

Finding My Father

by Dr. Pam Monday - Family Therapy Networker, July/August, 1991.

I returned from the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy conference two years ago more excited than I usually am after a meeting, especially electrified by a workshop I had attended on family secrets. The idea that much so-called psychological pathology might arise from shame over long-buried family secrets struck a deep chord in me, but I wasn't quite sure why this particular workshop, out of all the good ones I had attended, had such a powerful impact on me. Still keyed up several days later, I was telling a childhood friend about one of the cases presented at the workshop – an old woman whose obsessive hand washing ritual could be traced to her secret shame at bearing an illegitimate child many years before. As I told the story, my friend looked at me intently and said, "Pam, there's a secret about yourself you ought to know."

Startled, and oddly frightened, I asked, "What secret?" wondering what in the world she meant. She said, "My mother told me this about a year ago, and made me promise never to tell you, but I've wanted to ever since, and I can't keep quiet any longer." I felt something inside constrict, and braced myself. "What is it?"

"Your father wasn't your father."

There it was. A simple statement that stopped the world turning. And yet I felt an eerie sense of recognition, as if hearing something I had known once, but had long since forgotten. I started to wail, loud animal cries that sounded to my own ears as if they were coming from someone else. At the same time, I felt as if all the missing pieces of a lifelong puzzle were falling into place. "Thank you, God," I said to myself, feeling gratitude and relief beneath all the anguish and upheaval of the moment.

When I could speak again, I asked my friend to explain. "Your daddy who raised you," she said, "adopted you. Your mother had been married before." I asked where my biological father was, but she didn't know, and could only tell me that she had heard he was a rich businessman in Dallas.

As she was talking, many of the discrepancies and incongruities in my life that I had spent years of therapy and self-searching trying to reconcile finally began to make sense. Now I began to understand why my adoptive father, who died in an accident 10 years ago, and

mother, had discouraged questions about the family's past when I was growing up – any tactless questions might provoke conflict, which was always squelched at the onset. Indeed, a kind of gag rule prevailed in our house, kept in force by the old line, "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all," which effectively stifled the expression of much anger, resentment, or sadness about our family. I now realized that keeping the enormous secret about my birth father had required either constant denial or censorship.

I also began to see why my adoptive father – my "real" dad, for all I had known – had always seemed so closed and distant. He had never learned in his family how to hug or touch, and was never demonstrative with his own children. But especially with me, his only daughter, he was so reserved in spite of my frantic efforts to get close to him. Now his reticence seemed understandable, given the strain of secretly raising another man's child, especially during the years when that child was an angry and rebellious teenager.

Seven years after my adoptive father died in a boating accident, I finally grieved for him, talked to family and friends about him, and cried because I had never really known him. But I felt at peace with him, though now, after I'd heard about my birth father, I regretted not being able to talk to Daddy, ask him how he'd felt raising me, and thank him for loving me as best he could

After that momentous lunch, when my friend and I said goodbye, I raced to my church so I could talk to my minister, one of the sanest, wisest people I know. "What do I do now?" I burst out. "Call my aunt? Call the birth certificate office? Weren't adoption records closed then? What next? What next?" He answered quietly, "Go talk to your mother," an obvious step, and yet it hadn't occurred to me. My mother and I had spent so many years not talking about what we felt most deeply that the prospect of confiding in her now felt strange and vaguely threatening. Besides, it seemed almost perverse to entrust my knowledge of this vast secret to the very person who had kept it from me in the first place.

But the overpowering need to know everything immediately overwhelmed whatever hesitation I felt. I raced home and frantically dialed my mother's house, trying to slow myself down enough to sound rational. No answer. I began to call her friends. "Where is she?" No one knew. But they knew she would be at her volunteer job at the hospital by 4:00 p.m. "Find her," I ordered, "and tell her to cancel for today. I'm coming to see her." I asked my neighbor to pick up my children from school, leaped into my car, and struggled to keep within the speed limit all the way to my mother's house.

When I got there, my mother politely ignored my agitation; the gracious hostess as always, she asked me whether I wanted tea or coffee. She was obviously nervous, and I was jumping out of my skin, but still chatted for five endless minutes, saying nothing. Finally, she said, "I was afraid one of the children was dead." I shook my head, looked her in the eye and said, "Tell me about my father."

Her face registered shock, fear, guilt, anxiety, but what came from her mouth was anger. "Who told you?" she demanded.

"It doesn't matter, Mom, just tell me the truth."

"I won't tell you unless you tell me," she said with clenched teeth, sounding like a stubborn, furious 5-year-old caught in a lie. When I reluctantly told her, she broke out in a flood of invective against her old friend's "betrayal."

"Don't talk to me about betrayal," I interrupted. "Tell me about my father."

