning Spanish you can't avoid the topic of South America. So here I was again on the same topic.

In the last year of school, people start to get ready for life after school. Some used the chance to go abroad before starting working. So one morning I woke up and I knew I had to go to Peru. My plan was made and I didn't even wait for the official graduation party! My high school certificate was sent to my parents home. I left at the earliest date I could.

On 26 of June 2007, I was back in Peru. At this time I didn't really have the plan to go on a search. I was simply looking forward to getting to know Peru, learn more Spanish at a language school and to live with a real Peruvian host family.

Everything was new and although I had learned Spanish for two years at school (business Spanish) I didn't understand a word which was a shock! So I realised I had other "problems" other than thinking about a search. My host family were surprised I was Peruvian and didn't speak Spanish so I had to explain. I told my host mother that in the adoption papers I found the address of my birth mother, the address now being 25 years

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old. I said maybe I will go searching for them. I thought with that we closed the topic but it turned out this was just the start!

In my first week in Peru when I came home from school my host mother said, "I organised someone for you who will bring you to the address where your mother lived". I was just shocked and somehow angry that she organised it without asking me. I didn't know what to say. First I wanted to say no but then I thought this might be the only chance I have. If I don't go now with this guy (a taxi driver who used to bring me to school everyday) then who knows if there will be another chance with someone who knows the area?!

I didn't want to go on my own as my host mother said the area was dangerous. I couldn't turn this chance down but I still hated that it had to be now. I still didn't understand much Spanish. How could I communicate?

I don't remember much of this first meeting maybe because I didn't understand most of what they said. I do remember very well the drive to San Juan de Miraflores, the poor area and the taxi driver driving straight to the address. He told me to wait in the car until he comes back. I just understood the word *espera espera* which means *wait*. So I waited.

I could hear the taxi driver knocking on the door and then suddenly got into a discussion with someone and things got louder and louder. I got afraid! Then the noise stopped and he came back with a woman and a child. He said something to me which I didn't understand and the woman opened the door and sat beside me in the car with the child. I didn't know what was going on. I didn't understand who this woman was and where the taxi driver was now taking us.

The woman smiled at me and began to talk to the taxi driver. I just stared out of the window and then she dropped the names of my birthparents and I somehow understood that she was taking us there. I don't remember much more about the drive.

The car drove up a hill and nearly on top, it stopped. Everyone got out of the car and so did I. There was a house a few meters in front of me and a woman was sitting on a ceiling staring at me and I just stared back and I knew it was her - my birthmother! The woman who had directed the taxi here started to shout, "Ma, you've got a guest!" So I finally understood this woman in the taxi must be my sister. My mother still stared at me and then she said, "Who is this?" My sister said, "It's your daughter." My mother smiled and said, "Oh yeah? Come in then".

I still have this scene so clear in my mind as it was so weird and strange. I think she might have been in shock and later when we were in her house, she started crying. Actually this is where my memories end. I knew we were sitting in her house and then lots of people came in and everybody was staring at me and I didn't have a clue what they were talking about. They said my birth father was there on this day but I can't really remember it. I made a lot of pictures as I had promised my twin and then I went home. I don't have these picture anymore, I don't know why.

Going back to Peru and finding my birthparents completely changed my life! I instantly fell in love with the country when I saw it for the first time from the plane while the sun was going down above the ocean. I just knew this was where I wanted to be and where I belonged before the plane touched the ground. I stayed in Peru for 6 years and got to



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know my boyfriend and had a child. During all this time I stayed in contact with my birth family. We spent time together like a family. They made me part of the family. We celebrated birthdays together, New Year and Christmas days. We fought and got along again and I was part of it.

I came back to Germany about 2 years ago. My relationship with my adoptive family has changed. I don't know if this is because of my birth family and Peru or because of the circumstances within the family. I guess it's both. I still can't find my place in my family here and I guess it's no longer there. I have my own family now which is me, my boyfriend and our son.

As an adoptee, our identity is a very big issue. Before I went to Peru, I was German and nothing else. I didn't notice my skin colour too much. Now it has changed. I am still German but now I also can say I am Peruvian! I speak Spanish fluently. I know the customs, the food, the streets of Lima, the bus system and a lot of more. Today, I am proud to be German-Peruvian!

I spent a lot of time in Peru and I will move back there next year. It's kind of crazy knowing and thinking my son will actually grow up with his biological extended family. It's like a circle that is closing. I know I fulfil the nightmare of every adoptive parent - losing their child to the birth family but my birth family is not the reason why I go back. The reason is Peru itself. I don't know how to explain this or if anyone can understand but Peru is the place where I feel at home.

I think governments, agencies, and adoption organisations should encourage adoptees more to look for their birth parents and offer help via translation services, help with travel to birth country, etc. Also, adoptive parents should be encouraged to talk about adoption with the children openly. It's very important to talk about the birth family and searching. Everyone has a right to know who their parents are! It's part of our identity. Most importantly, our birth mothers should get more help and knowledge about what adoption really means and how important it is for the child to know their identity.

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## Joe Wood

I was adopted from Colombia to Australia when I was 2 months old.

I have always had an interest in my birth country and finding out more about it, the people (in general and any biological family), the culture and how it differs from Australia. From a very young age my adoptive parents told me about my adoption and my country of birth. My expectations of finding family in Colombia were not very high since I had no idea where to start, who to approach for help and I didn't speak Spanish well enough to conduct my own search.

My mum saw a show on TV where a Dutch girl searched for her biological family in Colombia. After seeing this show, mum sought out information on who the producers were for helping reunite this girl and her biological family. We found out the name of the person in Colombia who performed this search. We approached her and she told us her fees and we went ahead with the search. There were not many obstacles during the search since we had enough details for the lady to work with.

The investigator was able to find my birth mother and 3 half brothers. This had a profound effect on me because I went from an only child being adopted, to now being a part of my biological family in the country of my birth. It seemed to strengthen my connection with Colombia. It has not had a huge impact upon my adoptive family other than they are all, especially my mum, very happy with the news I have more family overseas.

The experiences of maintaining this relationship with my Colombian family has varied from initial shock and excitement, to being happy to make some contact via social media so easily, to frustration at not having a better command of Spanish to help our conversations flow. However, it has always been special and I look forward to making and receiving an email with the odd photo along the way.

I'm not quite sure if anything has changed within me, in the sense of who I am. Maybe it's a feeling there are people who may not have known where I ended up can now rest a little easier knowing I'm okay. I cherish the opportunity to communicate with them from so far away.

Suggestions for professionals, governments and agencies to assist adoptees like myself:

- Provide contacts of people in relevant countries who we can approach and ask for assistance in searching. These people could give their information and other details such as costs to the Federal government for checking, etc.
- Provide contact details of other adoptees who have searched, found, and reunited with their families and agree to be contactable by other adoptees as mentors.



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## Anonymous

I was born in Sth Korea and adopted to the USA at one year of age.

I searched for my family because I needed to know that I tried, so I would never wonder later in life. It was probably only in my late 20s, early 30s that I felt looking for my roots would give me a sense of wholeness.

My expectations were that in searching I would put demons to rest: the *what ifs*, the *if only's*, the *if only I had tried*, *I might be a better person* thoughts; or I might be more at peace.

When I decided to search, I contacted the Holt adoption agency to see what paper work they had. The first time I went to Korea I didn't think to contact them in advance, so when I dropped into the agency they were surprised as it was not common to have adoptee visitors. This was 20 years ago before the internet made information and connections so easily accessible. On my most recent visit, I did a bit of research and found a KoRoot hostel. I stayed there but didn't utilise their services. I think they have a lot more support services available to adoptees and birth families. I like that they are a 3rd party and have no vested interests in the outcomes, unlike adoption agencies, orphanages and government bodies who may be more interested in concealing information.

I also contacted the orphanage where I had stayed for a short time. They seemed more open and willing to help. I thought they might have more information as they were where I started my adoption journey. As it happens, I discovered they translated some paperwork which only they held and I had never seen before. The name I was given was actually from the policeman who found me. That was incredibly disheartening as it was the one piece of information I thought I could use for my search. So at that point I gave up. There was no more information about me. The orphanage nuns were very sympathetic and helpful. They even got the police involved to help me find the place where I had been abandoned.

The greatest obstacle for me has been the language barrier but of course cultural behaviour and values play a role as well. In my upbringing, the polite way for asking for something was perhaps too aggressive for Korean sensibilities. I've heard of local Korean people volunteering as intermediaries which in hindsight, I would have definitely utilised.

So for me, the main outcome of my attempts to search has been a dead end. I was told point blank by the adoption agency there was nothing else they could do. I had all the paperwork available. I have since posted some of my information on websites in the hope that birth families on the internet may connect. I have also taken a DNA test which I'm still awaiting results for. I posted on one of the websites that if birth families are looking for birth children they should go to KoRoot in Seoul for their free DNA test. 365Kamra is funding these tests.

In terms of impact, initially I felt a bit numb to it all. Not feeling much and just accepting it. Now I feel a bit more accepting of it. I feel happy that I have pursued it. The endless questions people ask me "have you ever tried to find your family" can be answered with a definitive "yes!" and "the only way for me to find my family now is to go on Korean TV -

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which I definitely don't want to do". However, I am feeling more positive about the DNA test. It has left the door open just a crack and I may still open that door one day.

Within my adoptive family, my sister has been quiet but supportive. I know my mother has been worried about me. I think she's worried more that she has done something wrong. I hate having to console her that it's not what she has done. It makes it doubly difficult. My father is not an active part of my life so he seems distantly supportive.

Having attempted to search, even though I haven't found any relatives, has changed me. I am more confident when people ask me "do you know your birth parents?" It's an inevitable question every time I tell someone I'm adopted. For me the journey has been more about visiting the country and getting to know some of the people of Korea. I am very similar in behavioural ways that go beyond our culture. As much as I found many similarities, I also realised I don't want to live in Korean culture. I am satisfied I am living in a culture that I like and feel more free in. I have since stopped dreaming about another distant life I might have had and have started living the life I do have. I have stopped feeling so temporary. I stopped buying things that I may dispose of in the near future and started investing in things for the long term. I also appreciate more the long term relationship I am in.

I strongly believe that non profit 3rd party organisations or groups should be federally funded to assist adoptees searching for their birth families. This organisation should also have records or have easy access to adoption records. The organisation should also offer ongoing support to adoptees and their adopted family once the adoptee begins their search. They should offer services to the birth families too.

Adoption agencies should provide education to all adopting parents with the knowledge their adopted child will probably search for their birth parents and if so, let them know what support services exist for adoptees and their families.

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## Lan Hopwood

I am adopted from Vietnam to Australia at approximately 3 years of age.

I wanted to search because I knew at age 4 that I didn't belong with the family I've been raised in and I also suffered severe psychological, verbal and physical abuse.

I just knew inside that I had to find my 'missing piece'. I didn't know what the word 'adopted' was. When my own children came along and having no medical history, I decided to start the process of searching.

I didn't really have any expectations. I didn't give it much thought because it was a new and untouched landscape, however, I hoped I could someday have a successful ending.

My search began when I was aged 14. I thought on my predicament and looked up the White and Yellow pages and discovered names such as the Australian Embassy, the Vietnamese Embassy, the Department of Immigration and Veterans Affairs. I started by calling and writing them for information on myself. I saved my pocket money and used public telephones, wrote letters and mailed them off.

In terms of obstacles that hindered my journey: inexperience, immaturity and lack of knowledge made my search lengthy. Being a novice without direction or mentoring made the search for answers hard and there weren't many adopted Vietnamese in my vicinity, nor was there a city service readily available to help people such as me, let alone someone of my age. I was alone. Searching in the quagmire of humanity. I was scared and I didn't speak my native tongue so couldn't feel I could approach a Vietnamese group either. To be honest, I wouldn't have known where to look as I didn't relate to being Vietnamese.

I don't think I was taken seriously nor did anyone really connect with my story or the reason behind my enquiries. In later years I still don't think my requests for assistance have been taken seriously and I was given the run around i.e. placed on hold, transferred numerous times, advised to ring other organisations.

My experience has left me feeling unheard and I've spent many wasted years backtracking, making repetitive calls, holding the same conversation many times over. It is distressing to share such a personal story with strangers over the phone.

My upbringing in my adoptive family was secretive and my origins wasn't a topic of conversation. What I sensed was within. My searching made me feel like I was doing something wrong, that I was dirty, mentally imbalanced, betraying my 'adoptive' family by asking questions that I shouldn't. I felt suicidal many times. As time passed, it became more difficult to not ask the big questions. Due to my adoptive parent's wish to remain silent, I emancipated myself from them two years ago. It has been a painful process! I feel a sense of overwhelming 'aloneness' because I have no biological or adoptive support or love. I feel betrayed by my family and both my governments.

Useful tools for navigating my life so far have included:

- my upbringing and the ethos of 'work hard for what you want';

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- holding on to that ribbon called Hope;
  - a sense of humour;
  - two special ladies working in Sydney and Brisbane who showed empathy, professionalism and dedication in guiding a young girl through darkened corridors.

Apart from the above, I can't say I've managed to 'navigate through life' all too well. It's been an isolating and solo journey. Discovering the international adoptee groups has provided some solace, however, I question the effects it has on a person because our deep seated wounds and hunger for answers can be magnified exponentially. The collective emptiness, emotional striations, yearnings, and fears are en masse and this can be confronting, scary and depressing. However, the shared community offers a balm to many and for the first time in my life, a sense of 'belonging', 'acceptance' and 'understanding'.

God knows how I've managed to keep sane and alive, considering I spent 8 years of my childhood attempting suicide and believing I was mentally unhinged. Perhaps my obstinate courage and stubbornness? To defy my adoptive parents – to exist?

As an adult, I didn't want to die before knowing the truth and possibly reuniting with someone who believed they had lost me forever. Even if I were relinquished voluntarily, I would rather know. In twilight years, a person reflects on the past and mostly wants to make amends.

