

Inter-Country Adoptee Perspectives: Returning to Birth Country / Culture

Is it important to return? Do we adoptees prefer to take the trip alone or with friend(s) / adoptive family? At what age?

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Interesting question ..

I think that in most circumstances, visiting one's birth culture and roots is the best way to open-up their life and get to know themselves as a young adult adoptee. I guess the less satisfied they are with current life, the more they will want to have a look into what things could have been like had they not been adopted into the western world rat race.

I am part Filipino and Spanish American, and this means I have had the excuse to do heaps of travel recently. In 2005 I went to live in Mexico for a year and get a taste of Latin American life and culture. I was 23 and I think that it is the best thing I have ever done in my life. Living there taught me so much about myself and what it was like to finally live somewhere where I felt I could fit-in.

This year I am now digging into my Filipino side and getting involved with the Victorian Filo community and then later taking a trip to the Phils. I have never known any Filipino people properly in the past and there is certainly a lot of novelty mingling with other Filipinos. So far they have seemed very welcoming to me and find it unusual how I have grown-up to be the way I am. Not in a negative way, but in an interested way. They ask things like, "Why are you not married?", "You are not very family orientated?" and "You don't know any Filipinos?"

It is comforting that Filipino culture, like Latin American culture, places a higher emphasis upon personal relationships and general happiness in life over status and responsibility. Ever since I was a little boy I had always questioned and opposed my adoptive family stressing the overall vitality of ongoing work, responsibility and absence of sensitivity. There was an on-going message about the avoidance of 'distracting' and 'expensive' satisfying personal lives. I have always desired more of my personal life and less of my professional life. This is a feeling I've always felt ashamed-of until I finally started my search for self by visiting Latin America, and now learning about the Philippines. Regardless of whether I meet my bio parents or not, I know that getting involved with my roots is helping me realise the life that I want and not the one I have been 'programmed' to have.

I sincerely urge all other dissatisfied or confused 20-something adoptees living in western countries who still have questions rushing about in their heads to take the time out to do this. It will be a sacrifice to your professional life in the short term but if my life recently is anything to go-by, it is a sure fire way to finding more happiness and meaning to your life as an interracial adoptee.

Richard

Yes, I do believe for me that it was important to return to Vietnam. It was an amazing and personally developing experience that will always stay with me. Although I wasn't there to particularly look for my parentage, I did revisit the orphanage from which I came from, which was an undescrivable experience. It's still a functioning orphanage with babies right through to 18 year olds, all very well cared for being a catholic run orphanage. So many emotions and a fleeting look into what life could have been for me if things had turned out differently.

Personally, I was so glad that my husband and I returned together. We also visited his home town in Vung Tau, which was also a very precious experience. I guess for myself, the joy was doubled with having someone to share it with who wanted to be there. For others, sometimes their journeys need to be on their own. Next time, my parents would love to come with us.

I don't think there is any set age to go, just when you're ready, and some aren't ready for many years.

As always, adoption is a common yet individual thing for each and every one of us. What has been for some of us, isn't always so for others.

Sarai

Hi, as an adoptee from Vietnam, I went back to Vietnam 7 years ago and it is all good but it also depends on the safety of the country (political and racial). I believe it is important that you do return to your birth place. However, if you have been institutionalized for along time before you were adopted then to go back to your birth country could be rather damaging mentally, psychologically, and physically. So I guess that wanting to return to your origin of birth is a must but I believe each individual has to be ready for what lies ahead when they make that decision. (I'm hoping that the committee that will be formed in Canberra will set up a program for something like this).

I returned with my wife who is Australian and to have that support was fantastic to share. If a young adoptee goes with parents then that is great too. It is good to have that support group with you so you can share the whole experience with them.

I was 26 years old and I was ready to go back, scared at first – why? the unknown? I didn't want to ask questions. I just wanted to see culture and the place of where I was from and to see the life I may have been given. A very challenging and worth while experience! Going again in July 2008 with my family - wife and two girls.

Heath

I think that it is important to 'return' to the country of origin for a number of reasons.

One – growing up in a predominantly Caucasian society may have inculcated racist attitudes towards to the country of origin or to one's ethnic group. Meeting with representatives who share the same racial origins and observing first hand how they live can serve to break down the stereotypes that may exist. I think that the lack of knowledge about one's origins and lack of exposure to the culture does undermine the self belief/self esteem systems. It is the truth that sets free.

