

Walking Down the Village Path

by **Dr. Jane Liedtke, Our Chinese Daughters Foundation**

I have watched the faces of the parents who attend my talks about “What’s in an Orphanage File” as they listen to what information is inside (and sometimes not inside) the file. I see interest and agony as we discuss how information in the file can lead to finding the abandonment site. We sigh a collective sigh of grief when we discuss the notes and messages found within the files. And, I see huge tears fall from both moms and dads as I share the story of how one family followed the trail to their daughter’s abandonment site, and how that trail led them down a special village path, to the door of the people who found her, to learn that those people knew her birthparents.

When I tell the real story of a family from one of our tours who experienced this two years ago, I share the following statements: “It’s a one in a million chance, like finding the needle in a haystack” and “The chances are that it will never happen to you.” I follow-up the discussion with the following questions:

1. Why do you want to see your daughter’s abandonment site? What do you expect to find there that you don’t already know? Does your daughter wish to see this location or is it for you as a parent?
2. How would you handle yourself as an unannounced visitor at the village home of the person who found your child?
3. How would you feel to have this really happen to you - locating your child’s birthparents when you only expected to visit the abandonment site? If you wanted the birthparent connection to happen, how would you handle yourself and the situation? If you had never anticipated this happening and the situation began to unfold before you, how would you handle the situation?
4. How prepared is your family to have a relationship with a rural family who may not have much education, have no ability to communicate with you in English or you with them in Chinese, be very poor and without knowledge/understanding of international adoption, and have other children who are your child’s sister(s) and/or brother(s)?
5. How prepared is your child to process this connection to her birthparents and siblings, should it happen? How will other children in your family handle it if this happens to one child but not the other (especially if you have more than one adopted child)?

5. What expectations will the birthparents have when they realize they are now reconnected to a birth-child they abandoned and that she/he now lives with a family living in America? Will their expectations match your reality?

6. How far down that path do you want to walk? How far are you prepared to go? What is going to be right for your family and also right for the birth-family (respecting their privacy in order for them to not be in trouble with the authorities)

For those families with children abandoned in urban areas - a hospital, police station, train station, etc., the path will not likely lead to a village. It will be easy to say, "we don't know how to find your birthparents" or "it's just not possible to do so" and that will suffice. We will have no options. But, for those who discover in their police report /certificate of abandonment a village name or a doorstep of a family's home or a hamlet so small that everyone for miles around knows everyone else, **the walk down the path could be more amazing than you could ever imagine!**

Over the last year I've told this one story about the walk down the path for this one special family and their children. I considered deep in my heart, and intellect, that this was a "one in a million" situation. I expected that an experience so rare would not be something most adoptive parents would anticipate nor need to worry about, because it just wasn't going to happen again.

I was wrong. Not long ago another family visited their village after their orphanage visit and through a series of amazing twists of fate, they found themselves face to face with their daughter's birth-family. The connection was made without searching for it. I won't share the details of this story herein nor any of the other stories I now know about adoptive families **finding birthparents**, or by sheer chance **meeting their child's birthparents**. How it happened, who it happened to, and why it was possible are the families private stories to tell in their own time and with their own voice.

I share this information that birthparents have been "found" because I want you all to realize that it's not going to happen often. It's very rare, but I am going to say it's MORE than "one in a million" because I now personally know three families that have had this happen, and have heard of a fourth.. None of the families were looking for birthparents. I think there is something important in that message. **None were looking**, none were expecting, none had thought it would happen when they went down the path to the village. None of the parents were prepared, nor were their children prepared. It was emotionally draining and a complete shock for those three families I have discussed it with.

Does this mean that everyone should run over to China on the next flight and weed through orphanage files to find the exact abandonment site so that they can find their child's birthparents? No, it would be irresponsible to suggest it. Am I suggesting that finding birthparents is what all of our children need? No, I am not saying that either--it's a family-based decision that should reflect what **your child** really needs/wants. Do some children have a high desire or need to reconnect to their birthparents? Yes, some do. Do they all? No, it's an individual need and can't be

generalized to the entire population of adopted children from China. They may have this need at different times in their personal growth and development, based on:

- ~ their personalities and their family environment
- ~ their emotional development
- ~ the impacts of institutionalization

What am I suggesting then?

I am reminding each and every adoptive parent that I can reach out to, that YOU must think and take responsibility for your actions **before** walking down the path - just think about it seriously. It's not another sightseeing stop on an itinerary. This is not a walk for curiosity seekers. This is not an entitlement as an adoptive parent. This is not a photo-shoot, nor a quick Kodak moment. This is a life we're talking about - your child's life.

Have strategies in place before you take the walk to the village. Be prepared for not meeting the finding person, be prepared for no connection resulting, and also be very prepared in case it *does* unfold before your very eyes. This is a situation where when you walk down the path you are confronted with reality and that reality returns home with you, whether the birthparents are part of the picture or not:

a. In general, people in rural China can be extremely poor and live in substandard housing. However, some are doing ok and have experienced improvements in their lives since the birth of your adopted child.

b. For the most part, people in rural China do not know anything about adoption and international adoption, though one might expect they would (it's not like it's on national TV in China; sometimes it is mentioned, but the chances that a rural farmer is going to be watching it is again rare).

c. Some people in rural China would expect the connection to adopted parents in America or to have a child in America, to give them status within the community, while some farmers will worry that they will be fined for the abandonment, or worse.

d. It is not possible to get birthparents visas to visit the US, nor help them immigrate to the US. Be prepared to explain the real situation with regards to government regulations.

e. Likely you are not a family who will elect to live in China. If you are, you are going to have a connection to people that you can not imagine how it will be in advance, other than to know that you will have an entire rural village (and not just one rural family) holding a key to your life.

Recently I met with a family who walked down the path to the village and met their daughter's birthparents and one of two siblings. They were visibly drained from the experience. They were concerned for the rural family. They were thankful the event happened (though purely by chance). They returned home with a deep understanding of what had happened to their daughter from the time she was born

until they received her. They returned home with the heavy burden of trying to figure out what the right thing is to do next aside from the obvious need to keep in contact with her birth-family.

This is more information than 99.9999999% of us will ever know. Some adoptive parents don't want to know and there are days when I personally waiver between which is better, knowing or not knowing. I wonder for my own daughter what that connection would be like. What would it be like for me? When I think about the details of the stories I know, tears run down my face, too. When I speak to groups of adoptive parents I can't tell the story of the first family without crying. I cry and everyone else does too because we know that if we were in that family's shoes it would be the hardest day of our lives. We know it had to be tough for them. We know we would not be able to be as strong as we might need to be for our child. We know we would be opening Pandora's Box for everyone - the birth-family and for our adoptive family. We know relationships will never be the same. **We know these things, yet with amazement and great curiosity, we still want to walk down that village path...**

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