It saddens me in many respects that my never-ending search 'defines' who I am as a person. One must understand until an outcome is reached, my 'definition' as a human being is never reached. I am a changeling. My search seems pointless at times. I am driven and determined yet anchor-less and adrift. It's exhausting and I still have no identity.

In this endless search, I've discovered within myself the ability to commit and sustain. This is important because for me as an adoptee without answers, the easiest path was to walk away after the first knock back. I look back in life and realise how many times I feared commitment due to feelings of inadequacy and not mattering, I shied away from developing deep-seated relationships, of letting anyone 'in'. The search has taught me how to investigate not only an ethereal paper trail but to investigate the capabilities within myself. The search may never result in my blood kin but the search has shown me that I matter!

I believe State and Federal government need to liaise with current adoption groups (local and international) to ascertain the needs highlighted by professional staff, academics and adoptees. There is a duty of care to the intercountry adopted child. Forethought, resources, ethics and transparency must be in place to support the child or adult who wants to begin the search for their beginnings. The adoptee must have the same rights to information as any other individual. There must be avenues available so they do not spend countless years searching for a needle in a haystack. A dedicated committee of both professionals and adoptees would provide diversity of opinion and hopefully be a central meeting point for all parties wanting access to information.

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## Leesah Belperio

I was adopted from South Korea to Australia when I was 4 and a half months old.

As a child I never wanted to search for my birth family. My mother in particular has always been very encouraging. As I got older, I was about 23 years old when I took steps to find my birth family. It's hard to articulate why. I think as I got older I became more curious. I had been told via my paperwork that my parents weren't married and then separated after I was born. I have since found out this is a lie. I was hopeful to receive contact and photos of my birth mother.

I made contact with the Post Adoption Support Service (PASS) who were helpful. The main obstacle I received in the beginning was I received a short response back saying my mother had passed away in 1996 and my father was alive and would like contact. There wasn't really enough information for me to process and I was left with more questions than answers. On reflection this was probably more to do with where I was at, rather than anything external.

Since that initial information about 6 years ago, my siblings have made contact with me. Through them I have been able to also communicate with my father. I learnt my mother and father were married when they had me and financially could not support another child. In the past week, I am here in Korea again spending time with my father and siblings. My adoptive family have been incredibly supportive and encouraging.

I can only predict at this stage but I feel very strongly that my biological family and I will continue to have a strong and ongoing relationship. Language and cultural differences have been an obstacle but utilising services like PASS and G'OAL have helped. Support of my husband, friends and family have been incredibly important.

It's difficult for me to make assessments about my sense of self since meeting my Korean family. I feel this is something that will develop over time. I have found great joy in discovering not only our physical resemblances but also our personalities. It's an interesting nature vs nurture debate but I think I'll grapple with this further, once I am home in Australia with my family.

Su Park from South Australia PASS has been fantastic but she is only one woman. Communication has been one of the greatest hurdles for me throughout this process. Also, the lack of communication at the beginnings of my search. I got overwhelmed about the process of writing to my Korean father, a man I knew nothing about. So I did nothing and he did nothing. After getting to a place where I felt I could put myself out there and start a search, I came away with more questions than answers.

Then communicating over emails and in person with my Korean family have been difficult because of language barriers. Translation and interpreting services are incredibly important as well as someone to explain the cultural differences.

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## Linzi Ibrahim

I was adopted from Sri Lanka to Australia at 6 months of age, although my birth date was changed quite a few times.

I always wanted to search. Growing up I loved looking through the box that my parents kept for me with all of my paperwork from Sri Lanka. I had no expectations, I just knew I needed to find my mother.

There were no obstacles, a family friend of mine conducts searches and reunions for Sri Lankan adoptees and he found my mother.

I found my birth mother and my parents came with me to the reunion. It was amazing! I would expect no less than to have my parents full support when doing something that was so important to me. Finding my birth mother has not changed my relationship with my parents. My birth mother has passed away, I am sad that I hadn't met her sooner. I'm sad I couldn't have done more to help her out of poverty. I am sad she felt like a stranger to me. I will be in mourning for a long time.

The language barrier has been the main obstacle but I always have a person with me who can interpret.

My search and reunion has changed my views on adoption. I think adoption can be prevented in many cases. In mine, my birth mother needed more education, financial assistance and possibly a hearing aid. If she'd had these things, I believe my adoption would not have occurred.

I'm also very passionate about providing adoptees with emotional support when searching.

Details of professionals who conduct searches needs to be provided. There are many people who conduct fake searches and reunions for adoptees. This is the last thing an adoptee needs during such a important time in their lives.

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## Lucy Sheen

I was born on the Crown Colony of Hong Kong, Kowloon in the late 50s early 60s. I was adopted by a white English family at the age of approximately eleven months old and flown to the UK.

In 2008, I was contacted by an organisation in the UK called BAAF (British Association for Adoption and Fostering). They were conducting research on a group of Hong Kong foundlings who were adopted by white families in the late 50s to early 60s. Apparently I was one of this group of 106 babies and toddlers flown over to the UK. This was the first organised and officially sanctioned group of Chinese children to ever have been transracially adopted by families in the UK.

I was raised in ignorance as in the 60s the UK was a very different country. Attitudes towards people of differing racial backgrounds were not those of inclusion or acceptance. Being non-white was the exception to the rule. Like most children, I had fantasies about where I had come from to fill the silent void presented by the those who had adopted me, interwoven with the culture I was being raised in. So I was a lost princess - except the princesses I was aware of, were always white skinned, blue eyed and blond haired. By the time I reached age of eight I knew there was no truth (at least for me) in any of the fairytales. With each passing year and the more I grew into my own skin - the more I wanted to know. But the less (if possible) my adoptive parents were prepared to tell me, given they refused to tell me anything in the first place.

My first attempt to search for my birth parents was when I travelled back to Hong Kong in the late 70s early 80s. I fully intended to visit the orphanage where I had been taken to before being adopted. At the last minute I lost my nerve. I was afraid - afraid of what I might find out and afraid I would find nothing. I had no expectations whatsoever - given my adoptive parents had raised me with no knowledge of my birth culture nor allowed me to learn Cantonese.

The second time I tried was in 2008 when I initiated contact with the National Children's Home (now called Action for Children) - the children's charity that handled my transracial adoption. I made arrangements to collect my International Social Services file. A document which existed and I had never known about until this point in time. This information had been kept from me. By all accounts ALL adoptive parents had been told such a file would be opened and available for their child to view, whenever they so wished. Upon viewing my file, it was pretty conclusive with the very real possibility that I might never find my birth parents. The records that had been kept by the local orphanage in Hong Kong had been burnt in the late 80s, early 90s. I'm not sure whether this was a deliberate act or as a result of an accidental fire.

I then reached out via the Hong Kong child services and my details were posted on a website dedicated to collecting information about Hong Kong foundlings, searching for information about their birth families.

The outcome is pretty well what I was expecting – basically nothing. I was abandoned during a very tough era in Hong Kong. Poverty, health epidemics, the continual migration from Mainland China adding to postwar migration. Being abandoned as a child during that



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period was not unusual. I suppose the unusual part was how we were adopted by foreigners and flown thousands of miles from our country of birth.

No one (as yet) has come forward with any information on me or about my birth family.

It's impact is I am left me feeling sad. Sad that I am unable to connect or find any information about my birth family. Annoyed and slightly angry that what I had been told was not the truth. Had I been told about my adoption as a child, might I have had a slim chance of connecting with someone from the my birth family? Or at least finding some bread crumbs of information? I will never really know and I don't think I will ever be able to excuse or "forgive." In my head I understand why my adoptive parents acted the way they did and made the choices they did. That was then - but as a teenager and young adult - I found it almost impossible to justify the rationale. As for the family who adopted me, I severed all connection with them many, many years ago.

I have no desire to connect to them or anyone related to them. The only thing that connects me to these people is a piece of paper. If I could, with ease, legally reverse or "annul" my adoption, I would. I know the way I was raised was how people thought at the time. I choose to believe it wasn't malicious. Just ill-conceived, culturally arrogant and ignorant, born from a religious evangelical take on non-white children who were perceived then as heathens and savages who needed to be tamed and saved in order to be brought into the civilised world.

A member of my adoptive family did contact me a few years ago. They attempted to threaten me with legal action because I had spoken my mind about transracial adoption and how I now viewed my own adoption as an adult. I gave an in-depth interview for a photographic and audio exhibition about being British-Chinese - it's called *Between East and West* (<http://betweeneastandwest.com/stories/lucy-sheen/>).

Obviously what I said was not received very well. So I am afraid in my case – the desire to search, to learn more about where I actually came from has been divisive. The main reason for this was the inability of the people who adopted me to talk to me openly and honestly about my adoption. Also their complete lack of understanding about my birth culture, their own feelings of inadequacy because of their lack of knowledge which in my view, translated itself into silence and anger from being challenged. Any potential relationship with my adoptive parents was doomed from the start because they were unwilling to be truthful, or to educate themselves and recognise I was a child of difference. I admit in 60s pre-multicultural UK, this was always going to be a challenge. In refusing to educate themselves, by choosing to ignore who and what I was, meant any possible relationship was always going to be deficient. It is fundamental to understand in transracial adoption that despite raising a child of colour with all the expectations of white privilege, this child will never, ever be able to fully benefit from the advantages of such privilege. Without this understanding, I personally do not see how any kind of relationship can exist.

If I could ever find my birth family, I will have an immediate obstacle which is that I do not speak either Cantonese or Mandarin.

Searching and failing has merely confirmed for me, who I am. I cannot change the circumstances that created me. As much I would like to rewind the clock I cannot do that.



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All I can do is deal with that now. I have come to accept this. Acceptance has taken me nearly fifty years and it does not stop me from occasionally feeling regret, sadness and even anger about the circumstance of my being abandoned and then transracially adopted. This in turn has made me a target - for prejudice, bigots, personal, professional, institutional and structural racism. Not just from white privilege, western colonialism and those who assume that West is best, but also from East Asians both overseas and indigenous who perceive me as not being truly East Asian. I am somehow “less than” because I am flawed in my upbringing. As the saying goes, I am too English to be Chinese and too Chinese to be English. I experience prejudice and racism from both sides. I am the artist, writer, actor and filmmaker that I am because of those “flaws” which I inherited via transracial adoption: cultural and linguistic disenfranchisement and dislocation. So in one respect it’s a huge positive. In another, it’s a heavy price to pay. I would not exist if I had not been adopted. But I exist and the way I have had to exist, in spite of the frustration, lies, anger and pain of having to inhabit a space in society as being “neither, nor”. Sometimes I wonder was it too high a price to pay?

I will continue to search. I will leave my details on the HK website. I see no reason not to be on that listing - who knows. But as the years tick on the chances of me ever finding anything substantive about my birth family dwindle each year.

Personally, I’d like to see an extensive range of practical programs for transracially adopted people - these programs need to be compulsory for all adoptive parents and adoptees until they reach the age of 18. The programs need to teach and educate on culture, history and language of where the adoptee was born. This also needs to include being taken through their adoption records, put in contact with the agencies, orphanages, or homes they came from. The adoptee should be taken back to see where they came from at least four times in their lives before reaching maturity.

Having built up a relationship with their birth country and being able to communicate, adoptees should then be given the opportunity with guidance and assistance to search for members of their birth family.

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## M Carroll

I was adopted from Haiti to American but when my adoption was processed, my adoptive family remained in the Dominican Republic with me. I was given the age of 3 years old but over time I've come to realise I'm possibly three years older than this.

I began my search because I knew there was something that was not right. The story my adoptive parents told was not making any sense so I had to know for myself. I always wanted to search for my real family. I never loved living in the family I was raised in. They were too racist.

I did not expect to find anyone at all because I was told my birth family were dead. I certainly didn't expect them to want to know me.

My birth family had sent my adoptive family pictures with their names on the back many times during my life growing up. This information was communicated via the orphanage. At some point, I put their names into Face Book and made contact.

The resources I utilised to search were FaceBook and Google search.

There were many obstacles but overall, the most difficult was language.

One of the outcomes of my search were issues with my half brother. I had to take a break because he was being very pushy, accusing me of choosing to leave them. My maternal aunt was very embracing. She was very loving and I appreciate her. I am very wary though because although I met her here in MA, I fear she may want a closer connection to me than I can give right now.

The impact of searching for and finding my apparent biological family has changed my life. Whilst growing up my adoptive parents told me that my birth family was all dead and that I was abandoned - but I found out my mother did not give permission for me to be adopted, nor did they stop looking for me.

The impact this has had on my relationship with my adoptive family is that I have no relationship with them any longer. I very much dislike them because of all the lies. They kidnapped me for their gain and it has forever damaged my relationship with them.

My experience maintaining a relationship with my apparent biological family has been difficult. There is so much survivor guilt from my part that sometimes I wonder if I owe them an explanation as to why my life is better than theirs. At times, I feel they blame me for something I had absolutely no control over.

Obstacles I have encountered has been class related. I was educated by Americans, I went to college, I live a life that is very different from theirs. Language is an obstacle, I struggle with communicating how I feel because I can't find the right words. I have also not requested a DNA test to date to confirm whether we are biologically related because I'm afraid it might be considered an insult.

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My wife and daughter have helped me with navigating this part of my life. I live a life of utter uncertainty. I know my aunt is alive but I don't know why my mother is dead - it is believed she committed suicide.

When my adoptive family said they couldn't "find" my mother, I feel it was the greatest lie because I was able to find my family. I have found people who I was supposed to be with from the beginning. This has helped me re-evaluate my desire to no longer be alive. I feel that my love for them is diverse, I can't say I love them because love is something that grows over time. But knowing they are alive and that they have always been looking for me makes a huge difference. It gives me a new sense of purpose.

