

OPENNESS & INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION: “Creating Connections Across the Seas”

People are drawn to different kinds of adoptions for a wide array of reasons. For many families, deciding on the best way to journey toward their child can be an overwhelming exercise of the mind and heart. Many different factors affect a family’s adoption decision including: the preferred age and cultural background of a child, race, gender, health, expenses, predictability of time line, and the level of risk involved. Important to this exercise is a family’s willingness to consider the risks and benefits involved in an open or semi-open versus a closed adoption.

For many years, I have listened to the expressions of fear and trepidation from adoptive parents in reference to the mere idea of openness in adoption. At the point of initial consultation, many families are drawn to international adoptions because there is an underlying assumption that their adoption will be closed (ie, there will be no contact between the child and his or her birth family). We know, however, that different countries hold different values and opportunities for openness. We also know that reunion registries have connected many children who were adopted with their birth parents. Korea’s registry is the longest running and most well-known; however, many speculate that other countries will create similar registries over time.

Children and adults who were adopted internationally now know that search and reunion may be as relevant for their adoption as for others. Posted all over blogs and hosting sites for adoptees in the throes of search and reunion are entries like this: *“Hi. I'm looking for my Korean family. I was given up on July 23, 1975 in the Yongsan neighborhood in Seoul. I was found on a neighbor woman's doorstep. She brought me to the Yongsan police station and I went into foster care from there. I may be of mixed blood, but I am not sure. Please get a hold of me if you think I may be of your family.”* What feelings does this arouse for adoptive parents as they consider the possibility that their child could post a similar inquiry? If openness in adoption often evolves over time, what would happen if a closed international adoption evolved into a more open one?

My adoption practice witnesses many stories of openness in international adoption. David was adopted at the age of 18 months from Ethiopia. His adoptive parents met his birth grandmother and his three older siblings before they returned with David to the United States. The adoptive parents were able to learn that David’s birth mother died during child birth, and his birth father died three months before from AIDS. As David grows, he will be able to correspond with his birth family members, and will likely visit every few years as decided jointly by the birth grandmother and adoptive parents. Nicholas and Katrina are siblings, ages 10 and 12, who were adopted from Russia. Their adoptive parents met their children’s birth aunt and three birth cousins while in Russia. The children speak with their birth aunt every Sunday night on the telephone, and they correspond regularly with their cousins. They hope to travel to Russia next summer for a visit. It is also not uncommon to learn about siblings adopted internationally into different adoptive families being connected miraculously with one another.

Is openness in international adoption something to fear? Just as in domestic adoptions, many believe that the gift of any degree of openness is three-fold: it helps to minimize a child’s loss of relationships, it helps maintain and celebrate a child’s connections with all the important people in his or her life, and it allows children to resolve losses with truth, rather than with fantasy. And some truths are painful, some relationships are difficult, some details will forever be a mystery. Yet, when it is safe to create connections for your child, openness in any adoption, however limited, can be a great gift. Regardless of the role of openness in adoption, the goal of adoptive parents continues to be to love their children unconditionally through all that is known and unknown.

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