

## Happy Birthday To Me

I was five years old when my mother told me something that would change my life forever. She told me I was 'adopted.' She used the phrase, 'You are special.' As I sat on the couch in my mother's living room, I remember the sun shining directly on the wall. Mum said "You were chosen by us and you are special." I remember the moment clearly and I also remember wishing my Daddy was there too and would let me know that everything was going to be okay. Each of my friends had 'Daddys' - and I wanted mine to be home sitting with me. Alas, he wasn't there for me and wouldn't be for another five years. I didn't know much about him, so I re-created him into this 'larger than life' figure in my head. I dreamed and expected he would magically appear when I needed him. In my world he was mysterious and handsome and would come home to me and make everything better. Later in my life when he did return, I was bewildered as I had created in my mind extraordinary expectations of how he would love and nurture me. He did his best. Like every parent, they both did what they could with all that they knew.

In my opinion, when you are first told you are adopted, regardless of your age at the time – what you hear is greatly impacted by 'who' it is that lets you know your world is about to change. By the age of five, I felt different from my mother and brother, so it made sense to me that they were not my real family. A child knows a lot more than we give them credit for and they remember impacting events in their lives with crystal clarity. So there I was, sitting under my willow tree watching the clouds form into shapes and listening to the flowing waters of the creek nearby, all the time thinking that I am special and I am adopted. I remember that my father must be very important to America, as he wasn't there when I was told this news. He was a Chief in the American Navy and was stationed all over the world.

It was due to a series of circumstances such as these and surviving living in a loveless home environment, that by the age of eight I had made a pact with myself never to cry or feel bad again. At least that way, everyday was a good day. I honestly didn't think any more about being adopted until I was 18 years old.

In 1989, I was studying sociology at a community college in Christchurch and was selected to complete an assignment entitled 'Adoption in New Zealand.' This assignment had a great impact on me as I learned all about the 'Closed Adoption Act' and how children adopted after 1986 were adopted under the "Open Adoption Act" of 1986. As I was born in 1970 the chances of me finding out any information regarding birth family were pretty remote. As a child born under the 'Closed Adoption Act' you are not legally eligible to access any information on either of your birth parents and the chances diminished even further if the birth mother had put a veto on the papers.

It was also at 18 that my adoptive mother sat me down and presented me with all of the adoption documents, which I hasten to add contained very little information about my birth parents. From these documents, I was able to access my birth mother's initials and last name and that my Christian name was Bridget. It was then that I recalled that my mother would rather flippantly tell me from time to time, that I was called 'Baby Bridget' by the hospital staff but I didn't think anything of it at the time. I had a birth certificate that read that my adoptive parents re-named me Sherry on the 6<sup>th</sup> of August 1971.

There was no veto – but very little information. Included in the documents was her birthplace, her physical appearance, her education at a business college, vocation, interests and talents. I had her colouring but she was a little taller than me and we also shared the same love of ballet and piano. She was described as an attractive, intelligent young woman. The document also went on to describe that she gave me up so I could have a better life. The only information about my birth father was that he was dark haired with olive skin, talented at cricket and rugby, loved sailing and after studying law at university, he went on to be a car salesman. It did not show his name or birthplace. It was also around this time that I was kicked out of home because for once, I stood up for myself against them. The years of tension between my adoptive mother and I had finally come to a head. I had never felt accepted by her, and I had also realised that my father's loyalties were first and foremost to her and their son, not me. It was not a happy childhood for me but I think that if it were, I might not have commenced my search for my birth parents. Everything is relative so to speak.

So, there I was. I now had to support myself through college, without any money or family to count on and very little friends to turn to. I was in a pretty dark place. The motivation for me to face each day was my determination and commitment to find the answers to my past. This was the beginning of a very introspective and empty period. I was also going through the realisation that maybe out of a feeling of loss for my identity, I was caught up with trying to fit in with everyone else - nobody would guess that I really wasn't 'there' at all. Those next few years were really a heightened acceleration of learning and 'un-learning'. I was now willing to undergo a journey of re-connecting to my core feelings which had been shut away for most of my life. I went through a series of counselling sessions and was obsessed with learning all I could about the dimensions of higher learning and eastern spirituality. This essentially meant I was willing to examine the habits I had formed for survival on an inner level. It is never a fun time when you are discovering your behavioural traits and conditioned belief responses and how you have shaped the world around you. If personal development was so easy, wouldn't everyone be doing it?