My mother suddenly wilted, her rage vanished and she sighed in resignation, perhaps even relief. She went into her room and came back with an old wedding album. "I was going to carry this secret to my grave," she said, looking miserable and afraid. Together, we looked at the album, at the newspaper clippings, the guest list, the shower presents, and then at the pictures of her and my father. What a strange feeling washed over me! I looked like this man! I sat in my mother's living room, looking at the pictures in a kind of trance, experiencing myself both there and not there at the same time, watching myself turn the pages, feeling a whole range of emotions and at the same time oddly distant.

"Tell me about him, Mama," I said. What I heard was the story of a woman who had been bitterly hurt in a tumultuous, unhappy marriage of two immature people barely out of adolescence. Charming, talented, and good-looking, my 19-year-old father had also been an angry young man, recently home from the war, chronically unfaithful, and subject to wild mood swings. Just before the wedding, my mother discovered that he had recently gotten a girl pregnant and had arranged for her to have an abortion. My mother said she cried as she tried on her wedding dress, unable to tell anyone about her fear that she was making a terrible mistake. "How do you get out of a big, fancy wedding at the last minute?" she asked me, the daughter who had asked herself the same question just before her own failed marriage.

I heard my mother's bitter recollections, but what my father had done 40 years earlier meant very little to me. I felt intuitively that finding to him was the key to resolving my own

inner struggles. I believed my identity was at stake, and even undeniable evidence that he was a world-class felon would not have swayed me from my search. When I left my mother, I thanked her for being so honest, and told her with as much determination as I could muster that I intended to find him. Once in the car, I cried the whole way home.

All I had was his name: John Miles. I called information, first in Dallas and then Houston. I spoke to several David Miles, telling my story to total strangers. In Houston, there were three David Miles. I called two, the third was unlisted. Dead end. I decided to start over with the facts I had. In the wedding album was a brief wedding announcement clipped from a 41-year-old newspaper—"Leona Donovan, aunt of the bridegroom, living in Houston...

"Aunt Leona – a dimly remembered lady in a snapshot with me, as a baby, on her lap. My mother had occasionally spoken to her in passing, vaguely identifying her only as distant kin, a shadowy personage obscured in the mist of ancient family history. I called Houston information. Miraculously, Leona Donovan was still there. I dialed her number, wondering how old she must be by now. To the frail voice of the woman who answered, I said, "Aunt Leona, I don't know if you remember me, but this is Pamela, John's daughter." Silence. And then a warm, excited, "Oh yes, I remember you!" She was 87 years old, but her mind was sharp and clear, and when I told her I was coming to Houston to see her, she seemed genuinely happy.

I showed my children the photo album, told them about my father and their grandfather, and said I was going to search for him. But when I said I would be leaving them with their uncle while I went to see my great-aunt, my 11-year-old wondered why they couldn't come too. "Mama," he said, " Aunt Leona is 87 years old – I want to meet her before she dies!"

As so, off we all went – my children and I. When we got there, we saw a picture of my father on top of Aunt Leona's television, and listened to her talk about him as if he had been her son. "Where is he, Aunt Leona?" I asked. "I don't know," she said. " Your dad was always a hothead, and 15 years ago, he got mad at me, and I haven't heard from his since. But every year I send a Christmas card to an address in Dallas, and it hasn't been returned, so I assume he's getting them.

"Leona had helped raise my father, as she had no children and he had no father. She obviously had loved him, and tended to idealize his good qualities. That he had left after some sort of fight apparently seemed to her just another sad example of her family's tendency to settle their disputes by permanently cutting each other off. She admitted he had been "a lady's man," and too wild for his own or anybody else's good. But she had always missed him, and urged me to keep looking. Now I wanted even more desperately

to talk to him, to hear him talk about himself, and perhaps to understand myself better as well – what I heard about him made his struggles sound so much like my own. When we finally left Aunt Leona, after a long visit, I was clutching a piece of paper with an address in Dallas.

I wondered how to begin my first letter to the father I had never known—"Dear Dad"? "Dear Mr. Miles"? I decided simply to address him by his given name, "Dear John." Eager to reveal myself to him, I wrote furiously, telling him about getting my doctorate and beginning a new private practice, about my divorce and my two children, who wanted to meet their grandfather. Then, in an impulse to protect both him and me from disappointment, I hurriedly added that even though I would like to meet him, I would understand if he didn't want to see me.

Mailing it, certified, return-receipt requested, relieved some of my anxiety, and I settled down to wait. One week, two weeks, nothing. I finally called the post office; they told me no one lived at that address. I felt discouraged.

Aunt Leona had told me my father had been a successful insurance agent. In a burst of inspiration, it occurred to me that maybe insurance agents were registered somewhere. I found the State Board of Insurance in the phone book, called them, and, incredibly, they reported a John Miles registered in Texas. His number was unlisted, but they gave me an address in Houston.