As a result of finding my family and realising the lies my adoptive parents told to get their "child", I have made it my mission to inform other adoptive parents about how they are impacting their kids. Many adoptive parents will claim they didn't know. My view is, if you don't get sole permission from a parent to adopt the child, then it is trafficking. Trafficking happens so often. My adoptive mother put me in an orphanage - not to get adopted but to get well. I can imagine her aim was to take me back. My assumption is she would have visited me frequently and I would have grown up in an orphanage ... still connected to my family. But because white people wanted me, they were given permission to foster me and then instead of getting the proper permission to adopt me, they went with the birth certificate of a dead person. I work endlessly to debunk the assumption that "it is ok and they did the right thing at the given time". I will not believe it now nor ever.

Professionals, governments and agencies can assist in search and reunions for intercountry adoptees like myself by not hiding information. Ever!

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## Mariela Andersen

I was adopted from Bogotá, Colombia, in 1990 when I was only 5 weeks old.

When I was a child I always felt the desire to meet my birth mom. I wanted to see if we looked like each other. Even more so, I felt a pull in my heart to let her know how great my life is. It was as if I could physically feel her pain and worry in my own chest, even from a young age. I didn't want her to question her decision to give me a good life, I wanted her to *know* that what she did was right for me and as a result I have an incredible life today. I wanted to thank her for her selfless act of giving me a new life, one she knew she couldn't provide me with. I was so grateful and I wanted to extend that gratitude to her in person to help ease her own doubts so she could live freely.

I used a search agent who I found on Facebook named Carolina Gonzalas. She lives in Colombia and does searches for many adoptees living in Norway. An adoptee referred her to me. At first, Carolina wanted me to pay her for her help but being a student at the time, I couldn't. Instead, I agreed to refer her to people living within the United States. She agreed to this since I was her first client from the USA and in return for my referrals, she would help me.

I was very lucky! I gave her my birth mom's "cedula number" (Colombian ID number) listed in my adoption papers. Carolina found her using private database in only a few short days. When she found her I was shocked! Previously, I had given the same information to other strangers online promising help but those searches were unsuccessful. Carolina was the one who finally found her after months of several failed attempts with other native Colombians. I felt lucky! I also felt scared of rejection from my birth mom.

The outcome was great! I got to thank my birth mom for my life and she said she wanted to meet me. She told me nobody in her family knew about me and she had kept me a secret for 22 years. She said seeing me smile over Skype helped encourage her to walk through her fears and tell them her secret. Once she did that, I was introduced to dozens of other family members over Skype.

Six months later I traveled to Colombia to visit them in person for the first time. I stayed for two weeks without a translator. The experience changed my life. Not only because I now know my roots, but seeing the poverty in Colombia and knowing what my life *would* have been was a big pill to swallow. The contrast was huge especially after returning home to my very spoiled life in an affluent area of the United States.

My life is now dedicated to giving back to those less fortunate than me, including my birth family. In terms of my adopted family, I would say we are even closer than before. I have always been close to my parents but now I *really* am, even more so than before! My gratitude for them has increased as well. They have been supportive through it all.

On my second trip to Colombia (6 months after the first), my parents came with me and they met my birth family. They said it felt as if they were an extension of our family! I loved them so much for saying this! I feel blessed that both my adopted and biological families are so accepting of each other. My mom did admit at one time she had a fear of

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me replacing her with my birth mom. She said she knew it was a natural human fear and that no one could ever replace the special relationship we have. She is right and I confirmed her fear wouldn't come true since she is very irreplaceable to me! I have two moms, living in two different cultures who I feel connected to in two different ways.

The first two years after finding my birth family I struggled to stay close with them because of the distance. Once every few months I would talk to them on the phone but it was hard without someone to translate. I would visit every 6 months for two weeks at a time but when I came back to the USA, the distance always played a role in "pausing" the bonding process. Two years ago I installed Skype on my sister's new computer in Colombia so we could talk more often. This has been great! My sister is only 8 years old so it's hard to rely on her calling me consistently.

I just recently got back from my 7th trip over the past four years since being reunited and while I was there I bought my birth mom a smart phone and installed *WhatsApp* on it. Now we can talk with ease. This is the first time in four years I have experienced being able to talk to my birth mom so easily while I am in the United States. We still struggle with the language barrier but I have learnt a lot more Spanish and the main language we speak is love and the language of the soul. Just knowing we are thinking of each other feels good! Sometimes I go through phases where I feel like I have become a means of money for them and I fear they consider me more of a bank than a family member. However, in my heart I know they love me and I *want* to give them what I can to help since they have so little and I have so much!

My search and reunion changed everything. I am now a fully awake, conscious human being who is deliberately spreading love on this planet after having realised how much of it I have been given.

Professionals, governments and agencies can assist intercountry adoptees like myself by providing information about who the best search agents are for a particular country of origin and the regions within it. Also, governments and agencies need to end any corruption happening under their watch. I am aware of adoptees with backgrounds from lawyers paid to create false information on legal documents which makes it almost impossible for the adoptee to have a successful search for their family.

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## Mary Choi Robinson

I was adopted from South Korea to the United States at approximately 5 years of age.

I realised as I grew older, my chances for finding my birth family dwindle exponentially with age and I did not want to regret later that I had not exhausted every possibility. So in 2014, I applied for GOA'Ls first trip home. I had actually never wanted to do a birth family search and had resigned myself to that thought and told myself it did not matter nor was it something I had an interest in.

I had no expectations for the search itself and every expectation to feel at home in Korea and love Korea. Instead, I left with less information than when I arrived and I hated Korea and could not wait to leave. I will visit it one more time with my daughter since it is part of her history and heritage but I have no desire to go outside that specific reason.

To search, I fully utilised the services of GOA'L since the trip was through them. GOA'L provided translators who accompanied us individually. They were mostly local college students. I also left a DNA sample at the police station for the national registry as well as a DNA sample with a private company that GOA'L had arranged for us. We had a mental health counsellor hold two sessions for us to check in during our experience. I visited city hall, the children's home, and the location of the orphanage. The obstacles I encountered were a lack of records and conflicting records, the language barrier, and cultural ignorance which all contributed to a high level of frustration.

My outcome was frustration, anger, and sadness. I discovered that two sets of documents had a completely different date of birth than what I have known my whole life. I also learned when my intake was done into the children's home, I mention my father but nothing else. I also heard rumours of police officers "finding" children and taking them to children's homes and getting paid cash per child during the time I was found. Some of the numbers were like 15 children per week were "found." That level of child trafficking is disturbing. And of course, unlike the government, the police destroy records after 5 years so no possibility to investigate any further, whatsoever.

I ended up leaving Korea with less information than I had, which made me overwhelmingly sad and lost, mixed with extreme anger.

My adoptive parents are deceased and have been since 2004, so it did not impact that relationship.

My sense of self has been really shaken since I found out that I mentioned my father but nothing of my mother. I wonder if this means she was already deceased or had left? The conflict in information has made me feel even more abandoned and incomplete. The overall experience has made me want to advocate more for adoptees. I have started a group at my work on adoption, I want to write more about my experience, I have put myself out there to my non-adopted friends as a resource for adopted persons in their lives who may need to connect and talk with another adoptee.

Professionals, governments and agencies could assist in search and reunions for intercountry adoptees by making it easier to access records, including DNA databases,

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and South Korea should financially fully fund all costs of a Korean adoptee's first trip home - that's the least they can and should do!

In Korea, adoptees do not fit in based on language, customs / behaviour, dress, formality, etc., especially when only there for a short visit. Adoption agencies need to stop making adoptees feel like children and holding power over them to access their records at the whim of individual social workers. While the South Korean government has made a formal apology to adoptees, adoption agencies need to as well for their many transgressions against adoptees.

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## Michelle Antoinette

I was born in New York City in 1972. My adoptive family was from Rockland County, NY, about 45 minutes northwest of New York City. I am a Filipino-American transracial adoptee and my adoptive parents are Irish-American. Women who gave birth in the early 70's were in the hospital up to a week after having their baby. In my situation, there were no temporary foster home for me to be placed in because the adoption proceedings via Catholic Charities / New York Foundling began for me at six days old.

My younger sister was born in South Korea in 1975 and the proceedings were again facilitated through Catholic Charities. She came from Korea and we brought her home from JFK airport in April 1976.

We had always known we were adopted because my parents explained it to us when we were in pre-school. They read us books and had discussions about it on a child's level whenever we brought up the topic.

My desire to find my biological Filipino family was triggered in high school because I had met some Filipino-American classmates who just couldn't wrap their heads around the notion that a Filipino person had given their child up for adoption. I did not speak the language, knew nothing about the food or culture and had no Filipino-American friends. To them, I was a *white girl trapped in a Filipino body*.

I would bring up these situations at home with my parents and we would try to work through them but I honestly feel they did not understand. Perhaps they had their own issues to contend with but at some level, I truly believe they were *colour-blind*. They saw us as their *daughters*, rather than their *adopted Asian daughters*. My parents always told us they would be supportive if we wanted to search for our biological families. They gave me whatever information they had and wished me luck.

My sister was able to obtain some more personal information because she was an international adoptee with a Korean name and passport prior to being given an American name by my parents.

My situation, on the other hand has been nothing but stonewalling from day one. Domestic adoptees such as I have no rights under current New York State law. Unfortunately, in New York State in 2016, adoption records are sealed and only a court order with a "government determined very good reason" will open the records. At this time, I do not have the financial resources to hire a private investigator to search the New York City Bureau of Vital Statistics to try and obtain information. I have medical reasons for wanting the records unsealed, so perhaps that may aid me in my quest when I have the means.

That being said, I do not have any reunion anecdotes to offer at this time. My relationship with my adopted family has not changed as I have no new information to share with them. I do think my father would have been extremely supportive of my search but sadly, he passed in 2007.



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I am mostly looking for answers to my questions, first and foremost – *why?* When I do find my biological family, I hope to make some genetic connections and have a better understanding of why my kids and I are the way we are. Even after twenty years of marriage, it is very hard to watch my husband’s family match up their connections and similarities to my kids, while I have nothing to offer.

I do remain hopeful that someday New York State will allow open access to adoption records. In the meantime, since insurance co-pays can sometimes be prohibitive, counselling to all parties involved in the adoption process should be made available at a sliding-fee scale and/or subsidised by the state government. We are all at a different place along our journey, but everyone can and should be emotionally prepared for whatever information comes their way.

In addition to opening adoption records, New York State should have adoptees DNA on file as an option and prospective adoptive parents should take parenting classes with a minimum number of hours. In this day and age of talk-show parental reveals, having DNA available could help facilitate searches and reunions. Parenting classes that touch on things like psychology, family relations, and cultural expectations should be required of all adoptive-parents-to-be, similar to the Roman Catholic Church’s Pre-Cana or a six-hour driver’s education class. Issues unique to the adoption community may come up in a child’s lifetime and it would be a disservice to all involved.

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## Anonymous

I was born in South Korea and grew up on the east coast of the United States. I was sent to the US at three months of age.

When I was younger, I never felt comfortable in my adoptive mother's home. Even now, I don't think of that place as "home." I grew up under the care of a mentally unstable adoptive mother and my adoptive sister has a severe developmental disability. My adoptive father wanted to see me but never could due to a separation and divorce, then he died when I was a teenager. I have never felt I had parents.

The tense relationship or lack of relationship I had with my adoptive sister was no-one's fault. I believe my strained relationship with my adoptive mother was almost 100% her fault. I never felt close to them. I feel rage when I think of my adoptive mother, so I try to not think about her or the life I had with her. I have very few memories of my childhood at this point, but I remember always feeling like I did not belong in my own home from a very young age. I remember feeling on edge like I had to constantly be looking over my shoulder, needing to get away somehow. I recall spending time alone after school and when my adoptive mother came home from work I would go into my room and avoid everyone. I did not form any attachments to my adoptive family members. I definitely show lots of signs of attachment disorder.

When I went to university, I was exposed to first and second generation Korean gyopos. I also took this opportunity to run away from home. During my university years, I ran away from so many problems in my life. I switched schools, majors, friend groups, boyfriends, and studied abroad - I did not have any direction or guidance from family I could rely on. One day, I literally packed everything I cared about into my car and left my adoptive mother's home. I only ever went back in extreme emergencies. She would always take me in when I was at my most vulnerable points but then she would manipulate me. I would sense the manipulation and shortly after arriving, I would leave again. I over-relied on my university friends and significant others for stability. I was in and out of many short and long-term relationships. I married someone in an effort to stabilise my life and divorced a year later when I realised nothing had stabilised and I would be unhappy for a long time if I stayed.

I never thought about the possibility of meeting my family until I found other adoptees living in my area. Someone asked if I had searched for my birth mother. It was a new concept to me. I didn't realise then that adoptees sometimes get a chance to "undo" their adoption. I am one of the few who got this chance.

I stayed in university for seven years and got the opportunity and built the courage to study abroad in China. I was at a breaking point and thought leaving the USA would help. I had given up two or three opportunities to study abroad in South Korea even though my professors had encouraged me to go to my home country. When I went to China, I put in a request to meet my birth family and didn't expect any response. I told myself if my family couldn't be found, I could commit suicide overseas and never have to worry again. Luckily, my Korean family responded almost immediately. I changed the entire course of my life and focused everything, all of my few resources and energy, to meeting and reuniting with them and building a life in Korea.

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Some of the problems I had been running from were internal within me and followed me. I was only just recently able to resolve some of my deep issues here in Korea over the last couple of years. I live in Seoul now and I dream of going back to the US for vacation or to try build a career. I have never seriously considered asking my adoptive mother to house me or help me during a transition period. In the past I had considered asking, when I was feeling terrified of something here in Korea but I remembered how awful I use to feel living in that home. This is how much I have grown to hate my adoptive mother. I usually ask my friends if their parents would let me stay at their house, as if they could be my adoptive parents. I spent most of my adult life looking for a family to belong in. I found many good people who love me but who cannot be a substitute for the family I seek. I am in touch with my Korean family and they have accepted me back into their lives willingly. They have their own families to take care of before me. Most of my sisters are all married and have kids. They view me as an adult and expect me to take care of myself.