Two – confronting the inherent fear within oneself is also an important milestone in the journey of life – and not just for we adoptees.

Three – travelling to another culture, another country is an experience from which a person will grow – all the more so if there is a connection.

Whether one travels with adopted family members, with friends or alone is not a matter for generalisation. This is a wholly individual thing. The same applies to age. One person at age 16 may be able to gain much from a visit to their country of origin whilst another at age 25 may not be emotionally ready.

Ron

Growing up I believed I had to travel back to Vietnam and connect to the Vietnamese culture. No matter how much I tried to avoid my heritage and culture deep down I knew I had to return. I was ready when I was 33 years old and the opportunity came up only because I was invited to an orphanage & babylift reunion in Saigon.

From the experience I gained a stronger sense of identity, pride in my birth country, greater understanding of the Vietnamese culture and a broader perspective of my adoption.

I went with my husband who was familiar with the country and language so this helped me a lot. I felt more comfortable traveling with my husband than I would have if I traveled with my immediate family.

I had a short trip and I saw other countries to make it more like a holiday rather than a quest.

Definitely recommend for all inter-country adoptees to return to their birth country!

Cheers

Jen

Elastic belongings – Reflecting on Birth Country and Return Journeys A response from Indigo Willing, Viet adoptee and adoption researcher

I never grow tired of learning from my fellow adoptees and am always enriched from the privilege of hearing their opinions, storytelling, celebrations and protests, as well as coming across the questions they ask in order to make sense of their extraordinary personal histories and adoption journeys. Lynelle Beveridge, as the founder of the Inter-Country Adoptee Support Network and someone who has her own remarkable adoption story, has always asked thought-provoking questions. Her questions on this particular occasion concern whether adoptees feel it is important to return to one's birth country, why some may not feel this is so, and what worked (or didn't) for those who do and have.

These are important questions and the themes involved cut across many issues and trends in the adoption. Questions about the role of an adoptee's birth country have also been continuously grappled with from within adoptive parents groups, adoption professionals and the research community, so powerful and elusive is the quest to understand the deep human puzzle of how 'roots' and 'routes' might fit in with the making of identity and belonging. And what we must not forget is that under the shadow of these currents of thought and opinion lies another voice, that of birth parents and siblings. These most marginalized voices have their own difficult place from which to speak, either to express indifference or perhaps convey very heart felt yearnings for the children they no longer have nearby.

Because these multiple frames of reference exist – from the personal to the political, and from every-day common sense to theoretical and philosophical - I do not feel one will ever come across answers that are unquestionably right or wrong. Rather, we must listen to all to keep searching for predominant themes in order to build strategies and understandings that makes life that little bit less bittersweet, turbulent or tense for all. However, I do think there is a special place for knowledge about adopted people's relationships with their birth country when it is generated from within the adoptee community. The reason is that it is because our very lives, as adoptees, are unfolding before our eyes and what we have shared before may be transforming again and again. Thus, the 'snapshots' here should not be read as static but as living and possibly

transforming insights into situations that we have had imposed upon us and experience firsthand. Who else can speak from such a unique and complex position?

For me looking back over my life and writing as an adult today, I would say my relationship to my birth country has always been elastic rather than severed. I would be the first to tell you that the land I was born in was pulled away from my daily existence but it also remains one of the most stubborn and unbreakable threads that weave together what is my complex life-story. For example, no matter how stretched and loose the ties might have become over the years, much repeated questions like “where do you come from?” and “do you know much about your birth parents” represent just some of the many links that continually lead back to, or prompt me to think and talk about the place where my life began in order to offer a better-rounded picture of who I am standing before whoever in the here and now.

I would argue that if one is adopted from overseas they inherit a personal starting point that is not easily erased just because one feels at ‘home’ where one grows up. From my own personal reflections, I have found that no matter how many bonds I have made in my adoptive country, others still connect me to my birth country, mostly on the basis of my physical appearance alone. Then there is the incredibly complex emotional and social ways that blood ties (birth parents) also come to assert/insert into one’s life yet another link, no matter how weak, to the soil one was born on.