Again, I wrote the letter, this time addressing him with no hesitation as "Dear Dad" (by now, I thought I'd earned the privilege.). Again, I sent it off, this time Federal Express. It was Tuesday afternoon. On Wednesday evening, I went to a party, trying to stop wondering whether he'd received it yet. When I returned at midnight, the red light on my answering machine was blinking. I pressed it and a voice said, "Pamela, this is your father." He spoke in a voice that radiated delight, and he left two phone numbers.

Goose bumps, disbelief, and then a rush of pure joy. Bouncing up and down, I shouted, "I found him! I found him!" Then I imagined my mother's reproofing voice saying, "You'll wake the neighbors," and the thought made me laugh out loud. I was shaking like a leaf.

My hands trembling, I first called my half-brother, who also lives in Houston – where my father lived! A sleepy voice answered. "Johnny," I yelled, "I've found him!" Instantly, he jolted awake, and cheered for me, his voice filled with as much excitement as my own. I asked anxiously, "Should I call him this late? He's 61 years old – what if he's angry that I woke him?" "P.J.," my brother said dryly, "I don't think he'll stay mad for long."

So, my heart in my throat, I dialed my father's number. He answered on the first ring; he had been sitting up in bed with his wife, both waiting for my call. We were very excited. Our words poured out in a jumble; we both talked at once and interrupted each other, and laughed – "He talks even faster than I do!" I thought in amazement. "Dad" rolled off my tongue as easily as if I'd always called him that. "I can come to Houston this weekend to see you," I said. "Where shall we meet?"

"How about the zoo?" he replied. This seemed perfect – what better place for a father and daughter to meet? He had seen a recent picture of me, but the last picture I had of him had been taken at his wedding 41 years before. "What will you be wearing?" I asked. "A blue suit," he said. "You're wearing a suit to the zoo?" I asked. He laughed. "Of course! This is an occasion."

The next day I arrived at the Houston Zoo 20 minutes early. Wondering where to park, I glanced up and saw a white-haired, white-bearded man in a blue suit, coffee cup in hand, pacing back and forth. It was him, and he was early! I was flooded with relief that he seemed as nervous and anxious to see me, as I was to see him. I hadn't realized until that moment how afraid I was that I might mean nothing to this man, who had not seen me since I was less than a year old.

I fumbled to get the key out of the ignition, and told myself to breathe. Walking across the pavement, fighting the urge to break into a run, I wondered whether I should shake his hand; kiss him on the cheek, or what. When I got to him, I stretched out my hand, but he brushed it aside, grabbed me with both arms and we hugged and cried, looked at each other, and hugged again.

We walked arm in arm through the zoo for eight hours, laughing and crying together, packing years of missed conversations into one electric day. Delighted by his knowledge, his keen mind, and his wonderful stories, I thought with amazement, "I am the daughter of this man." I looked like him, talked like him, and we seemed to share many of the same ideas and passions.

I asked him a million questions – why had he left me, why he had been so volatile and undependable, what he felt for my mother, what had happened to him, and what his life was like now. I felt no sense of blame or resentment, only a compelling desire to know him, as if I had been given a fabulous but mysterious gift that demanded my entire concentration and attention. Even so, mixed with the joy of meeting him were feelings of sadness, irony, and a little shame when I thought about my mother, struggling desperately to forget the memories of a painful marriage, and yet seeing the face of her ex-husband

every time she looked at her daughter. My father told me about his abusive childhood, about joining the Navy when he was 15 – he had lied about his age – at the start of World War II, about the horror of the battlefield from which he'd returned home an angry, explosive, and self-destructive young man. He said he knew he had been a lousy husband, and would have been a rotten father – he'd been too immature and distraught to know what he was doing. "I was 19 when you were born; I didn't know anything – right or wrong. I signed my rights to you right away." He said this simply, as a matter of fact, and I accepted it as I accepted him, without judgment or inner doubts. Perhaps because I had never experienced his abuse or anger, I felt no resentment toward him.

In the weeks that followed, I saw him often, and idealized him, glossing over traits that were less than wonderful – his workaholicism and belief that his worth was somehow tied up in his financial success, his stormy outbursts when he was displeased, his tendency to withdraw from people. But I saw in him so many of my own characteristics, both good and bad – his courage, intensity, spirituality, and sense of moral accountability for the harm he had done, as well as his willfulness, anger, and need for control – that finding him was like finding myself. And by fully accepting and loving him, I could begin to do the same for myself for the first time in my life.

