

Chapel Talk
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What's in a Name?

I was born Christine Lynn. I came to know this truth 20 years after my birth. What would you do if you found out that you had another name? For me, learning about this name triggered a desire to search for my birthmother, the person who gave me my first name and then put me up for adoption. On February 21st, 1972, in Burlington, Vermont, a 15 year-old girl gave birth to me, her first child. Tonight, I will refer to this girl, my birthmother, as Lynn. This talk is about how I learned of my other name and how I found my birthmother, working both within the law and sometimes beyond it to uncover information about a past that legally it is not my right to know even though it is in complex ways part of the story of who I am.

Even though my parents shared what they knew about my birth story and the circumstances surrounding my adoption with me when I was growing up, they really did not have much information themselves. I decided during my junior year in college that I wanted to know more about my story, so I began my search. I knew that my parents adopted me from a certain place in Vermont, so I began my search by calling this organization. The adoption volunteer mailed me a letter that included my non-identifying information – that is, a detailed summary of information in my adoption record about my birth parents, any birth siblings, and my health, genetic, and social background. This information in no way identified my birthparents or their families. What I learned was that, before she became pregnant and gave birth to me, Lynn was a 10th grade student attending her local public high school in her Vermont town. She was an above average to honors student. She was a cheerleader. She was one of 5 children and was an identical twin. She was dating, without the knowledge of her Irish-Catholic parents, a 17-year-old African American boy, who was an average student who liked cars. I learned later that this was her first boyfriend, her first sexual relationship. Before relinquishing custody to the State of Vermont, she named me Christine Lynn. The letter from the agency ended by informing me that this was all the information to which I had legal access, and if my birthmother ever contacted them for information about me, they would let me know.

Before I continue, it will be helpful for you to know a bit about adoption law so that you can understand how I had to circumvent it. As an adoptee, there are generally two types of information available about you: non-identifying information, as I explained already, and identifying information. Identifying Information includes facts that will help to establish the identity and whereabouts of a birthparent or a birth sibling. It includes information such as a full name, date of birth, and last known address. In most states, including Vermont, if you were born before July 1986, you are not legally privy to any identifying information. For adoptions finalized after July 1986, the adoptee can receive identifying information by request, as long as the birthparents did not file for nondisclosure. In short, in adoptions prior to 1986, the parent relinquishing custody is primarily protected. After 1986, the law privileges the rights of the adoptee. Because I was born in 1972, only non-identifying information is legally available to me.

I understand why the law is the way it is, after all, families are complicated spaces. But I guess I believed that even for parents that decide to put their children up for adoption, there must be a part of every mother, every parent, that wonders what has happened to their child. Part of me wanted to let Lynn know that I was OK, that I have a great life. And of course, I was curious about her life as well. Ultimately, I decided to circumvent the law. When I was 23 years old and a first year graduate student at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, I decided, finally, to try to contact my birthmother. I called the Elizabeth Lund Home again to learn about how to conduct a search for identifying information. The woman I spoke with on the phone was quite friendly and willing to help. She pulled my file and, as she did so, she exclaimed, “My, you have a lot of information here. This is one of the largest files I’ve ever pulled!” Now, since she could not by law share anything from that big file with me, I naturally was angry about that description. This piqued my interest and curiosity even more. I did, however, get from this conversation contact information for Beth Scott, a woman who conducted searches for adoptees and birthparents.

Beth Scott was a birthmother. Not mine, but someone else’s. She gave birth to her daughter when she was 18 and decided to put her up for adoption. Later she wanted to reconnect with her child and basically taught herself how to do an “illegal” search. She was successful in her search and now helps other people who are looking for their birth families. Her fee in 1994

was \$400 – cheap for a search, steep for a graduate student living on a very fixed income in Ann Arbor. So, when I told Beth that I would contact her in a few years once I finished school, she said, “why don’t you send me \$100 now, and if we can’t find anything, you don’t owe me anything else.” Well, Beth found everything, and never asked for the rest of the fee. Because my birthmother and her siblings never left Vermont and, in fact, still lived in the town in which they grew up, it was easy for Beth to locate her and her family. Beth found a current address, but there was some confusion about whether or not this address belonged to Lynn or to her identical twin, Laura. So my next step was to write to Lynn hoping that the address I had on file was indeed her address. Beth cautioned me, saying, “You don’t know what kind of people you are contacting, so be careful. Be honest about what you want, but don’t use your real name. Leave a contact number, but don’t include a return address. You never know how people will react when their ghosts come back to haunt them.”

