

Why Won't My Mother Meet Me?"

by Carole Anderson

Why did your natural mother refuse to meet you? There are probably as many answers as there are natural mothers. From some of my own feelings and those of other natural mothers, though, I do have a few possible themes to suggest

Your natural mother lost a great deal when she surrendered you. She lost the chance to give you all of the love she felt for you, that all mothers feel.

She lost the opportunity to share in the important and the humdrum events of your life. She lost all the joys and problems of raising you, of guiding you from infancy to adulthood.

She may feel guilty that she was not there. She may feel cheated because she was not allowed to be there. Either way, loss is both painful and unnatural.

In addition to the pain of the losses themselves, there is the additional pain of feeling different from other people, outcast from society. Often there is the pain of feeling that the loss was unnecessary and that the separation need not have occurred "if only..." If only her parents had helped her. If only the social worker had told her what adoption would really be like for you and for her. If only society had supported single parenthood at the time you were born. If only she had not believed she was unworthy of you. If only she had had the money to support you. If only she had somehow found a way to keep you. If only she had believed in her own feelings instead of in what others told her would be best for you. The list of "if onlies" is endless.

Knowing you could make her losses more real to her, and thus more painful. She may have worked very hard at denying her feelings, at convincing herself that your adoption was necessary, at telling herself that giving birth does not make a woman a mother, at pretending that she was not a mother and so did not lose anything. She may have denied to herself that it ever happened.

If she has succeeded at numbing herself to the pain by clinging to such beliefs, knowing you would remove the blinders from her eyes, exposing her to the full impact of all the years of loss and pain.

She may have coped with losing you through fantasizing about what might have been. She may see you over and over in her mind just as you were when she last saw you, see herself raising you, see what you would be like at different ages.

If your natural mother has other children, she may be terrified of losing them, too, if she had not told them about you. Many natural mothers were rejected by their children's natural fathers and by their own parents during their pregnancies. If the people she loved and trusted and whom she thought would always love and help abandoned her when she most needed them, she may be unable to trust anyone now. She may regard all relationships as fragile, and fear that she will be abandoned again if she disappoints the people who are now important to her. Having already suffered the pain of losing one child, the fear of losing her other children and suffering that same pain again may overwhelm her. She may also fear losing you a second time around, if you want to see her only once. Many natural mothers have internalized others' rejection of them and believe they are unlovable. Not loving or respecting herself, she cannot believe that others could care about her if they really knew her.

Suspecting that adoptees who search will ask about their fathers after they have satisfied their curiosity about their mothers, her rejection may be tied to her feelings about your natural father. If she loved him, accepting you could mean reopening the deep wounds she suffered in being rejected by him. IF she did not love him, she may dread having to admit that fact to you. She may

not want to explain her relationship with your natural father or her feelings about it, and fear that you will reject her if she does not answer your questions about him. She may fear that you would prefer him to her and she could not bear to lose you to the very person whose abandonment made your surrender unavoidable. She may believe that your natural father is a terrible person and feel shame at having had a relationship with him, fear that you would hate her if you knew him. She may fear that you would be upset or would think less of her or of yourself if you knew him.

Mothers want their children to be happy, but they also want to feel needed and important to their children. They want to be the ones who make their children happy. Generally, a mother's needs and her child's compliment each other, so that both are satisfied by her raising her child, with each needing and receiving the other's love. The special situation of adoption, though, assures that the natural mother cannot win. If she believes your adoption was the best for you, she may feel worthless or useless as a mother because you did not need her. If your adoption was not the best, she may feel guilty that she did not protect you from whatever happened and she may therefore feel she failed as a mother and as a woman.

Your natural mother's image of herself as a mother, a woman, and a human being may be at stake. If she has internalized society's judgments that "nice girls don't" or that only an "unnatural woman" could surrender her child or that "any animal can give birth but that doesn't make her a mother", it will be difficult for her to acknowledge to herself that it is she who is that bad girl, the unnatural woman, or only an animal in society's eyes.