In some ways, I still am searching for family even though I've been reunited. I probably won't be able to have the feeling of close family bonds until I build my own family and become a mother?

I didn't really experience any obstacles in my search. I asked my agency, Catholic Charities, who forwarded my request to Holt in Korea. They answered promptly and told me my family wanted to see me. It was probably one of the easiest birth family searches ever performed by an adoptee.

My Korean family wanted to meet me as soon as possible. I changed my whole life to move here to Korea to be with them. This part of my life forced me to gather an incredible amount of courage from within myself, rather than from external support. Ultimately, this experience helped me develop my confidence. I am a different person now. Before searching, I was not emotionally healthy or strong for many, many years. Finding my Korean family gave me some sense of purpose. Needing to work hard to come here to Korea and stay has saved me. I struggled a lot, it sucked! I got to so many low points but the hardships and joys that resulted from my reunion formed me.

The reunion itself was fleeting and only a small moment in time. I met some Korean people at Holt one day and suddenly, I was their family member again. It was the adversity leading up to that moment and the adversity I experienced afterwards which allowed me to get closer to becoming a complete human being. I was only half of a person in my early twenties and I'm glad I got to build the rest of me. It took a long time and continues even now.

I have no relationship with my adoptive family and meeting my Korean family had no impact on that. I had left my adoptive family a long time before meeting or hearing about my Korean family.

Not intuitively understanding or speaking Korean language has been the largest obstacle I now deal with, followed by cultural and social norms. My Korean family genuinely loves me, worries about me and cares for me. Sometimes I feel they perceive me as an idiot because I can't speak Korean even though I am possibly the most educated of all my Korean sisters. I just let them think whatever they want. I think they notice more and more, when I'm with them, that I'm quite clever and strong.

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Learning social boundaries throughout the time I had no family was useful. I used to believe if you had family, you could do anything and they still had to love you. In the past, I would push too hard or ask for too much help from people whom I considered family and they would always abandoned me or ask me to leave. Nowadays, I stay pretty true to myself but I behave when my Korean family asks me to. I don't assume I'm untouchable just because I share blood with my sisters and mother. I know they could cut me off as easily as they let me back into their family.

Being really easy-going, to the point of being submissive, has also come in handy. What many other adoptees find overbearing or annoying from their Korean families, or in Korean culture in general, I tend to just accept without question. It doesn't mean I think Koreans or my Korean family is right all the time. I just don't see any point in fighting with them or asserting my point of view which they aren't going to understand because they aren't American. I figure I have to pick my battles and I choose to gracefully lose battles more often. I'm still being hosted by a foreign country, I don't have a "right" to live here and see my family. It's a privilege to be here!

I'm lucky because since I found my Korean family, I get to say with certainty that I am a Korean person. Within me, I don't really believe this all the time. There are actual people related to me by blood, they are Korean, have Korean lives and have a family registry, citizenship and everything. I think it helps me to feel I belong here in Korea. I needed to feel a sense of belonging somewhere. I didn't find it in the USA so I'm really happy I found it here!

At the same time, I don't let my reunion define who I am nor determine if I am happy or not with my life. Most people ask if I've been reunited and I say "yes". They then respond with, "you must be so happy, everything's okay now!" I find this incredibly annoying! As if the answer to happiness were so simple. I'm actually quite sensitive and still full of rage and sorrow for the things that happened to me before. I feel under-accomplished and really wish to work harder and achieve more. I especially feel unaccomplished in academics and in my professional life. People think a reunion is the end of an adoptee's journey and it's so untrue! It is one of the biggest myths non adopted people believe about adoptees. Reunions are not the "live happily ever after" or "end" of an adoptee's life story. All I did was meet my Korean family, I didn't die. It's not the end at all. All the stuff that came after the reunion, those are the things that built me.

My reunion is such a small detail to me but to other people it's incredibly important to find their birth mother. I never had a real idea of what mothers were so I never felt my reunion was going to be a big part of my identity.

I didn't experience any difficulty searching for my family so I don't fully understand when adoptees say they want more resources or help from either the government or adoption agencies. I have heard of adoptees who wish to see their birth records and are denied that right and I believe they should have access to their records. If there was bad record-keeping, someone or some government should be held accountable. I also think if the Korean family and mother doesn't want to be found, then we need to respect their right to privacy. This issue is incredibly difficult to talk about and many people might discount my opinions because I didn't experience any difficulty with my search.

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## Nimal van Oort

### Founder of *Lankan Affairs International* based in The Netherlands

I was born in Sri Lanka and after six weeks I was adopted to The Netherlands.

All my life I was thinking about my mother, every single day of my life, starting when I was very young. I was always wondering how she was doing and what she would look like?

When I went to Sri Lanka in 2001 for the first time we went with a travel agency with a Sri Lankan man as owner. As I had still his contact number I asked him to help me with the search.

In 2003, my brother and I started a search to find our mother (Amma). We had the intention that as soon we had found her we would give her all that was needed to give her a wonderful life. Our love and gratefulness to her was and is unlimited, strong and pure. But in 2004, I received the news from Sri Lanka that our mother was no more, she had died in 1986 at the young age of 21. The people that brought me the news informed me as well that I had a Nangi (younger sister). She was almost 3 years younger than us and was living with our grandmother in the city of Baduralliya. My brother and I decided to travel to Sri Lanka to visit the grave to pay respect to our Amma and to meet our Nangi, Chamali Lakmali.

In June 2004 it happened, it was the most wonderful day of my life to see my Nangi but at the same time I was extremely saddened to see the grave of our Amma and to realise I would never see her in my life time. My Nangi and my grandmother also revealed a very painful story about our Amma. Our Amma had been several times the victim of rape and because of this she had been left alone by their family and community. My twin brother and I were born out of rape, my younger brother Thusita was born out of rape (he died after 9 months) and also my Nangi was born out of rape. After the birth of my Nangi, Amma died as she was exhausted and left behind, at the age of only 21 years.

At the same time I saw so many young girls in Sri Lanka with the same painful story as my Amma and without having a good future. They were rejected by their families and communities too. It reminded me of the story of my Amma. At that moment I realised I could not help my own Amma anymore but in special memory for her, I could help these young girls. So in honour of my Amma, I decided to start an organisation to make sure these girls will have a good future and a meaningful life - a life with freedom, justice and human dignity.

So in special honour for my Amma I started *NONA Foundation*. In the last 11 years we have provided shelter, care, education and empowerment aid to more than 1,300 girls.

The relationship with my adoptive family did not change much throughout all this.

Even though I have not met my Amma and never will see her in this life, since I visited her grave in Sri Lanka my body has gotten for the first time in my life, a soul!

Prior to my search, I was a young, silent, small frightened boy and through this journey, I have become a leader with an important mission.

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With regards to what could be done to help assist in search and reunions for intercountry adoptees like me - I suggest we need an advisory commission or something that could provide guidance during the search. Maybe they could help in funding a search, because it is not cheap and as young person we do not have much money.

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## Nisha Grayson

I was born in Goa, India and adopted by white Americans at the age of six months.

I was always curious about searching for my family, specifically my mother. I did hear a lot that it was impossible by family members, so I never thought it would be possible.

My dearest friends knew it was important to me. It was actually one of them, Shar, who suggested we search while we travel through India. She also wanted the experience of shooting a feature length documentary. That was the first time I heard it would be possible, so with lots of uncertainty, I agreed. I was 26 years old when we made our first trip and later in 2012, we returned to Goa to meet a woman believed to be my mother.

Let's just say it didn't go as planned, expected, or even close to my fantasies. During my naïve days, I fantasised about her running towards me as soon as I revealed who I was. Once I began to learn about the Goan culture and understanding the difference between Hindus and Catholics and the mindset of those who lived in villages versus the larger cities, I found out my expectations were not going to be met. This actually worked out for the better because reality is more an authentic story.

I was lucky to have information on my birth records. Granted there are doubts if my birth records are accurate but for the sake of this research, I continued to assume it was.

The information given to me was my birthday, the name of my hospital, my orphanage, and the village my mother came from. That is a lot more information than I was ever expecting on not only my adoption records, but also my original birth certificate which I was able to get a duplicate of. I feel lucky about this considering what all my fellow adoptees go through.

So I started with these details. I emailed the woman who owned my orphanage. Once we got to Goa, we searched out voter registrations but was told the building was in shambles. We looked into certificates of births and deaths. We asked the doctor working at the hospital as well as the nurses. We basically started to build my history.

With no luck or help from the woman who owned my orphanage, we gave up and got ready to go home. We later met a Goan named Tony who translated and helped us search. He took over and we tagged along. He searched for two years until I returned in 2012.

We encountered many obstacles but the one that kept us from moving forward faster was the language barrier. There were many people who spoke English and we were able to manage but when speaking the native language, I realised a level of trust develops that makes people comfortable. Given I sounded American, it didn't help foster this trust. Learning about the pace of society, their work and nap schedules, their love for gossip, negotiation skills, and the lack of fresh green veggies were just some of the social obstacles we took a few weeks to learn.

To be honest, there was no plan. I just started with the first piece of information which was the owner of the orphanage. From there, I kept going to places I knew about and luckily,



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we ended up at Tony's food cart on our way home one night. Intuition is what led my search.

In terms of outcome, well its complicated. I did meet a woman I believed to be my mother for the last 4 years. There was still a small doubt about her identity since it could not be confirmed by a third party organisation. It has been a rough road to work with the confusion, through the confusion, and release it all. I recently had the woman's fingerprint analysed and compared to the finger print on my adoption records. The conclusion is the analysis does not think the two prints came from the same woman. Now, I sit with the feeling I will never know any of my original family because there is no possible way to reach her again and I wouldn't want to either.

My search has opened me up to exploring all of my adoption issues, questions, concerns, my history and the film has allowed me to open up to a larger audience. Now I am becoming more educated about adoption and also educating others, my relationship with my parents has become more honest and a bit challenging. It's still in progress.

Considering I just found out the woman I believed to be my mother actually isn't, I feel it's too early to say at this point how I feel about it all. I will say I am quite proud of myself and my friends for even trying! This was a huge trek across the world into a foreign country with absolutely no experience of traveling or searching for one person!

Suggestions of what can be done to assist in search and reunions, I say keep all documents! Keep dates, locations, photos. Don't burn the buildings that hold our documents! Help as much as you can! Advocate for open adoptions. Do not allow adoptive parent's the power to close open adoptions. Follow up with the children and families. Offer support for young adults wanting to search. Be the middle man in the exchange of safe communications between child and parent if exchanging addresses is not allowed.



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## Ron McLay

I was born in Glasgow, Scotland, to a white Scottish mother and a father from Kashmir, Pakistan. My mother was married to a white Scottish husband and she had a brief affair with my father. At my birth, my would-have-been step father told my mother he would only accept her home "if she left the coloured child behind". My mother claimed she had been raped by a Pakistani lodger and thus I was placed in an orphanage at birth. At the age of 6 months I was adopted by a white Scottish couple who had no children but went on to have two natural sons after my adoption. My adoptive mother had been a nurse at my orphanage. At the age of 8 we emigrated to Australia.

When I was 30, I happened to be in Scotland. Another marriage had broken up and I was on another geographical quest in my endless search for love. I had never really given serious thought to finding my birth mother. Others had been more interested in the topic than me. I believe now I had suppressed the desire to find her and I was in deep denial. Of course, I had constantly wondered who she was and why she had abandoned me. At times I fantasied she was rich and famous (I knew her surname was Taylor and wondered if she was Elizabeth Taylor).

One Wednesday I was at an adopted Aunt's place in Scotland and I suddenly said to her that I wanted to find my mother. By 2.30am on the following Saturday morning I had tracked her down and was meeting her for the first time since we had been separated. I had no expectations as to what to expect and again I think I was wholly unprepared for the first meeting. At the time my alcoholism was in full swing and this was interfering with my ability to face reality. In fact, the initial meeting was a completely surreal event for me and I felt quite detached from the events. It felt, at the time, like a movie - like I was an observer rather than participating. When I found her, she had no idea I was looking for her and I had knocked on her door and I said, "Hello my name is Ron McLay but you probably know me better as Lal Shah Taylor". (On reflection that was a pretty good way to introduce myself). She collapsed at my feet and commenced to cry and to beg my forgiveness. I stood involuntarily impassionate while I witnessed 30 years of pent up emotion, guilt and shame spill out before me.

I can contrast the experience with meeting my father which I did once I was sober and after weeks of therapy prior to the meeting. Why I decided to find her that Wednesday I do not know. I can only surmise that God played a part in arranging what was a miraculous series of events that led to our meeting.

To search for my mother, I had travelled from Glasgow to Edinburgh to the General Registry Office. From there I began the search for any marriages or births associated with my mother. I had her name as I had requested my original birth certificate some years before. I spent two days searching through the microfiche and by Friday afternoon I had a wedding certificate of a cousin who had been married in Dundee. I was able to get a phone number from this name. I called this cousin and he then called my older half-brother, James. James called me. I was back in Glasgow by this time and we spoke for a while. He knew all about me and told me details of our mother. He explained she was an alcoholic and he had not spoken to her for 4 years. Although I found this incredulous it seemed to make sense to me.

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The search for my father was a completely different situation. I was sober for a couple of years after having stopped drinking after 25 years of active alcoholism. I had joined a 12 step program, was seeing psychotherapists and psychologists and more importantly, had joined an adoptee support group (ICASN). It was then I began to want to find my father. I had also said in my internal conversation that my father was not important to me – that only my birth mother mattered. I had struggled to forge a relationship with my birth mother and our relationship had broken down irretrievably after staying with her for 6 days. She had lost her temper with me one night and began screaming at me saying I had ruined her life and she hated me. It was a terrifying vision of pure hatred and rage – but also, something I instinctively knew was within me too.