So, I cautiously wrote to my birthmother. Here is what I said: Dear Lynn, My name is Christine Lynn, and I believe you are my birthmother. I was born on February 21, 1972 at the Elizabeth Lund Home and was adopted shortly thereafter. I am contacting you because I am interested in learning more about my family medical history. I am going to get married soon, and would like to know as much as I can. I am happy and doing well. I love my family and am not looking for another parent. I merely want information. Nothing more. I apologize if I have upset you by contacting you. But, I would appreciate any information you are able to pass along. Thank you for your time.”

I signed the letter “Christine.” I never used that name before, and have never used it since to identify myself. It does not feel like me. Yet, when Lynn called me one month after I sent the letter, asking for Christine, I answered, “this is she” without hesitation. It turned out that I did have the wrong address, so the letter went to Lynn’s identical twin, Laura, who was quite upset when she read the letter. She knew about the adoption, but, according to Lynn, hearing from me created some discomfort for the family who never let her forget that she had sex with a black boy. But, Lynn assured me it was ok, and we proceeded to talk for an hour, first about medical history, then about her memory of what happened around my conception and birth. There was a lot I wanted to know, despite what I wrote in the letter. I just wouldn’t let myself think about the possibility that I would have a chance to ask. Lynn’s first sexual relationship did not last long. She did talk about my birthfather, using words like “cunning,”

“crafty,” manipulative,” – and kept saying, “you know how those people are.” I wanted desperately to say, “I am one of those people, those black people,” but I wanted her to stay on the phone and so I did not interrupt her. That was not the time to be wearing my Director of Diversity hat!!

In this conversation, she volunteered an answer to the question I really wanted and perhaps needed an answer to: Why did she decide to give me up for adoption? I learned from Lynn that her parents, my biological grandparents, decided that she would put the baby up for adoption “if the baby was too dark.” I guess I was too dark, because they signed me over to the state immediately after I was born. Strangely, based on the way she was talking to me, she could not imagine the child she gave birth to as someone other than what she was – white, Irish-English. We ended this conversation soon after she let me know that when I was born, she was able to spend a few moments with me. She held me and was the first person to name me. We ended the conversation promising to write each other. I gave her my address and told her my name was Nicole. She liked that name, too.

What followed were a few months of good letter writing. The first letter Lynn sent me was short, but meant the world to me. It included a picture of her, and I felt like I was finally seeing pieces of my face in someone else. I had never had that experience before. All my friends looked like their parents. Some of my closest friends – Mr. Furlonge included – had families in which cousins who never met each other even had the same mannerisms. I had nothing like that in my life, although I always thought of myself mostly as like my father – quiet and patient. In her letters, she broached the subject of meeting some day, but Lynn reiterated in writing that she could not meet me – not yet – and that her sons could not know about me yet. She had just divorced a man who was emotionally abusive, constantly reminded her of her mistake – me – and made her feel horrible about herself. Learning about me would be too disruptive for her children. And she couldn’t handle more disruption in their lives. I completely understood, and honestly felt quite nervous at the prospect of meeting her and my half brothers – white brothers who I wasn’t sure would be thrilled that they had a black sister. For me, the closeness yet distance of letter writing was comfortable. I was learning about a self I did not know about without having to make decisions about claiming that self as me. At that point in my life, I was fine with that.

Or so I thought. Often, the text you are charged to make sense of is not someone else's book. The text is one's self. You see, a "self" is not a "name," yet the tension that emerged between these two categories consumed me for some time. Before I learned about my other name, I believed – or maybe, more accurately, made up a fiction – that I didn't have a name before my own name Nicole, that I was instead a number among other numbered babies waiting in a room full of cribs to be adopted, to join a family. That may seem like a cold image to you, but it was strangely comforting to me at an early age to focus on my beginnings not as located at my physical birth into the world, but instead as located in my second birth, which happened when I was adopted. By being adopted I was, in a sense, "born again." As much as I sometimes felt Christine Lynn was a character in an unfolding literary text, though, she was much more than that. She was – is – in some way me. While in Ann Arbor, I discovered Robert Hayden, an African American poet who also studied at Michigan, but much earlier and with the renowned American poet W. H. Auden. I discovered while reading his work that Hayden, too, was adopted, and that he learned about his other name when he applied for a passport to study in Mexico. There was no record of his existence. His adoption process was never completed and he was, legally, a self in limbo, a person without record. He writes in his poem *Names*:

When my fourth decade came,/ I learned my name was not my name./ I felt
deserted, mocked./ Why had the old ones lied?/ No matter. They were dead./ And
the names on the books were dead,/like the life I might have known./ You don't
exist – at least/ not legally, the lawyer said./ As ghost, double, alter ego then?