My elastic relationship with my birth country may not be that unique. A growing body of personal narratives and contemporary research accounts are showing that adoptees commonly report being approached throughout their lives by others (be they peers or strangers) with much curiosity about their life story. The voices of adoptees in these texts reveal that inquirers were regularly expected to converse about and impart knowledge about their history “over there” - “where they came from”. What is also being revealed is that those who have more understanding and appreciation of their birth country are more likely to cope with questions of identity.

I do not believe that adopted people should have to give in to enduring and sometimes uncomfortably intrusive questions about their birth country, nor should they be expected to love the land where they were born. Yet surely adoptees are in a better position *if they actually have the choice* as to whether to embrace their birth country or not, and that this choice only becomes possible if their adoptive parents, agencies and nations offer them ways to become familiar with it. The unfortunate problem is that, at least in the past, many adoptees had only speculation or no knowledge about their birth country at all. Many also struggled to visit their land of birth due to no financial offers at home or access to support networks overseas so that they were not dropped into a country that, for various reasons, is totally foreign to them and maybe even intimidating. In other words, *they had no real choices at all*.

I would argue that without knowing one’s birth country, either physically or even through secondary learning and the imagination, one is denied a preface and a decent sense of orientation to one’s history. I lacked this preface for a large part of my youth, as I was only able to return my birth country when I was in my mid-twenties. The first trip I made was with other adoptees and the second one I made was with my fiancé. Each trip came with equal parts exhilaration and challenge, but in hindsight both were incredibly rewarding. One of the most important things I gained from visiting my birth country was a new sense of choice in how I wanted to identify with it, and a greater sense of control and knowingness when people asked me about “where do I come from” and “have I been back?” etc. I just wish I had been able to feel such empowerment all my life.

I am now finding that many of the contemporary transnationally adoptive families who have young adoptees that I speak to in my research and community work are making sure their children access this precious experience too. Some travel annually with their children (who span infancy to young adulthood), whilst others may do so every five years or so. Even those who are financially unable to travel so regularly make sure a return trip is in their plans and find other

ways to provide their child with knowledge about their birth country. No one has reported that the trips were detrimental to their children's upbringing. Thus, in closing, perhaps the next steps we might all consider is how to make these return trips more accessible, with more support at hand and with more education about why its important. The answers in the ICASN Perspectives series offers a wonderful resource, and hopefully more and more progress for this timely and important trend will happen.

I found it was important to me to return to my country and culture. I feel that because I look so different to my family (adoptive) and friends, I felt that it was important to me to return to feel like I fitted somewhere. I felt that it was important also to know what type of life I may have had if I had not been adopted. I went with adoptive parents and wished my husband could have been there, but he had two lot's of brain surgeries in April and May 2002 and we went in October 2002. I felt that it was important for my mum and dad to realize that although it was a little tough on me, the adoption was the best thing that could have happened to me. I found that in my 20's I was old enough to fully comprehend everything that was happening. Prior to that I was pretty self centred and wouldn't have got the full picture. I still watch the video that was taken and still pick up on things I missed out on when I was there.

Jenny

As an adult, it's an individual choice as to when it feels right for you but in general, if you haven't yet returned. But as a child, I think adoptees should be taken back as soon as possible and as often as the parents can afford from as early an age as they can. I do think that returning to the country of origin is the most effective way to reconnect and remain connected with your birth country and birth culture, which is so important for the formation of that sense of identity and for that level of self-confidence about who you feel you are, and where you've come from.

As an adult adoptee returning, I think it's an individual choice. As a child, obviously the parents are the best people to take the child back, so long as they are very aware of the specific needs and fears the child might harbour (subconsciously and consciously; eg, abandonment and fear of being left there). When I returned (aged 30) I had aimed to meet a supportive individual over there, but when he disappointed me by not coming along (after I'd arrived there), it actually worked out ideal for me to being there alone (which I realised only after I'd cried myself into oblivion after feeling like he'd abandoned me!)

Ideally, return from as young an age as possible and as often as the parents can afford. This way, the birth culture and country and understanding of what it's all about can more easily become a natural part of the child and their life.

Analee

I think it is important to visit the country of birth to gain an indepth understanding of the culture and way of life. This is the way the adoptee could have lived. Also it is interesting to see the country.