That night I called out to God and He looked after me. This in itself, had not been the motivation to find my father - it arose from another source. I began to realise I had lived a life time of hang-ups about my racial appearance – self-hatred is how I describe it. It manifested in several ways – one was I could feel racist thoughts towards people that looked like me. Another was, I would try very hard to convince people of my Scottish heritage – using my Glaswegian accent to amuse and to ‘win’ people over – proving to them I was not really an ethnic. These concepts were all in my own mind. They were how I saw myself. It was also related to how I thought God saw me - that I was a mistake, an aberration, I should have been aborted, I was inherently evil, the black sheep of the family. All these statements were how I often described myself.

So, I was in a good place when I began the search for my father – I describe it as the search for the ‘dark side’ of myself. The shameful side. Initially I had a counselling session at the Post Adoption Resource Centre at Bondi. Unfortunately, this didn’t go well and I left that session feeling disappointed at the attitude of the counsellor. Perhaps she was trying to be realistic as she dissuaded me from having hope for finding my father. Her salient point being, he did not even know of my conception – something I had learned from my mother. At this time, I experienced a feeling I felt again and again in my search for my father – a rage in response to anyone standing in the way of me finding my father. Although my mother had not been able to fulfil the role of a mother, she had done me an immense favour in nameing me after my father – Lal Shah Taylor was my birth name. Taylor was her married name and Lal Shah was the name of my father. This piece of information was to be critical in locating my father.

I contacted Barnardo’s in the UK and asked their advice. My mother told me she wanted to help me find my father and although I wanted to keep her out of the process, I was grateful for the information she gave me. Other than his name I had little information. My adoptive parents had told me he was Persian but my birth mother told me he was Pakistani. I knew from my mother she had spent some months getting to know him. He was newly arrived and spoke very little English. She was 19 years old (her husband was in his early 30s) and they had one son already, born in wedlock. She had come down to the Midlands to work as a bus conductor. She met my father in Wolverhampton and she believed he was working for Goodyear. After falling pregnant she returned to Scotland.

Contacting Goodyear proved to be a dead end in the form of the UK Data Protection Act. I had details of my father’s employment and I wrote to Goodyear who wrote back stating, “unfortunately due to the Data Protection Act 1998, we are unable to disclose any information concerning Lal Shah.” At the time I felt a lot of anger towards them and I complained bitterly to a couple of adoption agencies in the UK. I felt it was my right to

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have the information. I felt the Act was preventing me finding my father and I found it difficult to handle. I can describe the anger as white hot incandescent rage. As if the act of abandonment was being re-enacted – as if I were experiencing the primal wounding again.

I returned to the UK in 2003 and with my birth mother went to the West Midlands Post Adoption Service (WMPAS). The counsellor explained to me I was entitled to free counselling and turned to my mother and told her the same. She said to him, “Do you mean someone will listen to me? I haven’t been allowed to talk about this for 40 years”. She became very emotional at the thought she could share her pain and feelings after all these years. She was clearly in a lot of pain. She had originally been told she should never talk about it again.

A search of the UK’s phone directories turned up the street addresses of only 7 men in the UK with my father’s name. I supplied the 7 names to WMPAS and they sent letters out with some limited information that did not mention me or my birth but the address at which my mother met my father and the name of the person running the lodging house. WMPAS received a response from my father and they sent another letter and then made a phone call to the house. My father’s english is limited and the caller from WMPAS talked to my father’s second wife (he was divorced from the first wife). WMPAS contacted then informed me this was the right person in their opinion. They supplied me with the phone number. This process was quite slow and I had to follow up WMPAS quite a bit. I was quite impatient and frustrated at this time.

At times I would pursue the search with vigour and then drop it completely for months on end without a thought. Upon reflection, although I did encounter obstacles in the form of bureaucracy, I also encountered my own inertia. The tyranny of distance with me now being located in Australia was also a limiting factor as I was born in the UK and all my records were in the UK.

In September 2004, I went to the home of an Indian born Muslim friend who had worked for me and spoke Urdu. He phoned my father’s number and spoke with my father’s wife. The call went quite poorly at first as my friend was politely telling my father’s wife that he wished to speak to my father and could not relay the matter as it was of a private nature. She was naturally suspicious and in the end my friend ended the call. After what seemed like ½ hour we decided to call once more.

On calling again the atmosphere was completely different and my father told my friend he accepted me as his son. This was a huge shock to me as I had expected the door to close – I had prepared myself for rejection. Many years ago, as previously mentioned, Barnardo’s had told me there was a very small chance my father would accept paternity given he was not aware of my conception.

My father spoke to me on the phone. We exchanged a few words and it was difficult because of the language barrier. I then spoke to several members of my family including several of my sisters and brothers. Later that night, one of my brothers rang me and he was quite emotional and affectionate. Given I did not know them I was reserved and shy. I have lived all of my life without blood relatives until my daughter was born when I was 28 and I had never felt a strong connection to anyone.

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Over the next year, I contacted my family and spoke to them by phone and via MSN Communicator. I spoke to several members of my family and found it strange and difficult to converse because I did not know them at all. At times, weeks would go by and I didn't contact them and I found it very hard to re-establish contact when I had let contact go for a while. My natural (or learned) instinct is to drift away from contact with people in my life. I have had to discipline myself to speak and stay in touch with people (eg. my daughter). The longer I was out of contact the harder it was to start again. I'd feel embarrassed.

A few months after contacting my father he had a heart attack. I sent flowers to the hospital. I felt guilty I hadn't gone over to the UK to meet him. At the time I was engaged and about to be married, so life was complicated. Eventually, one of my brothers who rang me quite frequently in displays of affection asked for me to come so I booked the ticket and the count down began.

As the time drew closer to the departure date I felt so excited I thought my heart would burst. I had to tell myself to calm down. I tried not to think too much about the meeting. As it got down to the last 3 weeks I found it difficult to sleep. I was sleeping only 5 or 6 hours per night. All sorts of scenarios were running through my head. I told myself no matter what happened it was for the good because the mystery would end. In order to prepare myself I went to 6 sessions with a body psychotherapist. These sessions were very useful and quite a challenge for me as the therapy was completely different to anything I had experienced.

At the time I wrote these short notes to remind me of the lessons I had learnt:

The inner child is good  
I am not fake – I am just anxious when appearing to be outside myself  
Feel the feelings and let them pass  
Disconnection is within me - its between the inner child and the adult  
Body holds and remembers pain - need to retrain it to learn it is safe

Good or bad, I was now ready to meet my father!

The day came to get on the plane and the long journey began. There is nothing exciting about 26 hours of flying. I was prepared for the long wait having made the trip several times over the years. I arrived at Heathrow feeling pretty ordinary from the trip but full of excitement. Playing through my iPod was the song "Music of the Night" from the Phantom of the Opera by Andrew Lloyd Webber:

"Close your eyes and surrender to your darkest dreams!  
Purge your thoughts of the life you knew before!  
Close your eyes, let your spirit start to soar!  
And you'll live as you've never lived before  
Softly, deftly, music shall surround you  
Feel it, hear it, closing in around you  
Open up your mind, let your fantasies unwind, in this darkness which you know you cannot fight - the darkness of the music of the night  
Let your mind start a journey through a strange new world!  
Leave all thoughts of the world you knew before!  
Let your soul Take you where you long to be !

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Only then can you belong to me . . .

Floating, falling, sweet intoxication! Touch me, trust me savour each sensation!  
Let the dream begin, let your darker side give in”

I walked out of Customs and two brothers were there to meet me. I said “G’day” and they both hugged me. The journey to my father’s home was about 45 minutes and we talked on the way. It felt surreal.

When I arrived at the house I met my father for the first time and said something like “Hello my father, it’s been a long time that I’ve wanted to meet you”. I really don’t remember too much about those first few moments – I was looking at him trying hard to see myself in him. He was nervous too. Other members of the family met me, they were very welcoming and soon I was immersed in the family.

I was the centre of attention and I was enjoying it. They treated me so well – my sisters were lovely and so attractive (yes, I liked that a lot for some reason). My brothers were good looking and lots of fun. It was so strange to be surrounded by so many blood relations! Everyone made comments on who I looked like and I must have heard a thousand times that I looked like my dad which I could not believe but now accept and can see myself. I was startled by one of my sisters who looked so much like my daughter that it shocked me. I think she probably impacted me the most because of her similarity to my daughter - never mind the fact she very plainly appeared to adore me! The other sister was similarly attentive to me and I felt terribly flattered they were both so friendly. It felt strange on one hand but it also felt really good. The brother I was staying with was similarly kind and loving to me. It was not too long before I felt as close to this brother as I’ve ever felt to anyone. I love him as a brother – so to speak!

After 4 days I travelled to Liverpool on a pre arranged trip booked before I left Australia. I had deliberately set the time up so that good or bad, I would have ‘time- out’ to gather my thoughts and centre myself. I spent a few days in Liverpool and went to as many AA meetings as I possibly could to get my feet back on the planet. As a huge Beatles fan I took the time to fulfil a wish and did all the Beatles tours. One place of interest for me was Strawberry Field – an orphanage now closed. John Lennon apparently used to jump the wall and play with the orphans and hence the song ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’. I then travelled to Scotland for a few days with my uncle. My uncle knew I was in the UK for the primary purpose of meeting my dad, had wished me well but it was obvious to me he didn’t want any detail.

When I arrived I was wearing a replica Beatles jacket I’d picked up in Liverpool and his first words to me were, “Get that Paki jacket off!” It was a half joking comment but I sensed the shame my mother had brought on the family was still present. I enjoyed staying with my uncle but looked forward to returning to Luton as I had not yet managed to connect with my father. I still felt disconnected.

I returned to Luton and the next few days were a wonderful blur of other family members and friends who travelled from different parts of the UK to meet me! During this time I went for walks with my father and it was during these walks that I began to connect with him. We walked very closely to each other and occasionally he held my arm. As best we could with each other, we talked about ourselves and he shared personal things about himself as did I. As time passed I began to see the similarity between my father and me.



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We ate meals together from the same bowls and grew closer. My father would often giggle and smile when I was around and he was obviously very happy that I was in the house. The feeling was becoming mutual.

I spent a lot of time getting to know my sisters and brothers. We went bowling, the movies, to restaurants and played pool. We sang songs together, played football, it was like a concentrated catch-up on that which I had lost. I felt paternal towards my younger siblings. It was a really nice feeling to be with them. I felt connected. I felt part of. I looked around me to see all these brown faces and I have to say, it felt good! It certainly seemed natural to me compared to any other situation I had found myself in. At the same time, I felt sad that this is what I'd missed out on for my whole life, up until now.

As the oldest brother I am in an honoured position. My intention was never to take over from my brother who was the oldest until my appearance. I explained this to him before I left Australia and again when I met him. He seemed happy for me to be the oldest. Kashmiri culture is different from what I've known and grown up with. For instance, the older siblings can order the younger siblings to do things for them. I could say to a younger brother – "Go down the road and buy me a Pepsi" and they would do it. No please or thank you required. I can imagine talking the same way to my adopted brothers and they would tell me where to go! At one stage, my father asked me to ask another brother who was estranged from the family somewhat, to come around to the house. Apparently he had not been around the house in a considerable time. I asked him and he came to the house.

Whilst I was spending time with my family and also when walking the streets of Luton it was apparent to me I had lost a lot in growing up apart. This is not to say I didn't have a good home environment and good parents. Rather, the loss of racial identity. My shame about my ethnicity stemmed from the lack of role models.

I recall one particular meeting with my cousins and one of them – the oldest cousin, a beautiful and intelligent woman said to me because I was the oldest son and she the oldest daughter of my uncle - that I could have been her husband. I literally nearly fell off my seat. It was a wonderful moment of affirmation I will never forget and yet it was tinged with sadness at the lost life I could never reclaim.

The shame completely disappeared whilst I was with my family. In fact, I had to keep telling myself not to become so 'ethnic' and lose my Scottish / Australian identity. I was becoming racist towards whites – not through anything anyone in my family was saying but rather as an out working of inner rage. In truth, I am part Kashmiri, part Scottish and part Australian. However, in appearance I am Kashmiri and I was happily lost in the world of Luton. I was anonymous. I became more Kashmiri in appearance having my hair cut short, wearing a stud in my ear. I transformed more and more as I spent time with my family.

One day I was walking with a brother and he spotted some National Front graffiti on the wall. I asked a passer-by to take a picture of my brother and I posing under the graffiti. I said to my brother, "Let's shave our heads, wear braces, Doc Martins and go to the National Front headquarters and apply for membership. If they decline, we'll ask if we can be associate members." I had a tremendous belly laugh about that and I'm not sure my brother understood why I found it so funny. Hatred is not for me and I don't intend to hate

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anyone regardless of colour or creed or religion. My family in Luton are Muslims, my birth mother is a Protestant, I was brought up by my adoptive parents to be a Pentecostal born again believer in Jesus, I have lived in Israel and prayed in Synagogues in Hebrew on Yom Kippur with religious Jews, I've practiced Eastern Mysticism, my first wife was into witchcraft, my second a former Catholic and my third an Atheist. Funnily enough, I found God in a 12 step program but then again He was always around, even in those very first days.

When I left the family to return to Australia the entire family stood in the street and were in tears. It was a difficult thing to do – to return to Australia, not to say that Australia isn't a great country to live in! At the airport I said goodbye to my brothers and sisters and I knew in my heart I would never be the same again. I had changed forever. I had been with my own and felt part of them - an extraordinary feeling!

It's been more than 11 years since I met my father and I've returned 4 times to attend a sister's wedding, a brother's wedding, as well as to introduce my wife and daughter to my family. I am much more at peace and accepting of myself having met my father and my family and it has largely put to rest the ghosts of racism towards my own kind. I feel settled knowing my story – where, why and how I came about, why I was left in the orphanage and where the 'dark side' of me comes from. It has helped immensely that my father accepted me. If both he and my mother had rejected me at reunion, I would not be so accepting. The fact I have one parent that accepts me and the other who rejects me is ok – at least I know them both. Of course I would like to have made a lasting connection with my mother but she is an alcoholic and this I understand very well. I am able to see her as a sick person rather than a bad person. I see myself in her self-centredness, her internal rage and bitterness. Without my 12 step program I would succumb to this self-centredness and I'm grateful that God has set me free.