My main focus at that stage was to find my birth mother. She would make everything better and through her I would begin to understand and accept who I was. With the information I had about her, I commenced my search. With a few clues and a lot of determination, I began to think outside the square. In this line of work, I became what I termed a 'Game Player'. To begin with, as it was 1989 and the 'Open Adoption' Act had been running in NZ for the last three years, I telephoned the Department of Children & Welfare, but they refused to give me the full name of my birth mother. When I asked why, they stated it would be too easy

for me to find her and that it was against the policy of the 'Closed Adoption Act' that I had been born under. They subsequently advised that according to the regulations of the Act, I was unable to obtain my mother's full name as they felt that it was too distinctive and therefore would be too easy for me to contact her. I felt kicked in the guts and thus went from six cylinders of determination to twelve. I was 18 and I decided I could beat the entire government system on my own.

I hung up the phone on that person and decided that no matter what, I would not give up. I poured through the words on the documents, desperately searching for any other clues. I spent hours at the public library scouring through the white pages. This exercise was made even more demanding without the resources of the internet back then. Using my birth mother's initials and last name (which was as common as Smith), I collated a list of names of people living in Auckland, New Zealand, as I knew that was her birthplace. Eventually, I had the names, many names. So now what? I needed to narrow this down. I then realised I should be focusing on researching names on the Electoral Roll of 1970 in Christchurch, NZ - as that was where I was born. My reasoning was around the fact that she might have registered her details whilst she was pregnant with me. I knew there was a hospital where people seemed to go to 'drop and run'. A little hideaway haven for the unfortunate babies delivered by the 'single pregnant female'. Armed with her initials and last name, I was starting to think a little clearer. I now had invaluable information from the Department of Social Welfare when they stated, "Oh, her name is far too unusual to divulge as it would be easily distinguishable." All I needed to do was to search for an unusual Christian name and middle name. The last name was so common, which had previously made it so hard to narrow this down. I was getting good at this!

After many, many evenings searching, before the joys of the internet at the local public library, I finally found my treasure. I came across an unusual first and middle name in the Electoral Roll of 1970 that my instinct told me to follow up. How? I had the name, but now what? I decided that the only way I was going to win this game of "This Is Your Life" was to turn to the ringleader who had always held the answers to my life in their tight little fist of control. The same government department that took away my identity was going to work for ME, as I decided that I was setting the rules this time. They were the Bastards, not me. How dare they take away my past and think they can now control my future! One thing you quickly learn, when you truly begin to understand the semantics of being an 'adoptee,' you are in fact blessed with a creative mind and license to reinvent yourself with unlimited possibilities, well, limited only by your own imagination. Mine, as my adopted parents would say, was a rather 'creative' and fertile mindset. I proudly agree with them, as that is how I managed to survive being bought up with an unsupportive and angry mother, an absent father, a brother who loved my dolls but hated me - and an identity that had been taken. THAT is why I am blessed with creativity.

So, there I was on the phone, heart pounding, listening to the ringing sound as I waited for the social welfare customer service person to answer my call. They finally picked up my call. In my most seriously savvy voice, exuding the tone that rang 'don't f\*ck with me', I introduced myself and made up the biggest bullshit story this side of a lie. It went something like: "Hello, as you know, I have been asked to call you back to verify a name with you. As your records will state, you

have guaranteed me a 'yes' or 'no' answer with a name I will present to you and this is due to the fact that the chances of me finding this name are literally zero. I now have a name for you and all you are therefore required to do is to say "Yes" or "No" in order for me to know if this is the correct name. That is all. Are you ready? Do you now have my files up in front of you on your system"? (I prompted this person with 120% inner conviction that I was a senior member of parliament or something – not merely a member of the community searching for their long lost mother.)