The age should be around 16 years or older, once the adoptee has a greater understanding of adoption --Visiting country prior may be traumatic for some.

The trip is best done with a family member or close friend - that depends on whether the adoptive parents are 'for it' though.

Daniel

I believe it was important for me to return to my birth country and culture of origin for the following reasons:

- To better understand my cultural and historical roots from an in-person perspective
- To better integrate my mixed cultural identities as well as gain a sense of cultural belonging and pride
- To directly and personally confront some of my personal issues of loss and grief.

However, I would caution others who are considering returning to their birth country /culture of origin - be prepared for possibly confronting disappointing discoveries. There is the possibility that you may face considerable discrimination and/or negative responses from the locals, especially if the country is not one with an open attitude towards foreigners, adoption and cross-cultural communities. Also, if your country is one whereby the local society is not one that you might feel very proud of (eg. the government is a highly totalitarian one or the society has huge gaps in social justice, etc.), that might be hard to personally come to grips with.

My main recommendations are:

- learn as much as you can about your country of origin, cultural customs, views on family and language. This is important because this learning can help you better understand and interpret your experiences and interactions with the locals when you go to your culture of origin.
- if it exists near you, perhaps go and spend some time immersing yourself in your local community that is the same as your culture of origin (eg. if you're adopted from Korea, then try to attend some of the Korean cultural events in your community before you go back to Korea). This is important because it can help your gradual adjustment to and familiarization with your culture of origin.

I would highly recommend doing the return trip with someone, either an adoptive family member or friend, who is emotionally supportive (must have) and ideally someone who is familiar with your culture of origin (preferred). The reason is that you may find your visit highly emotional and feelings of grief, loss, and confusion may arise and having a supportive person with you can really help when things get stressful.

I think returning at any age is useful as long as one is emotionally prepared to deal with issues of grief and loss and has some understanding of cross-cultural and/or socio-economic differences.

Ilan

I think if it's something you really want, it is a good idea to return to your country of birth. I did this in 2003, returned to Korea with my adopted parents and my sister. Both my sister and I were fortunate enough to meet and greet our birth families.

I was 16, and whilst I thought this was a good age to do this, at times now I look back on that trip and the whole experience was so overwhelming (and wonderful at the same time). I'm not sure if I was really old enough to appreciate it. In a way it made me more unsettled when I returned to Australia and my everyday life. In the back of my mind there was always the image of "what if", I had gotten a glimpse of how my life may have turned out if I was not adopted, and this (for me) was difficult to accept.

I am now 20 and am currently preparing for my second trip to Korea. I will be staying for about 2 weeks with my birth family. I think I am now more mature and will cope with the whole situation

better. Hopefully I will also have the maturity and capability to return back home to Australia with a big piece of the puzzle found and be able to move on with my life and accept what life has dealt me.

Jenna

As an adoptee of color, adopted in a Western country, in a Caucasian family, I think it all depends on the adoptee's personal feelings towards his/her birth country. Depending on experience in the birth country, the memory of it or not, how it was growing up in the adoptive family, and/or country, in a big city or in a small town, in racist environment or not, all depends on the individual.

But from my experience, I think it's important to find a balance with the culture where we grew up and to face or challenge our own limits to a country where we were born yet but also sent (sold) away from.

I think it's better for a first time visit before getting married (ie. I witness many divorces where the adoptee is questioning the partner) and children.

If the adoptee wants to experience the return trip without the stress of dealing with family matters, perhaps after school for the first time and in a number of steps to help manage and deal with all the new experiences a visit brings. Perhaps a shorter period to start with, in case of cultural shock and the expectation of being "accepted" is high (note, it's not always the case!)

As much as every human being is different, it is only on general terms and common sense that I write.

Mihee-Nathalie Lemoine (A.K.A star kim)
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While I would like to return to Vietnam at some stage of my life, up until now I haven't made it a priority. I have many parts that make up my identity, one of which is that I'm Vietnamese, but it isn't the largest part of my cultural identity.

My journey back to Vietnam would be more of curiosity rather than a feeling of 'going back' or 're-connection'

My family, in particular my Dad is largely responsible for the wonderful life I have, and the great childhood I experienced - and I've always wanted to go back to Vietnam with him as he is as much a part of my adoptive experience.

