

Ten Questions to Ask Yourself

By Hollee McGinnis

Hollee McGinnis spoke about searching for birth parents at the Gathering of the First Generation of Korean Adoptees in September 1999. This article contains portions of her speech.

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

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

I offer ten "moment of truth" questions gathered from listening to other people who have searched and reunited with their birth families. The first five questions relate to searches, and the last five questions relate to reunions. These questions are useful not only for those who want to search, but for any adoptee engaged in understanding their adoption.

1. What are you searching for?

Research on Korean adoptees who search for their biological parents indicate that all adoptees gradually become interested in different kinds of searches. Motivated by our interest in learning more about our roots, our first search is typically for our birth culture. Lastly, after possibly visiting our birth country, we may consider the possibility of searching for and reuniting with birth parents. Often a search is about the journey of searching and not the actual reunion. So it is important to understand what it is you seek.

I did not search for my birth family, they sought me. I was adopted at age 3 from Korea. When I was 13 my adoptive parents received a letter from my paternal grandfather asking for pictures of me. My family was divided on whether they should show me the letter or wait until I was older. After speaking with an adult adoptee who recommended they wait until I was older, my parents showed me the letter when I was 20.

It was October break from college, and I sat at the dinner table. My dad said, "Hollee, there is something I need to talk to you about." My mind raced as I tried to think of anything I had done wrong. I was unprepared for what they had to tell me. My mother was afraid I would be angry because they waited to show me the letter. I was simply overwhelmed. I peered at the grainy photo of my paternal grandfather and grandmother. It was like looking at a National Geographic photo. They were strangers. And yet they were connected to me by blood.

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

2. Why do you want to search?

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

I think it is vital that you understand your motivations and why you want to meet your birth family before beginning a search. After receiving the letter from my paternal grandfather, I felt I had to meet them. I did not know why I wanted to meet them except for the fact they had contacted me. It was not until I was 24 that I understood my motivation for meeting my birth family: I wanted them know I was all right. In the chaos of returning to Korea, meeting my birth family and learning more about my past, I was able to hang onto this one truth.

3. What are your expectations?

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

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

4. Are you ready to confront your adoption?

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

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

5. Are you ready not to be in control?

I think those who have embarked on a search can attest to the roller coaster ride of emotions. You will not be in control. Currently there is no simple way of finding birth parents. Many agencies are not required by law to give adoptees information about their birth. There are ethical issues about birth parents’ rights to

confidentiality, which adoptees must respect. You may initiate the search, but most people find their birth parents through sheer luck and the kindness of strangers, not through careful planning.

Once I arrived in the Seoul, I was definitely not in control. I could barely ask for a glass of water. I had to rely on strangers and new friends to help me navigate the foreign culture. When I spoke with the director of my orphanage, I knew that I would be meeting my birth father. When I called two days before our appointed meeting, he suddenly informed me that he also had found my birth mother. I had hardly even thought about the possibility of meeting her. I was shocked as I confirmed that I would meet her as well.

6. Are you prepared to meet strangers?

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

I will never forget waiting for my birth father to arrive. First my paternal grandmother walked in the door, a short and stocky woman. She gave me a crushing hug while she sobbed and spoke to me in words I could not understand. But I did not feel anything. I saw her and felt her arms around me, but my mind could barely comprehend that she was a real person, not a grainy photograph. Then my birth father walked in, and I suddenly felt shy and could not look at his face. I wanted to look, but it was like confronting my own face.

When the director of my orphanage told me that my grandmother wanted me to stay with them that night, my first reaction was, “I’m not going to go with those strangers!” And as I walked out into the coolness of the night and into my birth father’s car, I smiled as I remembered my mom warning me as a child about getting into cars with strangers.

7. Are you ready to meet possible extended family and integrate new members as your family?

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

I was prepared to meet my birth father, but when I met my grandmother I realized I had not thought about meeting her. Then my birth father mentioned I would be meeting my half sister and brother. He had married a woman who had since passed away. In addition, my birth mother had three children. Suddenly I had five half sisters and brothers I had never known before in addition to uncles and aunts and cousins.

8. Are you able to respect your birth parents and their culture?

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

During my second visit to Korea, I took my birth mother out to dinner. I told my boyfriend, who was Korean-American, that I wanted to give her some money. He looked at me and said, “You can’t!” I did

not understand. She was poor, and I had a good income. He could not explain why but was adamant that I should not give her money. I thought he was being crazy.

We went to a kalbi, or barbecue restaurant, which is an expensive meal in Korea. My birth mother could barely look at me. She said, "What kind of mother am I who gets taken out by her own children?" She was so distraught that she could not pay. Before us was a wonderful meal and all she ate was a bowl of rice with water. Then I understood. I had to respect her dignity and her culture. I had to respect that she was my birth mother, even though I had no memory of her. And I understood why I could not give her money. Parents give to their children, and even though I was an adult, to her I was still her little daughter. As we departed I allowed her to press a few Korean won into my hands.

9. Have you thought about life after the reunion?

Often the focus on a search is on the quest, but the true journey begins after you meet your birth family and are left with the question, "Now what?" Are you going to continue this relationship? Or are you satisfied with the reunion and do not wish to have further contact? If your birth parents are poor, do you feel an obligation to help them? Will you try to travel to Korea once a year? Will you send gifts for the holidays and remember birthdays? You have traded in your fantasies, your dreams and imaginations for reality, and after the reunion you will not be able to simply tuck these people back into the furthest corners of your mind. You have seen their faces; you know who they are; you have seen their lives. Meeting your birth family may answer some questions but raise far more questions. The search is only the beginning of the journey. Life after the reunion will be a far longer road.

10. Is this your choice?

As adoptees we did not get to choose our adoptions. We did not choose to be relinquished. We did not choose to be adopted. The decision to search is one of the few things adoptees get to choose. It is a part of our adoption life journey; it is not our adoptive parents' journey. There is a right time for everybody. It is a very individual thing. I would recommend you listen to your gut, your heart and have a clear mind. Do not listen to others who are enthusiastic about your search or reunion. Make sure the enthusiasm is yours. Do not feel pressured by your birth family or adoptive family to search or reunite until you are ready. Make sure that the choice is yours. Although I could never tell anyone when the right time is to begin a search, I would recommend that the person at least have the maturity to be able to clearly answer these ten questions.

Hollee McGinnis is the founder of Also-Known-As, Inc. (<http://www.akaworld.org>) and the editor of *TransCultured Magazine*. E-mail comments or questions to her at holleem@usa.net.

From *Hi Families* January/February and March/April 2000
©2000 Holt International Children's Services