Connecting with my family doesn't come easily to me though. It's usually sporadic and focusses around planned trips to the UK. One of my younger brothers stays in contact with me but every return visit has been fulfilling in its own way. All my father's family treat me as a legitimate member of the family – pun fully intended.

Finding my birth parents has made connection with my adoptive mother much better. My adoptive father passed away many years ago and I always felt very connected to him. My struggles always centred around my relationship with my adoptive mother. At times we were involved in open warfare, at other times there would be no contact for months or years. Today, it has all changed and I ring her very regularly. We finish our calls with "I love you mum" or "I love you son" and I no longer wince to hear or say it. My adoptive mother stays with me from time to time and this was unthinkable for most of my adult life.

I am convinced the primal wounding that takes place when we are separated from our mother is exacerbated by the mystery of our unanswered questions: who am I, where do I come from, what are my racial origins, why was I abandoned, what was wrong with me that I was not kept? These endless unanswerable questions which a young mind cannot comprehend then cripples the adult mind, forever damning that person to live a half-life of wondering and wandering. However, once the family of origin is found there is then a potential (but not a guarantee) that healing can take place. Nevertheless, the instinctive, reactive, abandoned infant will forever live in the heart and soul of the adoptee throughout adulthood. The extent to which we can manage that fracture is dependent upon our will to



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be free from the effects of the original abandonment. The wisest of us know the effects cannot be eradicated but understand they can be moderated. Connecting to one's birth parents can provide one key to wholeness - as can acceptance and forgiveness for the birth and adoptive parents.

I suggest the following could be done by professionals, governments or agencies to help assist in search and reunification for transracial adoptees like myself:

- Maintenance of a database to allow the search to be conducted with access into other databases such as births, adoptions, deaths and marriages in each country.
- Facilitated counselling service that assisted with the search and reunion process from beginning to end.
- Employment of knowledgeable trained and empathetic staff.
- Listing of adoptees as mentors who have been through the process.
- Stories of adoptee searches and their reconciliation to the results of those searches whether they be good, bad and ugly.

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## Anonymous

(German response provided with translation to English)

Ursprünglich aus Algerien. Aber im Mutterleib nach Deutschland gekommen. Im Alter von 9 Monaten wurde ich in einer deutschen Familie zunächst als Pflegekind aufgenommen.

I am originally from Algeria but my womb mother came to Germany where I was born. At the age of 9 months, I was first taken up as a foster child in a German family.

Ich habe erst mit 17 Jahren von meiner Adoption erfahren. Da war ich bereits mit einem Algerier verheiratet. Als ich erfuhr, dass meine Mutter auch Algerierin ist, wollte ich sie unbedingt kennenlernen.

Während meiner ersten Schwangerschaft wurde dieser Wunsch immer stärker. Ich denke, dass es auch mit der Schwangerschaft zu tun hatte, dass ich sie unbedingt kennenlernen wollte.

I only found out I was adopted at 17 years of age. Since then, I am married to an Algerian and when I learned my mother is Algerian, I wanted essentially to meet her.

During my first pregnancy, this desire became stronger. I think it had to do with the pregnancy that my desire was ignited.

Ich hatte mir eine richtige Mutter-Tochter-Beziehung erhofft. Das Verhältnis zu meiner Adoptivmutter war sehr angespannt zu diesem Zeitpunkt. Ich wollte endlich eine richtige liebevolle fürsorgliche Mutter haben.

I had hoped for a real mother-daughter relationship. The relationship with my adoptive mother was very tense and I wanted to finally have a proper, loving, caring mother.

Ich bin direkt zum örtlichen Jugendamt gegangen und habe dort nachgefragt. Ich durfte nicht direkt mit meiner Mutter Kontakt aufnehmen, da man befürchtete, dass sie vielleicht in einer neuen Partnerschaft sei und eventuell ihrem Partner nichts von mir erzählt haben könnte.

I went directly to the local youth welfare office and I checked there. I was not allowed to make direct contact with my mother because it was feared she might be in a new partnership and possibly her partner might know nothing of me.

Ich empfand als stark bevormundend, dass das Jugendamt mir nicht direkt ihre Adresse gegeben hat. Auch in meine Akte dort durfte ich nicht selber reingucken. Es wurden mir nur einzelne Seiten vorgelesen.

I felt a strong patronising attitude from the youth welfare office who did not give me my mother's address directly. Even though they had my file, I was not allowed to peek myself. They just read out to me the individual pages.

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Zwei Wochen später durfte ich meine Mutter im Jugendamt kennen lernen. Das erste Treffen mit ihr hat mich stark verunsichert. Sie wollte direkt, dass ich sie Mama nenne und war verärgert, dass ich das nicht konnte.

Two weeks later, I got to meet my mother in the youth office. The first meeting with her deeply unsettled me. She wanted me to call her Mama and was angered that I could not.

Meine Adoptivmutter war eifersüchtig auf meinen Kontakt zu meiner leiblichen Mutter. Sie strafte mich mit eisigem Schweigen. Über das Treffen konnte ich weder mit ihr noch mit sonst jemandem aus meiner Adoptivfamilie sprechen. Das war belastend für mich.

My adoptive mother was jealous of my contact with my biological mother. She punished me with icy silence. After the meeting I could not speak with her or with anybody else from my adoptive family. It was stressful for me!

Mit meiner leiblichen Mutter war leider keine richtige Beziehung möglich. Ich bin ihr fast 18 Jahre hinterher gelaufen und habe alles versucht, um sie in mein Leben mit einzubeziehen. Sie konnte den Kontakt nicht aufrecht erhalten. Sie war sehr wechselhaft in ihren Gefühlen und versuchte mich zu manipulieren. Jedes Treffen mit ihr war für mich so belastend, dass ich danach starke Hautreaktionen hatte.

With my own womb mother it has proven difficult if not impossible to establish and maintain a proper relationship. We were 18 years behind and I tried everything to include her in my life. I have not been able to maintain the contact. She was very changeable in her feelings, trying to manipulate. Each meeting with her was so stressful for me that I developed severe skin reactions.

Die Suche und das Finden haben mich nicht wirklich geprägt. Aus zwei Gründen: erstens musste ich sie nicht lange suchen und zweitens habe ich relativ schnell gemerkt, dass ich mit ihr keine normale Beziehung haben kann. Natürlich hat es mich tief enttäuscht, aber ich habe mich davon nicht weiter stören lassen.

Searching and finding has not really influenced or changed me in any way. For two reasons: first, it did not take a long time to search; and secondly, I have relatively quickly realised that I can not have a normal relationship with her. Of course, it has deeply disappointed me but I did not let myself disturb them further.

Ich würde mir wünschen, dass es gesetzlich vorgeschrieben wäre, dass jeder Adoptierte ein Recht auf seine komplette Akte hat. Ich fände es auch hilfreich, wenn Agenturen es zur Bedingung machen würden, dass zukünftige Adoptiveltern wenigstens 2 Monate im Herkunftsland des Kindes leben müssten. Damit sie eine bessere Kenntniss über die dortige Kultur bekommen. Ich würde mir wünschen, dass jedes Adoptivkind aus einem anderen Land von klein auf seine Muttersprache erlernen kann.

I would hope that it would be required by law that every adoptee has a right to his complete file. I think it would be helpful if agencies would make it a condition that future adoptive parents have to live at least 2 months in the country of origin of the child. Thus they have a better knowledge about the local culture. I would hope that every adopted child can learn from an early age his mother tongue within his adopted country.

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Es wäre auch schön, wenn jedes Adoptivkind ein Foto seiner leiblichen Mutter haben könnte. Vielleicht auch einen Brief, in dem genau steht, warum das Kind nicht bei seiner Familie aufwachsen kann.

It would also be nice if every adopted child could have a photo of his biological mother. Perhaps a letter in which precisely it is explained why the child cannot grow up with his family.

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## S

I was born in India and adopted to Sweden at the age of 3 years.

My partner encouraged me to look for my parents. He made me believe there was a possibility of finding someone, if not my parents, at least a relative.

According to my background story, my mother had died during or shortly after giving birth to me. It also said my father had “disappeared without a trace”. Therefore, I never thought to actively search for anyone as I was led to believe there was no one to look for. My adoptive mother taught me to be suspicious of “Indian bureaucracy”. She claimed “they don’t keep records” unlike countries in the West. Therefore, it would be impossible for me to find out anything more about my background than what we already knew.

Hence, I had no expectations at any time during my search. Completely unprepared would be the word and grateful, for any additional information I might be able to get.

Taking my Indian court document that my parents had kept, my partner and I travelled to India to visit his friend who is from the same city where I was born. From that document we found the name of the person who had granted the adoption in the court. Our friend located the name and number of this person through the local phone book and called them. It later turned out to be my maternal aunt’s husband whose name was in the court documents.

In terms of obstacles, the Swedish authorities were completely incapable in helping me in my search by providing me with any further documentation regarding my adoption in addition to the few documents kept by my parents. Other obstacles include financial and bureaucratic things – financing and planning the search, applying for VISA, translators and finding someone who is able to approach officials; these are obstacles most adoptees will face. I was very lucky to both be able to afford to travel to India as well we had some local contacts who were able to help us in my search.

Making enquiries regarding my own and my parent’s background resulted in meeting a lot of people with their own opinions and ideas about what adoption is and what an adoptee should and should not do. Being questioned on something so personal by family, friends and even strangers was probably the most challenging thing I had to face as a searching adoptee. Personally, I found myself questioned by many of the people I came across in India. No-one could really understand why I was searching and my relatives felt very uncomfortable with me asking questions about my background.

I found my maternal family - aunts and uncles, all their children and even some of their grandchildren. I also found and met my maternal grandmother. It was through them that I found out the background story regarding my mother and her death was incorrect. She had not died during or shortly after my birth, but many years later. Regarding my father, I have not been able to receive any additional information about him from my family.

Finding out my mother was alive at the time of my adoption and seemingly unaware that my relatives had arranged for me to be adopted abroad has been very upsetting. I still feel upset when I think about it considering for so many years, I walked around believing

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she was dead. If I had know, I would have attempted to find and meet her. Also, the realisation my relatives I have met in India are withholding information about my background is very painful for me and something I have not yet come to terms with.

My adoptive parents know I have travelled to India and found some of my relatives, they have also met some of them in person. Further than that, we have not discussed anything regarding my adoption or my reunion. I have tried bringing it up but it is difficult to find a comfortable angle at which to approach the subject with them. I think I prefer to deal with my reunion on my own.

With regards to maintaining a relationship with my biological family and the obstacles I have encountered - this has been difficult. Apart from the obvious language barrier and the geographical distance, the hurt I feel due to my Indian relatives withholding and lying about my origins is something I have not reconciled with and I am not sure I ever will.

Talking to other international and transracial adoptees who have shared experiences has been useful in navigating this part of my life.

Being able to say, with some certainty, roughly the geographical location of where I was born and came from and approximately my date of birth has been somewhat comforting. Knowing there are physical places and fixed dates I am connected to helps on some level.

As an outcome of my experience I have become more critical of international and transracial adoption as a practice overall.

To further help adoptees like myself, professionals, governments and agencies should follow the laws regulating international adoption in both sending and receiving countries and adhere to UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to prevent illegal and unethical international adoptions. When followed, adoptees should have the right to all documentation involving their background and adoption and they should be able to access this at any age or time should they so wish.

Agencies should be offering their full cooperation to adoptees who wish to reunite with their first families. Language classes in the adoptee's native tongue should be made available, assisting in a reduction of future language barriers.

During the adoption process, a sum of money should be earmarked especially for reunion trips to their country of birth, should they wish.

Professionals working in the physical and mental health services should be educated about the potential risks for adoptees who do not have knowledge of their medical backgrounds. They should also be prepared to better support adoptees who decide to search for their first families.

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## Seon Kee Woodley



I am born in South Korea and adopted to Australia at 4 years old.

My reason for searching for birth family was the feeling of emptiness, like a part of me was missing. I would say this started when I was around 15. At the time, I presumed it was usual growing pains / adolescence but as I got older, I realised it was more than that. I started to try different things to replace this "emptiness" but nothing seemed to work.

I recall talking to one of best mates at the time when I was around 17 years old and I was trying to figure out the root cause to my depression. After a short while I think I figured it out. The emptiness I was feeling was due to what happened when I was younger.

My expectations in short were to find my parents and with that I believed the emptiness would go away. I was wrong.

I never ended up having to conduct much of a search for family because at the time I was thinking about initiating a search, my biological father was also trying to find me. I guess I consider myself lucky in that regard!

I first contacted the adoption agency in Australia who were still connected to Eastern Social Welfare (the Korean adoption agency). I requested for them to send all documentation from when I was adopted and anything else of relevance. The response I received was basically "we have nothing more than has already been provided". My parents had kept everything on my adoption in a file. They gave it to me when I reached an age I would appreciate and not lose it.

I already suspected there were flaws in the paperwork as the name on my documents didn't match the name I wrote on drawings I had created in the orphanage. I figured that even though I was young, I would know what my name was and write it correctly.

The agency basically said the only option left was to attempt a search for my parents. We discussed it for a bit on the phone and I was left to think about it before committing/deciding on anything. It was during this thinking time that the Australian adoption agency called me and advised they had an email from my Korean father.

I have never been a huge fan of fairy tales, being somewhat pessimistic stops that. As much as I was excited about the possibility of meeting my biological family, I didn't expect everything to be perfect.

After some email conversations, my father and I decided to meet up in Korea. I was 20 years old by this point and when we finally met face to face, it was really strange. My father was overcome with emotion but I was the opposite. I looked at my dad and thought he looked like an older version of me. Other than that, I didn't really feel much else emotionally.



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Meeting with my paternal grandmother was the only time I did feel some kind of emotional connection. Neither of us could explain it but when we were together, we were really happy and relaxed. Words cannot explain it.