I believe the right age is dependent on each person. I believe it's more about being emotionally prepared and ready to take the trip back. For some it would be early in life, for others much later. For me, I feel more emotionally ready to take the trip the older I become as it's becoming more meaningful to me the older I get. I think that if I had taken the journey even 10 years ago, I wouldn't have appreciated it or understood it as well as I would now.

Jaye

The unfaithful trust of denial

My dearest love,

It's difficult to write you this letter. More than once I tried to write this letter. Every time when I thought I found the right direction I lost my way. I have tried to wrap this letter in nice words and to deliver this with a certain kind of sense knowing that it would hurt you. But I cannot find the right sentences and a way to tell you the truth without hurting you.

So, I just will say what this is all about. I have to break up our relationship. I found someone else. Our relationship is impossible. I waited almost 33 years to tell you this, but now I can look back, I see this as an inevitable decision and the only right one. I loved and cared for you. I really did. When I did not show you this, you have to know, I have done this silently many times in my heart. Expressing this was not my strongest point you know.

But now I got to know myself better, I understand we have to end this. I can try to find many arguments for this but none will exactly express what I mean. I am thankful for what we shared in times of happiness and pain. I want you to know this and hopefully remember this when the rain has stopped pouring. I know that this might be difficult for you to understand now but I guess knowing you a little, you will understand this one day.

We played for many years the game of denial. But it does not work anymore. I found someone else who understands me better than you. At least I think so... but writing this, it makes me doubt at the same time. You know me so well. At least that's what I always thought. This might be an assumption which will never be confirmed.

You know, the time when we met, was a strange one, as far as I can remember. We did not know each other and yet you said we were so familiar. Looking back, I am not so sure anymore. Your laughter and crying are somewhat mixed, at least the way I can see it now. But more experienced and less innocent I have to say goodbye to my life with you.

At the same moment, it's difficult to tell how this really feels. Somehow, it tears me apart to write you this. I feel free and lost at the same time. Maybe the feeling of a perpetual limbo expresses this moment in the best way. Sometimes I can dance and shout but there are moments of deep sadness which I cannot explain to you. Even when you say you do understand me, you will never really know what is going on. Sometimes I felt comforted but sometimes I felt being surrendered in a way I had never chosen. The issue is that we will never really get to know each other. Not in this lifetime.

In times of despair, I wanted to shout to you, to look at me and to tell me who I am. But I never did. I hid my anger and feelings of aloneness. Instead, I made jokes or played around with you and others not to admit my deepest fear. But now I have seen myself in you, I can no longer deny who I am and where I come from.

I decided to fall in love with myself. I found that love, knowing you, or even better, knowing you both. The resemblance of the past did reflect my life in the present. I have understood now, that I do not belong to either of you. I am formed / constructed, have lived and lingered between two unknown worlds. Now I know and have seen both of your eyes and hearts. I will not choose because how can I choose between the love who gave me life and the love who formed my life. I cannot, I only see one way to reconcile with my past and the future and that is to understand myself day by day. Not lost in translation nor captured in a perpetual limbo.

Maybe one day, when we meet again, we can drink tea or milk and chat a little about our past together. I go on a journey and perhaps I can tell you one day what this journey was. One thing will be for sure, it's a journey closer to my own heart and soul. Because I know now that there is no way to home anymore. Not to you or to the other. My home is where my heart is.

With love,

Jung Woon Seok a.k.a. Hilbrand Westra

If you had asked me whether returning to birth culture and country was important when I was in my teens, I would have said no. This was because, like my adoptive family, I just wanted to fit into the Australian culture and country and family that I had been given. I felt and absorbed so much of my new family that in my mind, I was “a real Aussie” – which meant I rejected and felt ashamed of my Asianness. Hence, to return was contrary to what I wanted at that time.

As I grew into my twenties, I moved away from my country Australian home town and into the big city of Sydney. It was here, that I became aware of other “non-Aussie” looking people and how many Asians there were. I also was exposed to the variety of restaurants available in the city and soon realized that my shame had led to now even knowing how to eat with chopsticks.

