

**Afghanistan, Murdering Your Spouse, Finding Your Biological Parents
What Happens Next – 8.22.2021
Darren Schwartz**

Larry Bernstein:

It's fantastic Darren. Can you expand on your relationship with your birth mother? She was resistant. Can you explain what she had to say, why she didn't want to have a relationship, and what that meant to you?

Darren Schwartz:

Well, my biological mother never told her dad she was pregnant and had a child. I suspect that they were very religious. The only person that knew about my birth was her mother when she was away at school. She was a freshman at Michigan State and her family wasn't seeing her a lot. And now she had kids, she had a family, and she didn't want that to be broken up. I think at the time when I spoke to her, her kids were probably in their early teens.

And I felt very rejected. It was very upsetting. But because my adopted father had died, Maury Schwartz, he's my dad, my father, he was always my hero. I wanted to, in a way kind of replace him, which kind of seems unrealistic. But the one thing my birth mother said, and she said it multiple times to me is, "I gave you, life. I'm sorry I can't give you more." In time, I've come to really appreciate and honor those words.

Larry Bernstein:

It's incredible that she was aware that she could give you, life and no more. What should we be thinking about in the terms of women that give children up for adoption? Is that a fair expectation? And that when we do go seek out biologic parents and they've moved on with their lives, does it make adoption ex ante that much more difficult?

Darren Schwartz:

The answer is that I think that she did what she could and she was young. And I think that as an adoptive kid, like all kids, all you think about is yourself. And as you grow up, you kind of realize that it's not really like that and the world's different. So I will tell you, honestly, I was very frustrated and very hurt and angry at that moment. Like I said, I've come to really appreciate what she's done. The way to think about it, I think that's every person's individual opinion.

Larry Bernstein:

You were very clever, Darren, in terms of manipulating Ms. McCallum. They had certain rules and the rules were simple. Her job was not to give away the name of the birth mother and not to give away the name of the birth father. And then you said, "Well, if that person in my file is not my father, could I have his name?" And she willingly gave it up. Did you get around the original intent of the organization, which was to protect the mother and father? How do you think about your ability to break through?

Darren Schwartz:

And I think by manipulation, I think you mean the caring, thoughtful approach. Well, here's what I know, is that since 1980, I was born in the late '60s, I think in 1980, at least in Michigan, every family or parents that give the child up for adoption are presented with a waiver, meaning that when the kid that you're giving up for adoption is 18, do you authorize that child to reach out to you? And I don't know what the percent of parents that actually do that are, but it didn't exist when I was that age. I think that their job is to protect the parents. But I think that that law implies that there's an understanding that there's going to be a desire for children to reach out and try to find their parents. I think it's a little bit on both sides.

Larry Bernstein:

Technology is what really changed the game in the past 30 years. Your example of 23andMe and Ancestry.com provided you a list of relatives. It allowed you to fill in the blank to find Tony, your father. And there's going to be a lot of surprises about who your real biological father is, even within marriage. I have a cousin of mine who donated to a sperm bank and has multiple children through that method. There's going to be a lot of surprises and discovery about biological parents in the near future offered by this technology. Is this a source for good? Is it a source for bad? How should we think about this changing dynamic?

Darren Schwartz:

I've heard multiple stories already, and I'd say that several are not so good. You have parents, people that gave up a kid for adoption, and now they're in their forties or fifties or sixties, their oldest child is 30, whatever it is, and then now a 35 year old kid comes out of the woodwork. I've heard those stories. At the same time, I have heard wonderful stories like mine. And oddly enough, mine is both. I would love to talk to my birth mother, but she wouldn't do it. And my birth father has embraced me and vice versa. I think that technology is incredible, but there will absolutely be some pain as well some joy.

Larry Bernstein:

There's this constant universal question about nature versus nurture. And as you've met your father, what have you found similar? What have you found different? And how would you explain your connection?

Darren Schwartz:

It's incredible. First of all, nurture. My adopted father Maury Schwartz was incredible. He had a great sense of humor. Many people think that I'm very funny.

Larry Bernstein:

I agree.

Darren Schwartz:

My biological birth father is a singer-songwriter. I'm a singer-songwriter albeit a poor one, but it's always been a passion of mine. So I think I got the passion, maybe not the skill. He's zany and funny. I think similar, he collects things: I do too. I collect lighters and glassware. And his profession in Norway was working with startup businesses and I've been part of early-stage companies. He scuba dives. We both went to Michigan State. I'm guessing he got a higher grade point average than I did.