This first trip and subsequent trip to Korea had an impact on myself and my adoptive family. The first time I returned from Korea, I didn't want to return to Australia. The second and third visits weren't much better and on the fourth visit, I came and split up with my then wife. So you could say it has definitely not been a smooth journey!

I am close to my adoptive parents and I don't view them as my "adoptive" parents. They are simply my parents. My Korean parents aren't my parents.

The whole experience with finding my past has not been the most pleasant. During that time I wanted badly to be Korean again. The harder I tried, the more it felt like being stabbed in the heart. Other than within my Korean family, I was not accepted as a Korean. It still hurts somewhat to this day, though I have accepted more or less the fact that I am Australian.

In terms of government or agency assistance, I don't really think it's as simple as requesting more support. There are far too many legal red tape and cultural issues that I guess some people don't realise. Yes, I agree that adoptees have a right to find out the truth, however, to what extent can agencies or governments intervene when it is touching on an individual's privacy i.e., the biological family? Sometimes we get so caught up in our western way of thinking, we forget asian culture is different.

Governments and agencies should help and not hamper obtaining information for an adoptee but I stop short at providing everything without prior consent from both parties.

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## Sophia Bremer

I am from Hanoi, Vietnam and I was adopted to Germany at 14 months of age.

I searched because I looked different than my parents and my peers would always exclaim, "Is that your mom or dad?" and I was in denial in some way or form. As I became more accepting to the fact I was adopted, I started asking myself questions like who my birth mother is, where I came from, my roots and if I had a sibling or not. All these questions and more lingered through my mind more frequently as I grew up. Searching was something I always wanted to do once I had a better grasp of what it meant to be adopted.

I had no expectations. I didn't want to go into the situation expecting something and then get disappointed. It was never guaranteed I would find a trace of my birth parents. I kept my mind hopeful but still had a realistic mentality.

My parents have always been very understanding and supportive with my questions and my curiosity for my roots. My mom got in touch with the orphanage agency and they gave us the email for a private detective who helped families find their birth families. We got in contact with him through email shortly afterwards, scanned my documents and sent to him, then he did the research. He picked us up from the airport and took us to our hotel and we talked shortly about what the process would be. He had a lot of contacts and we drove to my birth village and had coffee and tea with one of his friends on the way who helped us in some way or form. We ended up finding her and my birth brother!

In terms of obstacles I experienced along the way, it was my feelings. I had no emotional attachment to my birth mother but of course I didn't want to look heartless. I was scared to meet her because of the fear of her wanting to take me back. I didn't cry and I felt detached but I was still feeling blessed to know the truth of my story.

I found my birth mom and my birth brother! I didn't find my father because he left her after I was born and never returned. The outcome was wonderful and I felt like I found a piece of myself that was missing. I now feel complete. I feel like I know my story and my history. I feel a better attachment and understanding for my roots and I know where I'm from. I've fallen in love with my culture and love sharing my story with people.

My experience of reunion has probably strengthened my relationship with my adoptive family because it brought us together as a family. I love my mom and my dad but this experience of exploring who I am was probably a relief to them - they were able to be a part of my journey of finding myself.

In terms of maintaining a relationship with my biological family, it has been hard! We sent my mother a package (she had relocated to China after I was born because of work) and I never got a response or anything.

The communication is limited. My birth mom and brother speak Vietnamese but also Chinese, however, since I am not a native Chinese speaker or kept up with my birth language, staying in touch definitely has its challenges.

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The support of my friends and family during this time has been vital to helping me cope with the reunion and talk about it openly. The support really helps because I see my adoption is not a bad thing and realise how selfless my birth mom was to make the decision for me to have a better life.

I've integrated the reunion in the sense of who I am by finally being OK with adoption. Not looking down upon it and realising how fortunate and blessed I am. I feel fulfilled and can talk about my story in an open dialogue.

Professionals, governments and agencies can better assist us intercountry adoptees by doing a better job at organising adoptions and the documentation from the beginning. A lot of the problems is people are dropped off (in Asian countries) without any parental information. Babies are found in restrooms and other places without a note, so most of the time information is so limited. I think if Governments showed more interest in adoption and a genuine support for adoptees, birth families, and adoptive families, people would have a different view of adoption.

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## Anonymous

(French response provided with translation to English)

Je suis originaire d'Haïti. J'ai été adoptée par une famille canadienne à l'âge de 1 an et demi. J'ai maintenant 19 ans.

I am from Haiti. I was adopted by a Canadian family at the age of one and a half years old. I am now 19 years old.

Je crois que c'est la curiosité et un besoin de connaître mes racines que j'ai toujours éprouvé qui m'ont poussée à me poser plus de questions sur ma famille biologique. Je voulais savoir si ma mère biologique était en vie. Mais ce n'est pas moi qui l'ai retrouvée. Au final, c'est elle qui récemment m'a retrouvée à l'aide de Facebook. Je dois dire, que je n'y m'y attendais pas du tout, et ce fut un gros choc émotionnel. Je me suis découvert une immense famille avec des demi-frères et des demi-sœurs, une multitude de tantes et d'oncle. C'est encore aujourd'hui, un choc que je n'arrive pas à surmonter.

I think it is curiosity and a need to know my roots I have always felt that prompted me to ask me more questions about my biological family. I wanted to know if my biological mother was alive. But it is not I who found. In the end, it was she who recently found me using Facebook. I must say, I did not expect it at all and it was a big emotional shock. I discovered a huge family with half-brothers and half-sisters, numerous aunts and uncle. It's still a shock that I cannot overcome.

Ma mère adoptive a bien pris la nouvelle au départ. Seulement après, elle s'est mise à réagir très négativement, et je crois que c'est son comportement qui me perturbe le plus. J'aimerais avoir plus de support auprès d'elle, mais elle ne semble pas être prête à en donner et, je crois que tout au fond d'elle, elle a peur que ma mère biologique me « vole ». C'est donc une situation très difficile.

My adoptive mother has taken the news badly. Only after hearing she reacted very negatively and I think it's this behaviour that disturbs me the most. I would like more support from her but she does not seem to be ready to give and I think that everything within her, she worries that my biological mother will "fly" to me. It is a very difficult situation!

La relation que j'entretiens avec ma famille biologique est délicate. J'ai contacté deux ou trois fois ma mère biologique au téléphone et c'est tout. Les rares fois où on se parle sont grâce à Facebook. Je crois qu'elle voudrait qu'on communique plus, mais j'ai peur d'envenimer la relation tendue que j'ai avec ma mère adoptive. J'entretiens, donc deux relations très délicates et qui sont très difficiles à maintenir.

The relationship I have with my biological family is tricky. I contacted two or three times my biological mother on the phone and that's it. The few times we speak is through Facebook. I think she wants us to communicate more but I'm afraid to escalate the tense relationship I have with my adoptive mother. I try to balance two very delicate relationships that are very difficult to maintain.

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Je n'ai pas encore rencontré ma famille biologique, ce que j'aimerais bien faire un jour. Je ne crois pas que le fait d'avoir retrouvé ma famille ait changé, qui je suis réellement. Plusieurs de mes questions ont été répondues, mais, en conclusion, je suis restée la même.

I have not met my biological family yet, I'd like to someday. I do not think having found my family has changed who I really am. Many of my questions were answered but after all this, I remained the same.

Je ne connais pas vraiment les agences qui aident les gens à retrouver leurs familles biologiques, mais je pourrais tout de même suggérer qu'ils se mettent en place des centres spécialisés pour les adoptés qui ont besoin de parler, d'échanger avec d'autres adoptés. Parfois, juste partager nos expériences avec des personnes étant dans la même situation peut faire du bien et redonner le sourire dans certains moments de détresses.

I do not really know the agencies that help people to find their biological families but I would still suggest that they are set up as specialised centres for adoptees who need to talk, to exchange with others also adopted. Sometimes just sharing experiences with people being in the same situation can do good and bring smiles in times of distress.

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## Summer Youngs

I'm adopted from South Korea to the United States at 6 years of age.

I wanted to search to find my biological sister and I had all my information. I had reached a time in my life that I wanted to know more about my family and finding out who I am. I looked in my adoption papers and then went to my adoption agency which is Eastern Welfare Society, in Seoul, South Korea. I experienced the language barrier.

I found my other bio-sister and gained more understanding of who I am and where I come from. I experienced no changes in my adoptive family relationship.

In terms of maintaining a relationship with bio family, we write letters and emails. I have to say language barrier has been the most difficult issue. I do ask my Korean American friends and other Korean Adoptees to translate the letters and emails.

I have now found my biological sister and the process of searching and reunion with her has made me understand her better.

There was no cost to me for finding my biological family but I have heard of other adoptees being charged fees to conduct their search. I think there should be more accurate record keeping and better archiving of records.

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## Tamieka Small

I came from Ethiopia to Australia at around 13-15 months old.

I want to search because there's so much I don't know about myself, my identity in terms of culture, heritage and family history. I don't think I'm in the right place to search at the moment, perhaps in a few years when I'm financially independent and more emotionally stable. I was told growing up that my family was dead. It wasn't until a few years ago I started questioning the validity of my adoptive parents' story of my first family's death. I've now realised they may be still alive. This is still very hard for me to comprehend.

I'm also more aware of my repressed trauma and I hope that searching will provide me with some relief and closure. My expectations are that maybe one or two of my family or extended family members are alive and may want to see me, or that there was a valid reason for my birth mother to give me up.

I've found an adoption investigation group on Facebook that may be able to help but I haven't decided to use them yet. I've also put my data into the Ethiopian Adoption Connection database to see if I can find a match - but there's nothing at the moment.

I have no knowledge of anything about my birth family but would like to find out if possible, somehow.

I think there should be more advertisements of what sort of help the government and agencies can provide for adoptees searching. I also think they should make it clear to adoptive parents that searching isn't a bad thing to do and doesn't necessarily reflect on their parenting of their adoptive child. I think they should stress how culture is a critical part of someone's identity, hence why some adoptees would like to search. I feel that some adoptive parents misunderstand adoptee's reasons for wanting to know about our origins.



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## Viorica Magreta

I was born in Braila, Romania, and adopted at 15 months old to America.

Natural curiosity made me want to search. My parents instilled in me that I was adopted at a young age but they taught me to be proud of where I came from. So I was curious about who my parents were who lived in this far away land (Romania). As I grew older and had more questions my adoptive parents discouraged my searching and my questions about my heritage, so I waited until I was in high school to finally search. I did a research project in my senior year about Romanian orphanages. I guess you could say that sparked my interest because a couple months later, I found my Romanian mother's side of the family. My expectations were of a happy, easy, and glorious reunion.

At the beginning of searching, I didn't have the exact names of my Romanian parents because my adoptive parents wouldn't let me see my adoption papers - so I found a lady on Netlog (European Facebook). I messaged her and according to my adoptive mom who got into my email, claimed the lady sent back nude images. My mom locked up the computer settings so I couldn't do any more research, but within a week I figured out her password and unlocked the computer. I then turned to google but didn't search too much. I looked at my adoption papers and figured out my Romanian mom's exact name. I then used [adopteeconnection.com](http://adopteeconnection.com) and then Facebook. I encountered many false leads and of course the language barrier.

I eventually found my mothers relatives with the help of someone who lived over there. The guy went to the address on my adoption papers and met my grandpa. It's been emotional for sure. Many highs and lows but very worth it. My adoptive mom is an alcoholic so our relationship has been strained for a while. It's stayed the same for the most part. I am close with some members (aunts, uncles, grandmother) of my adoptive family and finding my family in Romania hasn't changed these relationships.

Maintaining a relationship with my family in Romania been challenging. Unfortunately, I turned to the mass media in Romania for help, so most of my story is known in Romania, but it hasn't been all negative. Many people who watched my story on Romanian TV have been very helpful with translating and being there for me, supporting me. The language barrier is the biggest issue but it doesn't stop us from communicating. Google translate has been very useful in this part of my life but it isn't the best at translating, so I have started learning Romanian.

Reunion has made me a stronger and smarter person. I have read up on the perspectives of mothers of adoption loss so I can understand why my mother in Romania does the things she does. I can handle many emotional things I never thought I would be able to. I have also started helping some other Romanian adoptees discover their roots.

Luckily for Romanian adoptees, our adoption papers have lots of identifying information. Unfortunately, we don't get our original birth certificates but we do get copies. People in Romania are willing to help us Romanian adoptees find our families so the search isn't too bad an experience.

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## Vong Ung Thanh

**aka Lynelle Long, Founder of *InterCountry Adoptee Voices* based in Australia**

I was born during the Vietnam war, in 1973 and adopted to Australia at 5 months of age.

During my mid 20s it suddenly came to my attention that being adopted had impacted me. Prior to that, I'd lived my life as any adolescent - getting on with things, trying to fit in, growing up, getting educated, making friends, establishing myself! During my very early childhood years I had always wondered about my original family - I missed them, I had cried out for them when awakening from dreams, I had felt sad often - but I never expressed it to my adoptive family or anyone, except through music.

At 19 years of age, my life had come tumbling around me. I suffered from extreme depression and suicidal tendencies due to the many issues I'd experienced as a child growing up in white Australia, in a family who had no idea of the impact being relinquished was having, compounded by additional complexities created by my adoptive family. I had finally sought help for these issue in my mid 20s and it was this starting point which helped me finally "connect" with my inner feelings - which included feelings of grief, loss and not knowing who my mother and family were, or who I was.

Looking back, it was learning to be "reconnected" within myself that enabled me to identify I had always wanted to know my origins, always had questions about why I was relinquished, and always wanted to search for my family in Vietnam. It's just that my life within my adoptive family had always inhibited my feelings and I had pushed them down so deeply I was experiencing depression. With professional help I learnt my depression was due to the amount of energy I had to employ to push away my very deepest feelings and sensations - a safety and survival mechanism to help me cope at the time because I didn't know any other avenue for safely exploring the issues which had been buried!