When I started dating in serious relationships, my boyfriends and their curiosity with other cultures / countries and foods made me aware of how biased I was against Asians in particular. I recall a boyfriend of mine who once asked me why I didn't wear “platform” shoes – because from his travels in Asia, it was popular and made us shorter petite Asian girls look taller than we are. His comments made me start to look around and notice other Asians – how they dressed, acted, what they did, what they ate .. and I realized it wasn't all that bad!

It wasn't until my mid twenties that for the first time, I developed a desire to go back to my birth country and explore what it was all about. I remember picking up books for the first time about my birth country – looking at the pictures and seeing everything with foreign eyes .. wondering how on earth this place was meant to mean anything to me .. or did it have to?

Finally, when I was 26, I booked the trip with my boyfriend at the time. I'd made sure I'd prepared by talking to other adoptees who had returned before me. It was amazing how much it helped – to learn about how the return trip can create a mixture of emotions as well as the culture shock, being a third world country. From simple tips like where the only place to get money from was, to other tips like how to deal with the constant flow of beggars. I read books, I watched any films that were made in my birth country, I basically absorbed myself as much as possible in everything about my place of birth. It did help that my boyfriend was extremely “pro-Asian” and thought us Asian chicks were really cute – which had been the opposite of how I'd felt growing up in a white Caucasian school where no Aussie boys would date me from what I felt was my “difference / Asian looks”.

I wasn't that close to my adoptive family during those tumultuous early twenties and late teens, so I had no desire to take them with me. I had spent most of those years cutting off from my adoptive family because of baggage they'd given me plus probably the natural desire in me as an adoptee to “do it on my own – so that I didn't feel I owed anybody anything”.

The return trip is still quite clear in my mind – particularly as I flew in over the country for the first time and landed. I had wondered previous to returning, whether I'd “feel” anything. Is there such a thing as an innate connection with one's land of birth? Would I have it? Or would I feel nothing? I'd even spoken to migrants who'd returned to their birth land years later and some had said how yes, they just had this sense of emotional/physical connection with the land when they went back. So did I get it? Yes .. I recall flying over the land towards the airport with my heart thumping in my chest – it made tears flow down my face as I just felt “I have returned – this is my place”. It was so emotional – just the landing!

For the whole the trip I kept a journal of how I felt every day, what I saw, and what I absorbed – another tip that I'd been given by another adoptee who'd returned before me. There was just so

much. I guess one of the important things I'd learnt from other adoptees was not to have any major sense of expectation of the trip. In my mind, I'd made sure that all I wanted from the trip was to simply "explore and absorb" .. to be open to what this place might mean and feel like. I remember watching the Heidi Bub story of her return and the heartache she felt because she'd not had access to other adoptees to learn from or good counseling on what to expect – the massive cultural differences and the lack of support she experienced made her trip such a negative journey. It was something I didn't want to repeat.

My trip to my birth country ended up being such a turnaround to me personally in how I felt about being Asian. I explored the history of the country and enjoyed meeting the people who were so friendly, curious and open. It was this trip that opened my eyes to just how resilient and strong these people were – something that I connected to being an adopted person and having lived the life I'd had. I suddenly became aware that my strength and resilience were ingrained within me and that I had everything to be proud of to be "one of them". I realised being raised by a family in another culture and country had not removed parts of me that were innately Asian – and in some ways, it helped me understand more about who I was because for many aspects of myself, I could never see these same characteristics having come from my adoptive family – previously I'd been at a loss for who I really was because I felt I didn't just "fit" with my adoptive family.

Since returning, I've lived my life being totally at ease in my Asianness – I've lived my life being proud of it. I've also come to understand more about the differences in being Asian versus Caucasian and I've embraced the bits of both that I've wanted to incorporate into my life. Isn't this the life we have as adoptees? In many ways – we get the best of both worlds – except that as adults, we get to choose the bits we want and toss the bits we don't want. I think in many ways, my journey as an adoptee has been all about incorporating these two worlds and coming to accept and choose who I want to be and how I want to live.