During all this excitement about finding and getting to know my dad, I had not forgotten my mother, but had badly underestimated her anger, fear, and shame. I had kept her informed of my progress, and had written a letter to her after I had found my father, joyfully describing my pleasure and how wonderful I thought he was, a refrain I kept up when I spoke with her. During one conversation, some time after I had met him, when I told her I was going to visit him the next weekend, she suddenly screamed, "You are twisting the knife in my back!" She blamed me for being selfish and disloyal, and ruining her life.

But after several years of therapy, I could listen this time without anger or guilt; I could see her agony and hear beneath her diatribe a woman begging me not to hurt her, to protect her from her own bitter memories. That afternoon we began a new, better kind of struggle with each other – a painful but truthful and impassioned conversation that enriches us to this day. When I left my mother, I was exhausted by the high-hearted feeling that we had been joined in strenuous arm-to-arm combat from which we both emerged victorious.

In May, I was to receive my Ph.D. from the University of Texas, specializing in marriage and family therapy. I very much wanted my father at my graduation, but was afraid my mother would then refuse to come or force me to choose between the two of them. But she rose to the occasion with dignity, courage, and her old wry sense of humor. "You have a right to

invite anyone you want; this is your day. But," she said, "Just remember who raised you."

We were to meet my father and his wife, Norma, at the graduation party after commencement, a gathering of my entire network, 30 relatives, friends, and neighbors – all of whom knew about the impending reunion and were intensely curious. As we walked in the door, I asked my mother how she felt, knowing she would be seeing my father for the first time in 40 years. "I'm scared to death and eating like a pig," she said – a blunt, straightforward statement of how she really felt, totally unlike the denial she had lived with for so many years.

Given the high suspense of the occasion, it seemed almost fitting that my father would add to it by being late; he had gotten lost on the way. When I finally saw his car drive up, I went out to meet him and Norma. As they came in the door, my friends started gathering around to greet them, make them feel comfortable – and check them out. Mother was standing at the opposite side of the room, and I saw her glance in his direction, and then look away. I went to her, took her hand and walked her over to face him. "Anne Monday," I said, "this is David Miles." My father's face lit up; he raised his arms slightly as if to hug her, then seemed to catch himself, and extended his hand instead. They shook hands rather formally, smiling shyly, like young people meeting at a party arranged by their elders. In the pause that followed, my mother introduced herself to John's wife and welcomed her to the gathering. Later, the throng of friends and family that had surrounded my father and mother tactfully faded away, as if by common consent, and left them alone for a long while. They stood together in a corner of the room, their heads bent toward each other, talking in low, earnest voices.

Later, my mother told me they had talked about all that had happened to them since parting 40 years before, and then tentatively, recalled the happy moments from their marriage and some of the painful times. My father assured my anxious mother that he, at least, thought she had done the right thing by keeping the secret. He told her then, and the rest of the family later, how much he respected Daddy and appreciated the good job he had done raising me. When the two joined the rest of the party, their eyes were wet.

The next day, Mother told one of my children, "Your grandfather is a really nice man," and my father said to me, "Your mother is still such a lady." Since then, he has been oddly protective of my mother, urging me not to hurt her in my quest to know everything about my family. In their joint bafflement over my passion for uncovering secrets, they are as one. Nonetheless, they have unfailingly supported me – like proud loving parents slightly mystified by their child's idiosyncrasies.

For me, while the three years since I discovered my father have hardly been perfect, there has been no shattering disillusionment, no childish fantasies smashed – only the hard steady work of establishing a relationship. For example, my father is something of a loner, and doesn't call me as much as I wish he would. But when I complain, he says he thinks about me a lot, and we talk about why he tends to withdraw. He says he's always been that way, even with his own sons, and seems puzzled that I don't think this is perfectly normal. But he is also there when I need him, giving me advice about relationships when I ask for a man's point of view, encouraging me, praising me, listening to me grumble about my job or philosophize about the meaning of life, or even letting me tell him he's full of hot air!

With all this, I still believe the search for birth parents is fraught with danger. The search should be undertaken as a quest for self-knowledge, not as a desire to be re-parented. Expectations of unqualified love, nurturance, and support to make up for real or imagined deprivation can only result in crushing disappointment. Even under the best of circumstances, the road is hard. Only years of personal therapy and family systems training had prepared me for the inevitable upheavals in my family life – the loyalty conflicts, anger, guilt, and the potential for breaking an already fragile family system.

Still, in my own case, I am glad I was so unreasonably stubborn, so foolishly and grimly determined to know the truth no matter what the costs. When I tell a man named John Miles that I need his approval, and he responds, "I approve of you when you shine and get your doctorate; I approve of you when you make mistakes; I approve of you when you do well at work; I approve of you when you are impulsive and willful. Pamela, I approve of you." I am thrilled to know it is my father speaking. When he tells me that my presence in his life is a gift from God – grace, pure and simple – I feel blessed.