

A Story Of Connecting

I t doesn't matter who you are or where you come from in life—we all have connections to our biological parents that can never be broken.

For some of us, it is simply being born to a parent that we never meet, although that parent may be psychologically present forever. For others, a biological parent is there for a lifetime. For many of us, our stories lie somewhere in between on a continuum of connectedness to one's biological parents. My story is one of those that lies somewhere in the middle. My mother abandoned me and my sister, Renee, when I was 6 months old and Renee was 3 years old. We lived with our father and step-mother until we were 12 and 15 years old. After years of abuse and neglect, my sister and I entered the foster care system. We aged out of the system without a family when we each turned 18. We struggled to maintain our own connection, but have successfully done so. We are now 28 and 31 years old and although we have been scarred by many things that happened to us before and after entering foster care, we are growing into strong and accomplished women who many would be proud to claim as daughters.

Although I had no memory of my mother, I had an image of her in my mind and I knew she was out there somewhere. Part of me wished she would find us one day and come back into our lives to save us from our suffering, while every day that she didn't I became angrier with her for not doing so. Both my sister and I had a desire to reconnect with our biological families after we left foster care. Renee wanted to find our mother and I did not—I wanted to reconnect with my aunt. Perhaps my sister had more empathy for our mother, as Renee lost custody of her own two children at a very young age. I however, had none. I could not comprehend how a mother could do such a thing to her children. We suffered immensely from not having a good parent in our lives, and government agencies make poor substitutes for parents.

I got my own apartment at 16.5 years of age and was able to start college at 18 despite having dropped out of high school in the beginning of my sophomore year. While in college, I tracked down my paternal aunt, and at 19 I took a 900-mile bus ride to reconnect with her. My aunt and I spent years building a relationship across so much distance and it took many difficult conversations about my past before we could finally move forward with what has recently become a very strong relationship.

I remember checking my email during my third semester of college and seeing an email from my father's new girlfriend. My aunt had given my father my email address since I had not yet told her the truth about why he had lost his children, and that I did not want to have contact with him. Although I was quite shaken up from the message, I responded and was offered financial support from this woman who called herself my step-mom, but was the same age as my sister. Despite the things my father had put my sister and I through I agreed to email him, partly because I desperately needed the financial help and also to tell him I was doing well despite what he had put me through. I told him about my 3.9 GPA and my 3 years of living on my own when most people I knew still lived with their parents. His response was that he hadn't taught me to be very humble. I quickly closed the door of communication and have only spoken to him once since then. That one time was in order to try to find my other siblings.

I had never stopped wondering about them, though I had given up on fruitless internet searches with only the first and last name of my mother to search by. With nowhere else to turn, I emailed my father and asked him for more information about my mother. He gave me her adoptive parents' last address and phone number and as

it turned out they still lived there and had the same phone number after 26 years. They gave me the number they had for my mother and I brought it to my sister Renee. On Christmas Eve 2008 my sister and I called our mother together. It was such a joyous occasion with smiles and tears, shock and excitement. I forgot all about my anger and was so happy I had found my mother. She was happy we had found her too and she flew 900 miles with my half-brother to visit us. What an exciting time—my first day of graduate school was so hectic because I had my newfound mother and brother at my apartment and couldn't focus at all. Renee and I went to visit our mother that spring and got to meet our step-father and half-sister. They had written "welcome home Renee and Lynn" on the glass door for when we arrived.

After what I would call the honeymoon period of reconnecting was over, many questions remained that had to be answered before I could move forward. My mother's story just didn't add up; her tale was one of outside forces taking her children from her and an inability to find us despite concerted efforts. There was no tale of mistakes or an apology for the horror stories that we shared with her of our lives. I requested a records review from the child welfare



agency we were placed through and found out that they had found my mother when I was 12 and told her where we were—yet she failed to contact us back then. In my eyes, that meant she had abandoned us a second time and I was once again angry, this time more than ever before. And now there was a face and voice behind the anger and betrayal I felt. I decided to give my mother a chance to own up to her mistakes and lies, and apologize. Once again, she would not do so and instead treated me like a trouble maker, one who wouldn't just "stop living in the past and enjoy the years ahead as a family." My feelings were invalidated, and I took a long vacation from my newfound family so my life wouldn't completely fall apart. Now having an opposite experience of reconnecting to compare to the one I had with my aunt, I had a profound realization of how much my aunt loved me and what a great person she is. She listened to the hard things I had to say about my past and her brother, and she empathized with me and walked beside me through those difficult steps toward the wonderful relationship we now have.

Let's fast forward two years and four months from when I found my mother to today. I do not speak to my mother anymore and do not have much of a relationship with my newfound siblings either. My sister tries to reach out to our mother but my mother doesn't have time for her. Both of our lives were derailed by reconnecting with our mother. I almost dropped out of graduate school and almost lost my job and apartment—and my sister did lose her job and apartment to move close to our mother. We had lost our identities when we went into foster care and never had help finding them there. We then tried to find our identities on our own and were shocked to find that learning about our history and getting to know our mother and siblings made it even harder to determine who we are. This is not to say that finding our mother was a negative experience—neither of us would go back and undo it. We have learned where we come from and where our lives would be had we grown up with our mother. Frankly, we are both glad we didn't because she would never have been able to make us into the women we are today. We would be stuck living in poverty in a rural town with no opportunities for our future. We may have struggled to incorporate this information into our identities, but at least we have it now. The void has been filled and we are finally settling into knowing who we are and where we come from, and do not have to wonder about what might have been.

Looking back on the road I have walked to get to where I am today, I have much advice to give to people working with young people in the foster care system who have been disconnected from their families. First, no matter what challenges a young person's biological parents may have, that relationship must be valued and respected for the lifelong psychological and/or physical connection that it is. It should be no one's decision but the young person's whether a parent will be in his or her life. If there is disagreement, the young person will carry out their wishes as soon as they are able, with or without the consent of supportive adults. Second, it is much better for young people to have help with the difficult work of building their identity through establishing who their family is and what that means for their life. Do not make them do it alone when they may not have any support. Third, the best thing you can do to help a young person reconnect is help them manage their feelings of confusion, anger, betrayal, and grief. Help them manage their hopes and expectations and be there to support them if they are let down. It is also important to teach them how to set healthy boundaries in their relationships with their parents and everyone else in their lives. I know adults in my sister's and my lives may not have wanted to "rock the boat" or upset us by telling us they had found my mother when I was 12. I'm sure they thought they were doing what was best for us. I wish they had known that we needed the boat to be rocked while we had support in our lives instead of having to do it alone as adults. Young people need to build their identity and reconnect with their families before they leave foster care, not a decade later.

AUTHOR

Lynn Twigg is a 28-year-old foster care alumna.