Subconsciously, some mothers feel that their babies abandoned them. Mothers were often repeatedly told that their babies needed or wanted more than they could give them, and that surrender was necessary for the child. Many mothers were told that to keep their children would be selfish, that they had no right to satisfy their need to love and nurture by raising their children, because the children deserve and need more. Other people spoke for you, telling your natural mother you wanted more than she could give. To your natural mother, this may have been experienced deep within as a rejection by you, as her baby's deserting her for other people. Even though she knows on an intellectual level that this feeling is not rational and she may feel guilty for it, on an emotional level what she feels may be that, although she needed and wanted her child, her child was not there for her.

Closely related are the problems of competition and sacrifice. Just as she may have felt that she was in competition with unknown couples for the right to raise you, a contest in which she was the loser, she was also placed in the position of being in competition with you. She may have been told that it was her life or yours, her needs or yours. Because you were not aided as a family but instead treated as individuals whose needs were in conflict, she may have felt that she was choosing between her own happiness and yours.

If she wanted to raise you but believed that your surrender was necessary for your happiness, she may feel that she has sacrificed her life for yours, her happiness for yours. All people want happiness, everyone wants her own needs to be met, and there is usually anger toward injustice. She, however, cannot allow herself to feel or express her anger and resentment, because it was your natural mother herself who decided that you were more important and mattered more than she did, she herself who chose your needs above her own.

If that choice was made by others such as her parents or by her situation instead of by your natural mother, there may be even more anger. There can be tremendous guilt involved for feeling anger, because we have been taught that parents gladly sacrifice for their children. Her anger may therefore be threatening to her, for what kind of person can she be that she could feel anger toward her child?

Yet other parents, other people, do not make sacrifices of this magnitude. What society usually calls parental sacrifice is really more like an investment or a trade-off of some current comfort in exchange for other regards. To give up a full night's sleep in order to tend a sick child carries with it the benefits of holding and comforting that child, feeling necessary to the child, receiving the child's love and gaining society's approval. What most parents think of as sacrifices are small and

temporary inconveniences for which they receive personal satisfaction, the child's loyalty and affection and societal sanctions. The sacrifice of a natural mother's life for her child's is unique.

Rather than compensations, the sacrifice is generally answered with guilt, pain and emptiness. Society's reaction is most often condemnation rather than approval. The natural mother's sacrifice is unnatural, unrecognized and unrewarded.

Some natural mothers felt less than human during the pregnancy and surrender experience, and may have felt they were regarded as subhuman by society. Just as infants have a need to be nurtured, so every mother has a need to give nurture to her child. You were placed with people who could meet your infant need for nurture, but your natural mother was given no substitute for you. Her need to nurture was not met.

Understandably, many adoptees explain that their adoptive parents are their only real parents and they love them dearly, but that they searched to gain information about themselves. Newspapers are full of articles about adoptees saying that they are not looking for a mother, but for themselves or their own identity.

Your natural mother may feel she is again being reduced to a data bank. Just as she once surrendered you to others while her own needs went unmet, she may feel she is now being asked for information but that again her feelings and needs will be ignored. She may feel she has given everything without receiving anything in return, and will be reluctant to give still more if she fears that you too, will take what you want from her and then abandon her with no thought for her needs.

Even if she is able to struggle through the many pains and losses that have already occurred, your natural mother may fear that there are more to come if she accepts you now. It may hurt her terribly that she could not mother you.

Opening her heart to you would make your natural mother vulnerable to a later rejection by you. If she welcomed you as the beloved daughter or son she lost, how would she feel at being only a friend or acquaintance to you? To what extent would you accept her? Would she be asked to your graduation or wedding? Would you want to spend Christmas or Passover with her? Would you regard her as the grandmother of your children, including her in events in their lives? Or would you want to see her on rare and secret occasions, carefully hiding the relationship from others? She may feel that not only have adoptive parents taken her place in your life as a child and in raising you, but that by accepting you now she would lose you again, this time by inches, by being relegated to a lowly and insignificant place in your life, if she were included at all.