"OK. Yes, yes that is okay," she said. Thinking that I was now in far deeper and quicker than I had originally anticipated, I leapt at the opportunity and took advantage of this poor creature. "I will also remind you that I have spent months researching and reviewing my records and now I am demanding that you agree and adhere to providing the information to me. I need you first to state that you agree to give me a 'yes' or a 'no' to confirm that the following name is correct. I need you to guarantee that you will state this either way for me." Silence. "Yes or No" I prompted. The female voice said, "OK". I breathed in sharply and go for it, stating the name for her to verify.

"Yes". What? A yes? Yes! I had my mother's name! Bloody hell! Now what? Well, I thanked her politely and hung up of course. I had her name and it sounded like gold to me. I decided to contact 'Birth, Death and Marriages' for her birth certificate so I could get her parent's names – the names of my grandparents. \$32.00 and a couple of weeks spent in anticipation, I later received my mother's actual birth certificate! She was REAL. I was REAL! No. Not yet. My mind started to fill with a cacophony of those terrible sounds of confusion. I was so full of adrenalin that I couldn't stop to think or feel and I decided to look up the address of my grandparents that was listed on her birth certificate. From the white pages, I discovered that they were still living at the same residence, 18 years later! Here I was, aged 18 in 1989 and was holding the actual phone number of my biological grandparents living in the same country I lived in. I could call them whenever I wanted to!

Ok, it was time to really think smart. I didn't feel confident enough to call them myself and I needed a clever way of getting the information I wanted. I had ONE chance of doing this right. I called an old friend who happened to be the same age as my birth mother and asked her if she was prepared to help me find my birth mother. She was very happy to help. I had known her most of my life and felt she was a trusted confidant and friend. I knew she wouldn't be shocked if I asked her to call my natural grandmother and tell a little white lie. My plan involved getting her to call my grandmother and to say that she was looking for my mother whom she met 18 years ago, in the same ward at the hospital where I was born. (Hey, at the time, I thought this was a great idea!). As it turned out, my grandmother was most reciprocal and played 'along with the song'. She not only handed over the full contact details of my birth mother, but also informed her that I had two brothers, 11 and 14 years of age!

I then proceeded to do what any rational, logically mature minded person would do. I immediately wrote to my birth mother...filling the rubbish bin with unsent letters for the next two years. I had her in my grasp but I couldn't gather the confidence to introduce myself to her or to my brothers. I just didn't feel good

enough about myself and didn't know how to 'sell myself' so they would want to welcome me into their lives. How sad, looking back. If only I knew the phrase "Better to be hated for who you are, than loved for who you are not," or, "Life is dangerous, you never get out alive," I would have delivered that damn letter when I was 18.

I was 20 years old when I first met her. It all began with a simple phone call, surrounded by my flatmates in Haitaitai, Wellington, for moral support. She thought I was her niece calling from Auckland. At that point I suggested she sit down and began to introduce myself using the name she had given me. In a heartbeat she responded with, "I have also just been informed by the government about you – just this month!" Well, that was certainly a positive sign that she would be willing to meet me. We exchanged a couple of photographs and in June of 1990 I was flying to Melbourne. I was totally freaked out as the plane landed. If anybody was watching me, they would never have noticed how I was feeling inside because I had learned to always appear calm on the outside, to avoid anyone seeing the 'real' me. I made my way through customs and walked into the arrivals lounge. There she was. She was all I could see in the busy airport. It was as if all of the other people just disappeared and it was just me and her walking towards each other. It really was as if she was floating toward me, in her coral jumper and faded jeans holding a long stemmed rose in her hand. We hugged quickly, I collected my luggage and we sat down at the café. We couldn't take our eyes off each other.

