



There's a heart and soul connection that bonds adoptive families. For some of us, this comes in a moment in prayer, when we bless the invisible, but always present, birth parents.

For others, it's an extended family gathering that includes members, who although are not biologically connected, remain forever connected through the love of a child or children.

Some of us have found ways to help our children begin to understand the way in which they were born, the family to which they came. We're only one of those families. I'm willing to bet our story, one of ironic turns and fate, has been played out by many others.

We are, on the surface, a traditional family comprised of two parents and four adolescent children. Dig a little deeper and you'll learn we're a family created through adoption. We're a family that has created another family through adoption, too. We're adoptive parents and birth mothers, half siblings and whole grandparents, friends and so much more.

When our fourth child was born, she came into a family that had been created through three closed adoptions, one from Guatemala. This adoption was more open. We knew Sherry was the birth daughter of an adopted woman and we believed we understood all the implications. We promised to update

Sherry's birth mother with letters and photos on an annual basis. In addition, Sherry's birth mother sent Christmas and birthday gifts.

We honored this contact for a few years, but, to be honest, we were so busy shuffling four kids to sports practices, music lessons and school that we hardly noticed when our contacts stopped.

Over the years, we reminded each of the kids to keep their birth families in prayers and we lived our lives fully, sometimes even forgetting that our children were ours through adoption.

*As I listened to Sherry's lilting voice and watched her face glow, I realized she was gaining so much by learning about the mother who set her on her life's journey. Now she was receiving a more meaningful life through this connection. I left the room to allow her the chance make this connection on her own terms.*

We assumed that, as our four adolescents became young adults, one or two might search for birth parents, the others might choose to let old secrets rest. Either way, it was their decision

and would only become our business if they asked for our help or advice.

But life is funny; so often we think we've laid issues to rest only to have them resurface. That was the case, a few years ago, when our oldest daughter Ann became pregnant, only to realize that she was unready to parent. She chose adoption for her baby.

While Ann made plans for her baby, she grieved terribly, and so did all of us in her family. As time wore on, I found I wasn't just grieving for our daughter. I grieved for her birth mother who had once made this same difficult choice.

Perhaps Ann's birth mother took some of the focus for my grief because, while Ann was pregnant, I had often considered that she needed to know more about herself and the circumstances of her own birth.

I wondered if she would be making the same choices if she could hear, in her birth mother's words, the wisdom that only comes from a similar shared experience. I worried that my daughter was in an unhealthy relationship because of her own issues about adoption.

Unlike her own somewhat secretive closed adoption, where we never met her birth mother or even exchanged first names, Ann met with potential parents, talked about parenting issues and chose a couple who she believed would be the very best parents for her baby. She fell in love with this couple in every way, and she knew her baby would too.

Ann brought her baby daughter home for Wisconsin's 30-day waiting period so that she could be the very best parent to her daughter in the time she had. We all helped her with Miranda until the day she would go to court and permanently, irrevocably turn her parental rights over to the baby's adoptive parents. Meanwhile, the adoptive parents visited with the baby, with our daughter and with us in our home during that waiting period.

They became friends, an extended nontraditional family of sorts. They mourned Ann's loss along with us even as we all found joy in their newly created family. Obviously, names and addresses were exchanged. Within the year after Miranda was placed with her parents, our daughter visited with parents and baby.

Photographs, gifts and letters are exchanged. While our daughter won't contact the adoptive parents unless they've contacted her (she be-

lieves she needs to allow them the space to parent) she has consistent reassurance through these contacts that adoption was the very best decision for all.

Meanwhile, I watched my daughter grieve as every birth mother must. I grieved as only a grandparent can. But I also discovered that open adoption has tremendous emotional benefits for the birth mother, the adoptive parents and the baby because everyone in the triad works together in an open and forthright way.

I found myself wanting what Ann had for each of my own children and their birthparents. My son, Jim, whose birth mother died, wasn't interested in searching. Our oldest two, Noah and Ann, who are of legal age to search, had the most traditional of closed adoptions. They've begun the process of filling out paperwork, but they might never find out who their birthparents are.

Our daughter Sherry's more open adoption was different than her siblings from the very beginning. We had more family history, a name and a city and state.

In the end, Sherry's maturity played a huge role in the final decision to look a bit further. I felt strongly that she had the right to know about her birth family, to make the connections and to choose whether she wanted ongoing contact with her birth mother. I felt strongly that she needed to hear from her birth mother that placing her child for adoption was a complicated and difficult decision.

I also weighed my daughter Sherry's maturity. Although I had considered opening her adoption when she was fifteen, I was pretty sure that, in the heat of many mother/daughter struggles over her independence, my daughter at 15 might have the inclination to attempt to

pit birth and adoptive mother against one another and to wreak havoc on both families. On the other hand, Sherry's adolescent rebellions might be less rebellious if both mothers were available on some level.

I even considered the reactions of all of my four children to one sibling who had this special knowledge of birthparents. Would this pull them apart or make them closer? Would some be jealous? Would they be uncomfortable enough to single her out as different from them?

On the other hand, would it really make any difference to four close siblings that one had more information and contact than the others? In the end, I felt this was a family built on open discussion and love. They could handle it.

Before I did anything else, I asked Sherry if she wanted this contact. She said yes. Later that evening, while Sherry was out with friends, I called her birth mother and asked if she wanted contact with her daughter. There was no hesitation in her response. "YES!"

Sherry's birth mother and I agreed that we would let Sherry set the pace for opening this adoption and for meeting with her birth mother and other birth relatives. Then, three nights later, Sherry, who was so shaky and nervous about this, asked me to dial her birth mother's phone number.

Within minutes, the two were deep in conversation, learning about each other and catching up. My heart swelled with tenderness for this birth mother who had given my daughter life in so many ways.

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she was receiving a more meaningful life through this connection. I left the room to allow her the chance to make this connection on her own terms.

This fragile connection is still pretty new. There hasn't been a face-to-face meeting yet. And I'm learning that one of Sherry's weaker traits is her inability to write letters or cards in a timely manner. I hope her birth mother understands this attribute.

We've been in close contact with people at Adoption Resources of Wisconsin while this has unfolded, and our family is fortunate that we know so many adoption professionals and counselors who can offer advice and guidance as we make this journey. Families and individuals who decide to open adoptions would be well advised to read as much as possible and to take advantage of agencies who can guide them through opening an adoption.

I try to stand back and let Sherry grow the connections in her own way and time. This birth-mother is helping to heal our daughter Ann as well, in giving Ann the chance to see that life goes on after you place a child for adoption. She's healing me in her connection to our shared daughter.

Each time Sherry hears from her, I see the glowing face. I get to share in Sherry's enthusiasm as she pours over photographs of her siblings—Sherry, lucky girl that she is, has discovered that she's got a dual identity of sorts. While she's the youngest in her family here, she's the oldest in her birth family.

We each, in this family, have come away from our two recent open adoption experiences with joy, gratitude and a true understanding of kindred spirits. It made our family so much closer. And bigger!