Larry Bernstein:

What would you advise someone who is adopted to do, given your experience? Was this a worthwhile journey, given the pros and cons of going through all this? I also find it rather miraculous that you were able to find Tony, given that he lives in Europe. How do you think about the challenges ahead for someone in the same position as you?

Darren Schwartz:

Well, I think it's a personal thing. I think the first thing that has to happen is someone who's adopted want to find their birth parents. I don't think that's necessarily a hard and fast rule. I have a very close friend of mine who was adopted. And he said, "Well, I don't know if I want to find my birth parents, my birth mother. I feel like it'd be an insult to my mother," which I think was a very profound thing, because he came from his background. Mine was mine. So I thought that was very interesting. I think it's your own personal journey.

I think what's universal is the feeling of being connected, a feeling of belonging, and that is universal. And for me, I think, in general, adopted people have that curiosity. But for me, I think that was really accelerated because I'd lost my father who adopted me. But before he died, it was never an issue. I think at some level, I felt proud of it, like somebody wanted me. But I think some people feel the opposite, someone didn't want me. I think the answer is people want to be connected, they want to be loved, they want to be part of something.

Larry Bernstein:

Well, I have Robi Ludwig on the line as well. She's a psychotherapist. Robi, you want to join the conversation?

Robi Ludwig:

Sure.

Larry Bernstein:

What do you make of this universal desire?

Robi Ludwig:

Oh, it's really interesting. I think it is wanting to see people who look like them, that there is that visual reminder of, who do I look like? Who do I belong with? They say psychologically that people who are adopted are born with this sense of abandonment. I don't know if that's true

across the cases out there. And I've met people who were adopted who did not want to search for their birth parents because they so loved their adopted parents. I think it makes sense to do whatever works, but it also makes sense to be prepared for the worst case scenario as well.

Larry Bernstein:

Darren, how much do you look like your biological father?

Darren Schwartz:

A lot. He also is very good looking. But my cousin Dave, who's one of the heroes of this story. Because I called him and he had just gone through the same thing and he's like, "I'm on it." My aunt Bonnie, who's the one that got this information. During that time before they were deciding if they're going to connect me with my birth father, they sent a picture. And when I first got the picture, I was outside, sun was glaring. I looked at the picture like, "Who's sending me a picture of me?" And it was my dad. I absolutely look just like him. When I sent the photo to my family. They all almost plotzed, which is actually the word one of my older aunts used, which is Yiddish for almost falling down. And Robi, I think you're right. It was an amazing piece that had always been missing. I didn't look like anybody from my adopted family. So I agree.

Larry Bernstein:

Within days of discovering who your family was, you were able to meet your uncle Ted and play golf with him at the country club across the street from where I am right now. How was it meeting the first person from your biological family? And what that would mean for meeting the rest of your family?

Darren Schwartz:

It was amazing. I had my second conversation with my birth father, which was with the family in Norway. The second day after first contact, we had a Zoom and we saw everybody. And moments after hanging up with that, I got a call and it was, "Hey, Darren it's your aunt Bonnie." And so that was my father's sister. We talked to her for a while. And then I hung up the phone and I got another call, "Darren, it's your uncle Ted." And we talked. I was like, "Uncle Ted." All of a sudden, I've got people I've got to talk to. He's a golfer. I said, "Where do you golf?" He said, "I golf at Sunset Valley in Highland Park." Sunset Valley is two and a half blocks from my house. He's been golfing there probably for five or 10 years. I'm sure I was playing the same golf course with him at some point.

Darren Schwartz:

And I thought, I said, "Let's get together," and said, "How about golf?" "How's Tuesday for you?" I'm like, "Tuesday's great." And within three days, I was on the golf course with uncle Ted who's given me all the backstory of the family. And it was interesting because I now have a higher sense of responsibility in an odd way, even though these people are new to me. But it was pretty amazing.

Larry Bernstein:

Darren, I'd like to end on a note of optimism. What do you have to say this optimistic about both your own family and the role of finding your biological parents?

Darren Schwartz:

Well, I think that the most important things we haven't talked about, is my family, the family that adopted me and all my cousins and aunts and uncles. I didn't need to go find my birth family to find love and belonging. These are the people I grew up with, my cousins, which are like my brothers, and sisters and aunts and uncles. And what's also important about that is that they were totally supportive. When I told some of them what was going on, and they all cried and were filled with joy and excitement. I think ultimately, the takeaway, whether you layer in what's going on with COVID and everyone being at home and just the world being upside down, is that what's optimistic is people and our world and communities have a really high capacity for love and taking care of family.

Larry Bernstein:

Darren, thank you so much.