For Hayden, the search began and was framed by a search quite literally for self. For me, it began with a search for information and turned into a finding of more of my self. Suddenly my notion of family extended to include not only the pieces that I knew about – my parents, siblings, extended family and all the history there – but also the unknown fragments, the unspoken fragments of my background that live unrecognized by me in the gesture of my hand, the curve of my smile, the furrow of my brow, my thinking line in my forehead (how I like to think of the deep wrinkle on my face). How much of this information does Logan carry that I can't see? That she will never know?

My letter writing history with Lynn was in some ways too brief, in other ways too long. I wrote much more than Lynn did, just to keep her up to date on where I lived because at the

time I was moving often. I actually stopped hearing from her when I moved to Plymouth, New Hampshire to work at the Holderness School. Perhaps my close proximity to Vermont made her nervous, made her feel that I could show up at any time. When I moved to St. Andrew's in 2000, I wrote Lynn one last time to let her know where I was, what was going on, and that I was thinking of her. I had not heard from her in some time. I asked her in that letter to help me open my adoption file, a request I had made before but never followed through with. In this letter, I even included the form for her to sign and send to the court. She would not have to appear in court; her family would not have to know. She wrote back, saying: "I do not see the need for you to open your adoption file." She said other things that were very hurtful in the letter, things that made clear how viscerally she still carried around the guilt of having me. But that line in particular reminded me of how frustrating searching for one's history can be when the right to your information belongs to so many other people beside yourself. Because she refused to open my file, I probably will never know what is in it, unless the law changes.

There are a few other steps I could take - but have decided against them. I put the letters and other relevant information away, and honestly did not look back at this material for 6 years, until I pulled them out in preparation for this talk. In rereading this information, I noticed that Lynn often made decisions in her life because someone else told her she should. When she was getting a divorce, she wrote to me, saying, "I share custody with my ex-husband because he thought that it was best to do so." When she told me to never write her again, she said, "My sister is really upset that you are contacting me. Please stop contacting me and my family." Never do I want to give over the responsibility for making my crucial life decisions to someone else. This I learned from my parents - Virginia and Harry Brittingham. When I think about the fear that Lynn suddenly felt for sharing any more information with me, I can't help but reflect on a quote one of my favorite writers. James Baldwin observes, "It is rare indeed that people give. Most people guard and keep; they suppose that it is they themselves and what they identify with themselves that they are guarding and keeping, whereas what they are actually guarding and keeping is their system of reality and what they assume themselves to be." I believe this to be true. I would argue that each of us fights to guard and keep these kinds of systems of reality that Baldwin alludes to in tact. This is natural in some ways. But what if we can identify something more dynamic, more complicated, and more human?

The letter also contained more information about my birthfather than Lynn shared with me before. His name was John Brown, Jr. Not a very helpful name when you are trying to find someone. But maybe one day I'll try. Not now. For now, I am content to petition the State of Vermont for the next piece of information that the law recently has said I am entitled to: my original birth certificate. I already wrote for it and will hopefully receive it soon.

No document, no law, no one person can erase what I have come to understand through all this searching and finding and lack of finding. Mr. Furlonge says that, "Identity is largely about trying to stay found at those moments when you feel most lost." If this is true, the process of learning more about my genetic history has allowed me a fuller sense of self and in many ways, a greater, more generous sense of humanity. In so many ways, having Logan helped me understand Lynn in ways that I did not before. Her words hurt me deeply, and made me confront important questions like how much power will you allow anyone to frame and define your identity? The truth is, when I eat, the way I use utensils, I think of my mother (she's not big on using knives and neither am I). When I think about my propensity not to raise my voice, even when angry, I am allowing my father's patient ways to live through me. They framed my cultural self, my racial identity – I am African American, the descendant of children of the depression and the Jim Crow south. My grandparents were sharecroppers and domestic workers. My parents served in World War II and Korea, joining the service to escape lives of poverty at a time when such an escape was really the only option for African-Americans. My mother took care of other people's children. My father cleaned toilets and floors to make enough money not to send me to school, but to physically get me to a great public school 45 miles from my home. My parents have a work ethic, a vision, and value for education that allowed me to realize a possible future that was unavailable for them. My parents are these two amazing human beings that not only adopted me into their lives, but they provided the blue print for how I could possibly aspire to and achieve at moments when I thought I couldn't push any further, like finishing my PHD in English Literature this past spring. My name is Nicole Leta Brittingham Furlonge.