Embracing the two worlds and integrating them into who you are as an adoptee can be confusing as a teenager and into the early twenties. My suggestion to other adoptees considering returning is – persist and travel your own journey. For those who want to return, do it when you're ready and with someone you feel close enough with to share your vulnerabilities. Be prepared by talking to other adoptees who've done the trip before you and learn from what did and didn't work for them. Make sure you have support from a close friend, family or counselor. For those who don't want to return – that's ok because it might not be for everyone, and you should only ever go when you want to and not for somebody else. As baby/young adoptees, we didn't have choices – they were made for us, so it's important that as adult adoptees, we make our own choices and live the life we want.

Lynelle

Meeting my birth family saved my life. I had experienced a very tough teenage period. I experimented with drugs and alcohol and didn't ever think I would amount to anything. I rebelled against my parents and any authority figure that would try and stand in my way. I really hated the world, but more so myself for being different.

I grew up as one of three brown babies in a white family (with older white adopted siblings)... However, I was always considered the 'black sheep' of the family. I would pray to God each night and bargain with Him to say I will be really, really good if I could just see a photo of my birth parents, or I will do extra chores or be nice to my parents if He could find away for me to find out where I came from.

My prayers were finally answered when I was 19. I traveled to my birth country Sri Lanka along with my twin sister and my adoptive mother (my mum) and I met my birth mother, father and younger sister and brother. It was a life changing event and the most important thing I have ever done in my life. I knew that when I met them my life would change for the better and it has.

Returning gave me a sense of identity that I had never before experienced. I looked like other people besides my twin sister. I had relatives and cousins that were just as amazed by me as I was of them. We played street cricket and shared a meal. It was beautiful.

Ironically the trip brought me closer to my mum and I now consider her my best friend. I think it is important to go with someone, a close friend or ideally a supportive family member but never alone because it is very emotional and a little overwhelming.

Going overseas at 19 I think was the right age for me because I was no longer considered a child and could have greater decision making powers. I didn't have any pre-counseling to help me prepare for this journey but I would highly recommend both pre and post counseling because when I returned, it took me nearly 4 years to comprehend the magnitude of what a life changing experience I had just been through.

Now as I sit and write this piece from Tanzania, Africa - I realize how truly blessed by life has been so far. Many times growing up I wondered what my life would have been like had I stayed and was able to be raised by my birth family. It would have been vastly different from the freedom and life's little luxuries that people growing up in the western world take for granted. I know that I am receiving a high standard of education. I don't have to worry where my next meal is coming from, nor do I have to worry about how I am going to pay my bills. Because I was adopted into my family I see it as the greatest blessing of all. Sure my life has been no bed of roses and I have been cut by many thorns but as I am a little older and hopefully a little wiser I am proud to call both sets of parents mum and dad. I count myself as having 3 beautiful sisters and 3 handsome brothers just separated by a body of water and a few thousand kilometres.

Gabbie

Yes. I think it is important for most adoptees to be able to return to their country of origin because...

1. For me it would open and shut doors to questions that I may have about my family, my existence and possibly have a healing effect on my psyche.
2. It could bring to me my roots and my culture that I have always wondered what I was missing
3. I would finally get to bring the memory to life of the beautiful countryside/landscape and beaches that I hold dear to my heart.

However, the downside...

1. It helps me with the visions that I have had since childhood and help to understand those realities and construct a new reality by coming to grips that this could be a double edge sword situation- it could be a yard stick to measure what I know now and or make the realization that "Good Grief! I am glad I live in a America and I don't live in the country of origin for one reason or another.

No - because this could actually alienate me more so from the people there because ...

- a) I may not be all Vietnamese, may be partially European
- b) I can't speak the spoken language
- c) Have little knowledge of the social norms in the country of origin
- d) I am already from two cultures. Both American (more so than Vietnamese)
- e) The return trip could bring out many suppressed emotions from the past that my psyche has hidden to protect me whether they be good or bad.

I would think the return should be shared with people of the similar situation/shared experiences than of that of the adoptive family. These people can share along with me and they may/will have the same type of emotions thus aiding each other to the emotions that maybe overwhelming. I personally would not want to share this experience with my adopted family since my adoptive family have not supported me in much of my endeavors. I would resent them if they "feel" they should want to participate in a very emotional time for me.

I don't think a certain age should be determined or gauged until that adoptee is mentally and emotionally ready within themselves. I am 46 and I don't think I am ready to face the emotional let down or emotional high that would be associated and may come with a highly charged step.

Lisa Coddington :0)
