PREPARATION BEFORE CONTACT by Amy Bredes (abrades@portjeff.net)

Searching Adoptees:

The purpose of this letter is to raise the level of awareness of adoptees in search of their birthmothers. If you sincerely want to find your birthmother you'll be interested in these guidelines.

The adoption experience is incredibly traumatic for each triad member. In general (although not always), birthmothers know, or try to understand, the pain and loss of adoptees. Of course, no one can fathom what it's like to be adopted except another adoptee -- you have to live it to really know it. But we should try to help each other the best we can to comprehend our experiences so our relationships are as satisfying as possible for both parties. The emphasis here is on the birthmother; it is not an attempt to minimize the suffering of adoptees. Birthmothers who are searching for their lost children should be as equally compassionate and concerned for their adoptee's feelings, desires and needs when he/she is found. She needs to be educated, informed and aware. The issues common to adoptees should be fully acknowledged and validated by the birthmother and always be in the forefront of her mind and heart. But here the focus is on the birthmother and her issues.

Your birthmother may have suffered in a way that is nearly impossible for you to relate to without great effort on your part. Are you willing to prepare before you make the first contact with her? She will probably go through all the old trauma once again when you find her. Will you be ready to handle this? Will you be supportive and comforting, or will your desire that she meet your needs right away outweigh her need to slowly adjust? Finding her will turn her life upside down. Will you be able to giver her time and space to absorb what's happened without begrudging her? Your telephone call or letter alone -- regardless of what you want (even it it's only medical information) -- is an enormous earthquake to her and her family.

What do you really want? Do you know? Are you prepared and willing to accept her even it she's not emotionally capable of making the commitment necessary for the kind of relationship you have always dreamed of? Do you have any expectations? What are they? (It would help if you wrote them down.) Will you be terribly crushed and disappointed if they aren't met?

Have you talked with or met other birthmothers from your birthmother's era? Do you understand the stigma of being a pregnant, unmarried girl/woman during that time period? Do you realize if she was in high school or college, she either dropped out or was kicked out, and her parents may have kicked her out too? That she lost her reputation, her friends, her boyfriend (your birthfather), her graduating year, her lightheartedness and winsomeness, her youth and innocence -- that special time in life that can never be retrieved?

If your birthmother was in an unwed mothers home (the agency she used will know -- ask them), have you read "Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race Before Roe v. Wade" by Rickie Solinger which describes life in these maternity jails during the 40's through 60's? This is must reading for adoptees whose birthmothers were forced into isolation during their last trimester of pregnancy, literally banished by society to serve time "behind the fence" inside these dreary institutional places. This was more than an attempt to hide her shame and redeem her; it was pure punishment for getting "caught" in her "whoredom".

Do you feel your birthmother abandoned and rejected you at birth? Do you realize that unless your birthmother left you on a doorstep or dumpster, she probably does not feel she abandoned or rejected you? This is not what she was told she was doing 20 - 50 years ago. Every respected authority figure around her told her she was doing the most selfless, wonderful thing in the world, giving you away to good, moral people. So you secretly in the depth of your soul hate her for surrendering you for adoption? If the answer is yes, then you need to work through that resentment and bitterness before you contact her. Getting counseling from a qualified therapist specializing in adoption issues should be part of your preparation, particularly if you are male. Some male adoptees have hidden anger, even rage, toward their birthmothers that they aren't fully aware of (if it's there, it will surface after reunion). Females are generally more in touch with their feelings and therefore have less trouble acknowledging and dealing with their anger, but also are not immune.

By understanding the various and unique experiences of birthmothers, you will be better prepared when and if you do talk to and meet your birthmother. I cannot stress enough the importance of preparation. You can be very unprepared, but you can't over prepare. And lack of preparation can cause trouble in your new relationship with your birthmother. But you can avoid some of these problems by taking a few preparative measures.

I strongly recommend that any adoptee in the final stages of the Search do several things before making the initial contact with their birthmother. In fact, don't pick up the phone or a pen without first:

1>THE FANTASY: Let go of any lifelong image, any fantasy of your birthmother. No one can live up to a fantasy, especially someone who is in the midst of post-reunion turmoil. Be sure you are ready to accept her as she is because she's probably not what you wanted, expected or fantasized her to be.

2>THE EXPECTATIONS: Don't let disappointment over unmet expectations spoil your budding relationship with your birthmother. She may be ready to jump right into a close relationship, or she may be very hesitant to even meet you. Hang in there with her and DO NOT take it personally. (Easier said than done, I know.) Don't let feeling of rejection shut-down communication between you (letters, phone calls, email, faxes). If she asks for some space to adjust and absorb what's happened, give it to her and don't

assume the worst if she does, thinking, “oh no, this will never work; it’s over; she doesn’t want me in her life,” etc.

3>READ the following: “Birthmothers: Women Who Have Relinquished Babies For Adoption Tell Their Stories: by Merry Bloch Jones (essential reading); “Birth Bond: Reunions Between Birthparents and Adoptees” by Judith Gediman and Linda P. Brown (essential); “Birthright: by Jean A.S. Strauss, the second half of this book covers reunion and includes a list of questions to assess reunion readiness (essential); “Adoption Reunions” by Michelle McColm; women should read, “Giving Away Simone” by Jan Waldron; men should read, “Finding Family” by Rick Ouston.

4>KEEP IN MIND: Your birthmother most likely has not gone through any mental, emotional or spiritual preparation for this momentous event. Some birthmothers know nothing about the Search & Reunion Movement. She may have put you out of her mind many years ago, only thinking of you on your birthday (and maybe not even then anymore). But even if her memory is fresh and she’s thought of you daily, your reappearance into her life is sure to be a major disruption that will stir up a plethora of hellish memories that have the potential to derail her. Being instantly thrust into the past and having to relive the nightmare, immersed in the quagmire of painful losses again is really tough. She needs people around her who are filled with compassion and patience. Those she loves most, usually her husband and children, may not be the least bit supportive. And if her support system is weak, she’ll be just as alone as she was when she delivered and relinquished you. The worst thing you can do if this is the case is pressure her by pushing her, expecting too much from her, too fast, and too soon.

All relationships require lots of maturity, mutual respect, total acceptance, complete forgiveness and unconditional love, but an adoptee/birthmother reunion requires even more. Your birthmother may welcome you with open arms without ambivalence or doubt; she may refuse to know you without reservation or regret; or she may be somewhere in between in a state of ambiguity, confusion and mixed emotions. You don’t know what you’ll find. That’s why I encourage you to take your time, prepare, talk to a lot of birthmothers and other adoptees who are in reunion, and be ready for anything to happen **before** you make the first contact.

Then take a deep breath and hold on tight, because if you find her, you’re in for the most intense roller coaster ride of your life.

Good luck in your searches!

Amy Bredes, birthmother

<abrades@portjeff.net>