As an adult, you are unlikely to want your natural mother to be the mother she may, on some level, still want to be. Your image of motherhood will always be that of your adoptive mother, not your natural mother. You cannot relate to your natural mother in the same way you would have if she had raised you, nor can she relate to you in the same way. Neither of you are the people you would be if she had raised you. Although the similarities you are likely to share would make her keenly aware that you are her child, the differences resulting from your growing up in your adoptive home would make her painfully aware of the distance between you as well.

Because meeting you requires facing all her feelings about your surrender and loss, it may also challenge your natural mother's beliefs about the value and meaning of life, the importance of family ties, religion and other basic concepts on which she has built her life. Many people want to believe that the world is fair, that everything comes out even, that people get what they deserve out of life. Adoption issues do not fit into such tidy categories.

If the world is fair, what has she done that is so terrible she deserves such pain? If life is equal why did other people who expressed their sexuality before marriage pay no price for it? If this is justice why did her subsequent children have to grow up in an incomplete family, without their brother or sister. If families are of primary importance and should be kept together why was her family

separated? How could her church have told her God wanted her child to be adopted or that God created her child for other parents? How could a loving God want this pain for her? If she allows herself to acknowledge her experience, how can she reconcile it with what she believes about life? If the foundations on which she has built her life do not match her experience, it will be difficult for her to face her feelings and risk losing those foundations. Facing you may mean reconstructing her entire view of life, rethinking all of her values.

The issues a natural mother must face before she can accept her adult child are not simple ones, nor are they obvious to her. Often there are conflicts between what she thinks and what she feels or between her feelings and those of the people around her. Few natural mothers were told to expect these problems or prepared to deal with them. Since little or no hope of a future reunion was offered to surrendering mothers, there was little motivation for attempting to deal with them. Many were told that they would be abnormal if they did not forget about their children, that they should go on with their lives as if they had never had their children.

Most natural mothers, despite the enormity of these issues, do face most of them in the years following surrender. Most people cannot sustain the fantasy that their loss was a nightmare and not a reality. Most people find the strength to face the truth of their own lives, but growth can be a slow and painful process with uneven progress characterized by temporary regression back to suppressed feelings.

To some people, it might seem pointless to attempt reunions when so much pain, conflict and confusion seem to be involved. Reunion, though, does not cause these difficulties. Their source is the natural mother's unnatural separation from her child. The feelings already exist, and leaving them buried beneath denials and fantasies cannot resolve or eliminate them. However painful the separation experience may be, it is her experience, her life. Attempting to suppress the most profound experience of her life separates the natural mother from herself as well as from her child and is not healthy for anyone. It requires that much emotional energy be spent on denying or numbing feelings, limiting emotional growth in all areas.

Your natural mother's fear and dread are evidence of the intensity of her feelings for you. If she had no feeling for you, you would be no more frightening to her than a store clerk or a stranger asking for directions.

What she feels may be an overwhelmingly intense but undifferentiated fear and she herself may not understand the reasons for it. Her reasons are her deepest emotions, hidden under so many layers of intellect, rationalization and denial that she is unaware of them. She may try to give sensible reasons why she cannot see, understand or articulate the real reasons without much self analysis.

You are offering the opportunity for your natural mother to grow by facing herself and becoming reconciled with her feelings about herself. You are offering the gift of knowing the person her surrendered child has become. These are enormous gifts and you should be proud for offering them to her.

In order to accept them, though, your natural mother must climb a painfully steep and rocky path through her many feelings about your surrender before she can move forward to reconciliation. Her ability to walk a part of that path or all of it is not a reflection on you or on your worth or on your importance to her but on how well she herself can deal with the fears and pains that your loss and society's attitudes about the surrender have caused her. With time and support your natural mother may grow to accept the gifts you offer.

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