Weird. I can't recall that I felt anything strongly emotional. I had lived my entire life separated from my feelings in order to get through the emptiness. Even though I was experiencing this amazing moment, I remember feeling in total control. Probably shock, in a good way! Along the course of the evening, I also met my half brothers. Yeah, I was starting to defrost and warm up by this stage. They were both very sweet and cool and very funny. I felt very comfortable with them after only a short period of time. Gifts were shared and jokes were aired and I guess for me, it was a slow burning of love at first sight for my mother and brothers. My mother and I were holding hands for the very first time. It felt like home. I felt alive and awake and loved, unconditionally. It was a deliciously romantic moment and yet strangely delirious.

In 2001, I was living in Auckland raising my five year old son. I decided it was now time to make an effort to find his grandfather, my Father. I hired a Private Investigator for quite a sum of money and didn't get much return on my investment. It was probably because I had very few clues. I had a name, (but not the correct spelling as there were about eight other variations), a location for his birthplace and possible age. I knew from my birth mother that he sailed Catamarans and loved the sea, cricket and selling cars. He was a bit of a player, she said. That is why she left him. I didn't have a very good impression of him. I didn't like that at all. It made me feel like I was a lot like him in some ways. This is because I had been brought up with a family who liked to put me down and didn't believe in me or agree with my life choices – therefore, I felt there was something 'bad' or 'wrong' with me.

In 2007, I was seven months into my happy marriage and living in Adelaide – we had just moved from living for two years in Sydney for a lifestyle change and to

raise our boys. I received a phone call from an ad I placed in the Sydney Herald a couple of months back. A woman called me to say that she believed her father was a friend of my father's and that they knew him in the early 1970s in Nelson, New Zealand. She remembered that he was a good man who carried around 'suitcases of cash'. Her father had originally met him at a popular pub in Nelson and they were frequent visitors there together from then on. She told me that in 1978, my father moved to Christchurch and that was the last year she saw him. He was building a boat. She then went on to describe how she heard he later lived in Auckland and sold BMW cars. That was all she could tell me, other than that she would contact a friend of his to see if he knew where he was, or if he was still alive, as he was a big drinker, smoker and gambler. She gave me the names of a couple of her father's friends for me to contact as well. Great lead!

My birth mother had previously mentioned the name of his best friend. I kept a record of his name since that time when I was 20, thinking it might come in handy one day. It did. I did a Google search on the White Pages and found a series of listed contacts with that name. I dialled the first name that I looked at. A jovial voice answered the phone in a country area outside of Auckland, New Zealand. I asked him if he could help me and he said he used to hang about with my father. But that was over 30 years ago, he said. He kindly offered to search the White Pages for me in NZ - but as he wasn't sure of the spelling of my father's last name, it would be doubling up with what I had already researched. I decided to go back to my original lead and followed up on the names of my father's old friends. I called a lovely couple and they referred me to another old friend. Unfortunately, he didn't want anything to do with me. It was at that precise moment that I new I was getting warmer. Each phone call I made, I described how I was researching my family tree and believed that I may be related to this person and wanted to locate them.

Through the course of my investigations, I found out that my father had owned several catamarans and houseboats and his best friend told me he made quite a good living out of an invention and distribution of his products around New Zealand. His friend whom I had spoken with had shared with me that 3 years ago, my father called him to invite him to come over to visit him on his houseboat. On August 25<sup>th</sup> 2007, my searching had led me again to Nelson, New Zealand. I had called a man whom I thought was my father as they shared the same surname. But I had instead just traced the address of a man with the same name. Funnily enough, this person actually knew my father! This person was to prove to be invaluable as he knew my father and said that he lived on a houseboat and gave me the name of the boat! I asked him when he last saw him and he said it was about 6 months ago. I called the local pub and asked the publican if he knew where my father was. The publican told me that my father had last been seen at a boat repair yard and gave me the name of the company. I immediately contacted the boat company, but there was no answer. Then I searched every boat registration company to see if I could trace the boat ownership details. I phoned another couple of boat companies and I said that I needed to contact a member of my family and that it was urgent! Finally, I struck the jackpot. A guy told me over the phone that he knew the person I was looking for and would go down to his boat in 5 MINUTES and get his telephone number for me. What? OMG! Of course, I couldn't believe it! I didn't know what to think! Suddenly, my phone rang. He said that he was no longer living in that boat and that there were new

owners now residing there. I asked for the new owner's phone number to which he agreed, and proceeded to explain to them that I was searching for a missing family member, my father.