I began informally searching in my mid 20s by checking out avenues of people I knew who were Vietnamese, which hadn't numbered many until this stage of life. Connecting with fellow Vietnamese adoptees helped me realise I was not alone! Most of us had similar problems with our documentation from Vietnam - it was either scant, falsified, or none at all. Where does one start to search when you have nothing official except a Vietnamese passport that could easily have been falsified?

A work colleague of mine had some local contacts in Vietnam who offered to enquire for me. All I could give them was my supposed Vietnamese name, Vong Ung Thanh, with a date of birth which I never knew if it was correct but had been stated in letters between my adoptive family and the lawyer in Vietnam who facilitated my adoption. The local contacts searched and did what they could but nothing came of it.

Years later, I tried again by making contact with the Vietnam lawyer's daughter who had been a young teenager when my adoptive father flew to Vietnam to bring me home. My father had taken movie footage of this trip and this teenage girl can be seen with me, her father (the lawyer) and their family. My hope was she might remember something, might know how her father's work operated and might be able to shed some light on my beginnings. She is now residing in France and I wrote to her and her father, the lawyer, asking if they had kept or remembered any information about me. Unfortunately the

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responses I got back talked about how fortunate I was to be out of Vietnam and how I should get on with my life, connect with other Vietnamese and be happy. I also found out the wife of the lawyer had passed away - and she had been the *one* person who might have had answers because while her husband did all the legal work, she was the one doing the work on the ground - finding (sourcing) babies and putting them into their own private creche to be cared for until adoptive parents organised for the baby to be flown to their new home country.

The entire lawyer's family had fled to France when the North took over South Vietnam. Years later, I tried again to approach the daughter for any help but this was again met with resistance and lacked any desire to help or assist.

In the meanwhile, over the years I built up a network of intercountry adoptees (formerly ICASN now ICAV) which included many from Vietnam. About 3 years ago, I watched with fascination as a few Vietnamese US adoptees utilise the services of a private investigator / detective who seemed to have many connections which led to a few successful and well publicised reunions. It was a fellow Australian Vietnamese adoptee who shared about her search using this detective that inspired me to finally try him myself.

I talked more with some of the US Vietnamese adoptees who had success through this investigator. I asked many questions, including financials and I eventually decided to contact him. It was certainly a risk given the wide range of views about him being shared amongst the Vietnamese adoptee community. I had also made the decision that ultimately if anyone was found, I would not accept the result until a reputable DNA test was done to confirm. I had heard of dodgy DNA test results, of family being found but never confirmed via DNA testing and I didn't want that experience.

Initially, I questioned the investigator over a few months, trying to suss out how he operated, wondering whether I was going to be taken for a ride, wondering whether I could trust him but eventually I realised - I didn't have much choice! He was one avenue for getting results that I'd not seen in my 17 years of being involved with Vietnamese adoptees. The Vietnamese government has still not opened up to provide any services for it's many hundreds of intercountry adoptees around the world who want to travel back. The Vietnamese government could do this easily by formalising return trips and having a department who can access our adoption records. So we are left having to find our own way, utilising whatever means we can.

In the end, I protected myself by paying up front with the request to "try and find my papers" as a first step. Then based on the results of that step, for anything further to be negotiated afterwards. I was prepared for the worse case scenario of having nothing in return for my money. Eventually, the risk payed off and after 6 months, the investigator contacted me to say he'd found my birth certificate and original application for passport papers of which he sent me a copy.

Wow! What a find! Considering I'd lived all my 43 years to date, not having any formal documentation about myself that's true except my Vietnamese passport! I now finally had something that confirmed my name, my date of birth and gave me other extra pieces of information I'd never known - such as the hospital where I was born, the time I was born, and the most important bit - my mother's name and a witness name! My mother's name is almost the same as mine! In letters between the lawyer's wife and my adoptive parents, it

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had been mentioned my name was given to me by my mother. I had read those words many times in my mid 20s when I asked for those letters and it had been the fundamental piece of information I had hung onto. My mother had actually named me, taken the time to ensure I had a name, which I've now found out is almost the same as hers. My name connects me to her. This is why fundamentally our original names are so important to us adoptees - it is the one act by our mothers that tie us to the knowledge they held us close, saw us as an important being in their lives! Sadly but pragmatically, I have always reconciled myself to knowing I might never know why I was given up.

To date, we have not managed to find anything else or to locate the woman who's name is on my birth certificate. I live in hope the impossible might be achieved, after all I have lived my whole life thinking it would be impossible to find any documents and we've actually found my birth certificate.

With regards to my relationship with my adoptive family, we have gone through many ups and downs due to the complexities within my family. Today, my relationship with my adoptive parents is better than ever despite the past and due to commitment to working through the issues. So when I got to utilising the services of the private investigator, my parents totally supported me and helped me financially. I think on the one hand they are excited for me, on the other, I can sense their fear that I might find a "better" family should I find anything. I think the fear adoptive families have is unfounded if there has been a fairly positive relationship most of the time. If anything, I suspect finding my original family will only strengthen my relationship with my adoptive family because after all, I'll only have genes in common but not much else - no shared history and memories, no language, culture or values in common. I have the expectation that should I ever find family, it will be so difficult to forge a close relationship with them because of our completely separated lives and the lack of common language and values to understand one another.

So far, the obstacles in search and reunion for me have included having absolutely no paperwork, no starting point. Also, having no formalised and vetted professional search service available in my country of origin. This leaves us adoptees open to being potentially taken advantage of by entrepreneurial middle men who can benefit from our vulnerable situations because we have no other choice if we want to search. It has also been difficult being so close via email to someone who might have remembered things but with their attitude of adoption being so closed, I didn't receive any help. This experience was extremely frustrating but has helped me be more fully aware of the attitudes and cultural expectations we adoptees face when confronting our countries of origin with our need to find our beginnings.

Our sending countries flew us intercountry adoptees out usually from a lack of social infrastructure to support our mothers to keep us. For me, in Vietnam it was a war zone with a lack of political, economic, and social stability. So in the eyes of our sending country, we adoptees are the "lucky" ones to escape - being flown out to a wealthy country with white people and a democracy. It is going to take some time for our sending countries to catchup on the research and material available reflecting that our journeys of adoption are not always a straight forward "lucky" experience. Maybe then they'll develop some empathy for what we've been through and balance out how much we've lost vs what we've gained. Perhaps then they might create the much needed support services to facilitate our searches, reunions and the journey post reunion.

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This also reminds me of the lack of support our original families have experienced - they have remained in their country, unassisted, and with even less support or understanding for what is now widely recognised in western countries and documented as “relinquishment trauma and grief” that impacts the parent(s) for a lifetime. How long will it take for our sending countries to recognise the long term mental health impact it has on the family and community who are left behind after a child has been relinquished and given up for intercountry adoption?

So from my perspective, more needs to be done to raise awareness of the natural need intercountry adoptees have to find their origins and reconnect with family where possible. I truly hope one day we will see our sending and receiving governments work together better to facilitate this reconnection and to help balance out the general public’s awareness of the impacts intercountry adoption has on *all* parties involved.

The impact on all needs to also be better reflected as per *The Hague Convention for Intercountry Adoption*. In reality, post adoption support (different to post placement) is barely provided for, in most sending or receiving countries. Nor is it clearly defined from a logistical perspective that our right to identity (as per the *Convention of the Rights of the Child*) needs to include providing *full access* to our original documentation by orphanages, central authorities, or private organisations who facilitated our adoptions. This right to our identity documents is what impedes many of us from ever truly knowing who we are and prevents us from having a decent starting position for how to conduct our search. The focus of the Hague Convention is still largely around the transactional nature of giving a child a home with little thought for the long term journey of adopted life. Search and reunion is just *one* of the phases of our adopted journey requiring well thought out support and services!

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## Yong Sun Gullach

### Chairwoman of *Adoptionspolitisk Forum* based in Denmark

I am adopted from South Korea to Denmark at 2½ years of age.

I gave birth to my first child in 1992 and started to wonder about my origins when my second was born in 1999. I wanted to give my children a part of my family history to build an identity upon. That was my first recognised need. Later on, I came to realise I have a deep longing for origins and family who I can relate to.

There are two sets of expectations I have experienced with regards to searching for original family. Firstly, the one the brain creates and the secondly, the expectation my body creates. My brain kind of knew I should expect not to find anything due to my age but my body was still longing. I know logically it is beyond my control and this knowledge finds its way out in a form of sorrow and anger - but it is part of me and I allow it to be like this. My body remembers far better than my brain, so I accept the need of my body too.

To conduct my search for the first time in 2004, I visited Holt and the hospital with an interpreter and we tried to get as many of my papers as possible. The second time I placed an add in a newspaper in Seoul in 2005, published a letter in a GOAL publication and left a letter written in Korean at HOLT. The third time, I got DNA registered at a Korean DNA bank and went to a TV show in Korea. I also created ads at all the online places I know of for searching. My final option which I try now, is to place myself in the bigger DNA register – I have just done Family Tree and am considering 23&Me. When I go to Korea this summer, I will do the Korean DNA register again.

In terms of obstacles that I have faced in searching, the basic issue is Holt who do not hand the full files over – this is really the worst part and the main obstacle. Second is Korean culture and language which may very well prevent my birth mom from searching for me. Also the lack of Korean language on my part, makes it difficult for me to explain all the official pieces of information needed in a search process and why I find it so frustrating because it is my damn human right to know who I am!

In terms of outcomes from all the searching I've done so far, I've found 4th and 5th cousins through DNA testing which is close to nothing.

The first and biggest impact emotionally on me from my trips in 2004 & 2005 in searching, has been it started my more critical thinking about adoption and made me realise how much this was about a structure rather than me as a single person. I had not realise beforehand how many adoptees were impacted, it set into perspective how nationally organised and orchestrated our adoptions were - the politics and economics, the way in which the system of falsifying papers developed - this was a huge shock! This opened my eyes that this cannot be solved or understood unless I look at the whole search as being larger than my own individual experience.

In my second attempt to search, I became aware of how much I got re-traumatised when going back and having to deal with the adoption agency. There is a fine line between feeling rejected and going to these power organisations who manifest the systems imbalance and being rejected by them each time. Holt is such a large, international and



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well established organisation. It still holds onto our adoption papers without any openness or understanding of the ethics around this. It is emotional violence on me each time I visit them.

I'm dreading my 4th visit! Once again, they will sit in front of me with my files 30cm high, yet hold onto their power over my life in knowing all of my origins information yet not allowing me access to it. It is a demonstration of power that is violent and unnecessary but they do it in order to discourage me from returning. On top of this, they now charge money just to meet with them. It is around US\$200 (for US\$100 more you can visit the orphanage and meet up with your family – if you have any). Not only did they make money from exporting me as a young child, but now they make more money from all us adult adoptees wanting to know and understand our origins. And even though we pay the fee, they still withhold the Korean papers and information. One has to ask why are they like this? My view is they are withholding from exposing the structural falsifications they have built and justified my adoption upon. Until legal action can be taken, we adoptees remain under their power to the right for our basic identity. Searching has made me realise the mind boggling reality that intercountry adoption remains one of the few structural systems where what we know about right and wrong by law, has been turned upside down. Illegal activities have been made legal.

In Europe transnational adoption is the only system that requires a special convention that sits outside the universal human rights convention. Why is it the laws we consider right and for which we have ratified, do not apply to intercountry adoption? From this perspective, the rights of the child are just a smoke screen, a fig leaf.

Searching also reconnected me with my anger. Many people are scared of anger but for me it was empowering to accept that I found this so highly unfair, this system! It made me extremely angry - not in a violent way, but to realise how unjust our situation is, in so many ways. I refuse to accept the story telling around adoption and the claims Holt pushes onto me. When I meet with them, they actively sit down and tell me I have to be happy with my new family .. I refuse to accept this! Anger can be very powerful if you use it as a force to make things right.

My favourite quote from the Joan of Arc film goes a bit like this, "I did all the things I had to do because I was fighting for a cause". I relate to this! As an activist, I constantly ask myself why I am doing this and whether it is in the right way? I can never criticise other adoptees who don't want to connect to this kind of anger. We all have different survival strategies. I understand the sorrow and pain connected to the anger. But each time I search, its like someone turns on the fire within me. I simply have come to terms with understanding that I have been a victim of trafficking.

Most people cannot put together concepts of trafficking with intercountry adoption - but I see it as the mechanism derived from a need and demands in the western world. This demand has resulted in a systematic process for removing a highly valuable resource from a country - it's children. Western colonial powers see it as their right to take these children by claims of being better parents, of having a superior understanding of the welfare needs of the child, as having a culture more suited for a child. The whole concept of trafficking, colonialist attitudes, power structures and politics - these are concepts and understandings that searching has ignited within me.



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On a more personal level, I realised being adopted is a lifelong journey. It's not something that ends with a search. The search is a life long process. I can recognise myself in lots of the younger adoptees - you do go through certain stages but eventually you cannot excuse or explain things anymore to yourself even if you manage to successfully reunite. For some adoptees, the process takes a long time, for others, they stop the process because it becomes too dangerous to explore further. For me, I've realised this is something I have to live with for the rest of my life.

The search is not a question of just searching for original family - once you find original family, you basically search for the explanation to give you relief from the fact that adoption happened in the first place.

As for whether I've experienced any impact with my adoptive family and our relationship since searching, I must say it was not that close to begin with – so the impact is more an unspoken thing – an elephant in the room to be avoided – but that is often the dynamics in my family, so one more elephant is no big deal.

Navigating through this part of my life in a constructive and healthy manner, the most useful thing has been to practice Joe Soll's adoption healing – it has given me an acceptance of my loss and also tools to heal and empower myself.

My suggestions for what could be done by professionals, governments and agencies to help in search and reunions for intercountry adoptees like me:

- Hand over all files.
- Ensure by DNA an idea of our heritage.
- Ensure files are rightfully documented and not fraudulent.
- Provide an official apology and compensation for the cost involved in our search.
- Help us to retain and remain in contact with our birth language and culture when we are relocated to our adopted country.