They were diamonds to me. They gave me the greatest lead yet. They told me the name of the broker who sold my father's yacht to them. Being a public holiday, I phoned them immediately. They asked me to email them his name and what I wanted from them. I just wanted his full name and address details as I was a family member trying to locate him. They gave me these details – the next day. Now that I finally had the correct spelling of his name and address details, I contacted a private credit search firm to match with his details and they confirmed his birth date and current address for me. I had found him.

I met him in October, 2007 – I was 36 years old. We keep in touch with a phone call now and then, and have exchanged a couple of photographs. I found him and that is really all I needed to do at this stage of my life.

At 18 or any age, it is not very comforting to top feelings of rejection and self hatred off when you have thoughts such as: 'How can I be forgotten if I was never remembered.' I used to think about these things a lot. Where did I begin? Who knew about my birth? What pain did I cause to my birth parents or those involved? Who knew about me? Am I to live my life as a secret and as a person without a family? Who cares about this stuff, other than me anyway? Looking back I can see how all of these sub-conscious/unconscious thoughts or feelings impacted upon my psychological state. I can remember that from the age of eight after I made a pact with myself not to feel anything, I began to grow invisible. I thought I just had eyes and no 'body'. I thought I was nobody. I didn't have any connection with how I felt on a 'day to day' basis and I never looked at myself enough in the mirror to know what I looked like. This is interesting to me as I write this because I was always on stage as a ballerina in full make-up and costume or singing in a choir at a cathedral, performing piano recitals or competing in a regular swimming heat – wouldn't you be naturally conscious of how you appeared? Actually, if I was to be completely honest with you, I would feel depressed and anxious waking up each day and grateful for the dark of night each day just so I could go to sleep to escape my life.

Over the years, I have looked at photographs of myself when I was around the age of 10 and can see that I was dead inside. I really was just a shell, with no connection of how I appeared to the outside world or how I felt on the inside. I would let anyone take advantage of me because I thought that they were more important than I was. Is that a typical reaction to being adopted and then raised by an unemotional mother and unavailable father, resulting in an unhappy childhood? Probably. Is that a typical reaction for a person who has grown up without someone to love them unconditionally? So, how different is it from maybe being physically, emotionally or sexually abused as a child? This sense of 'dissociation' with self is due to not having any connectedness to 'self' and it is about the true depth of pain that one is in without realising it or the reason for it.

It is only through my choice to undergo self- introspection and self-discovery that I am now able to comment on my life as it was. Yes, I thought that finding my birth parents was the key – and a part of it has been. I also believe that it is through

having someone close to you who loves you, that you can truly become the person you want to be. For this, I thank my husband. My life is better than it ever was and once you learn that you take your 'self' with you in whatever you do or say, you begin to understand how you can manifest 'good' into your life. Attract what you want, be who you want to be – and this will change your life. What you think – you create. Let go of your pain of the past – and live now in the moment. It is from my motivation to understand who I am and where I have come from in order to move on from my pain – that I have written this journey of how I am healing my life. I am still trying to locate my half sister, with even fewer clues than I had for my parents.

I just wanted to share my story of how I found my birth parents to show you that it is possible to find someone who you want to find. I am not famous or anyone worth wanting to read about – but I appreciate that here you are reading my story. This can only mean that you are interested in how to find someone, maybe it is your birth parent or your child, or maybe it is someone you have been separated from and you know you need to find them now. All I have is a calling from above to write my story to share with a reader who is setting out on a journey of self-discovery and truth. I am just a person who is willing to share my story about searching for my true identity. This is also a story for those of us who believed they were born into a destiny that asked them to be kept a secret - but knew they had the courage to create their own fate and reclaim their identity. My story was written to empower you to share your story too. This is to inspire you to find the answers to your own questions without having to invest in the thousands of dollars a Private Investigator will charge you.

To Inner Peace and Happiness,

Sherry