

Excerpt from:

# A Wealth of Family

An Adopted Son's International Quest  
for Heritage, Reunion, and Enrichment

Thomas Brooks



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# The Decision to Search

As a young adopted child, I had been challenged by the question of which heritage an African-American should embrace. For example, could an African-American embrace a French heritage because of his or her affection for the French language and culture learned in high school? Does the answer change if his or her ancestors are from the French-speaking Caribbean island of Guadeloupe? Or should an African-American seek to embrace African culture? That seems obvious, but in Kenya alone there are more than seventy ethnic groups, most with their own languages and cultures. What about all the other countries in the Africa of today? Few African-Americans have any idea whether their ancestors hail from the lands known today as Nigeria, Ghana, or Angola, to name just a few. Many can live without that ancestral knowledge but, as it turns out, I was not one of them.

I was twenty-five years old when, after a few months of thought, I decided to search for my biological parents. It was 1992, during the last semester of my MBA studies at the University of Maryland. Even though I had known of my adoption since I was eleven years old and had a very good relationship with my adoptive family, I had a growing need to know more about my biological background. Because I knew nothing of my biological parents and their heritage, I felt somehow that my own human identity was partially lacking. I had this sentiment in common with many African-Americans whose family heritages were erased by

centuries of slavery, but in my case even the previous generation was a mystery.

In February 1992 I spoke with my adoptive mother about my feelings. “Mom, I am proud of my place in the Lowry family and its heritage. I love you and am delighted to be your son. You are my real mother. I also want the additional knowledge of the heritage of my biological parents.” I explained to her that I wanted to know their ethnic origins as well as their physical makeup and family medical histories. Additional information about their interests and accomplishments would be a bonus.

“I was told only that your biological parents were a mixed-race couple,” she said quietly.

“I’d kind of concluded I was multiracial from a few comments made by you and other people over the years,” I slowly said. “But it never really mattered much back then since I was viewed as a ‘Black’ boy in a Black family, as opposed to ‘multiracial.’ I remember that you would never let me tease multiracial people like the other kids did. You would never let me refer to them as ‘half-breeds,’ for example.”

“Race doesn’t matter,” she said emphatically. “We are all the same in God’s sight.”

She paused, looking a bit uncomfortable. I added, “Mom, I want to make sure you understand that I am not looking for a new mother. You are the only mother I will ever have, in the truest sense of the word. You raised me. You cared for me when I was sick. You went hungry so I could eat. You are my *real* mother.”

“Thomas, I understand,” she said. “I am okay with you finding your biological parents. I wouldn’t want to try to stop you, if that is what you want to do.”

And that was it.

Although I am generally an optimistic person, I went into the search with low expectations. I didn't expect to actually find my biological parents. I assumed they were dead or terrible people I would not want to befriend. Or, I imagined, if I found them, they might deny they had anything to do with me. They might not want any contact with me, perhaps because they would not want their lives with their current families interrupted.

As stated, I was busy finishing my last semester of my MBA and I was working full-time as an engineer for a major defense contractor. I was also having trouble finding a new and better job at this time because of the recession that gripped the United States in the early 1990s. Many companies, especially Maryland and Virginia defense contractors, were laying off engineers and eliminating middle management positions. Consequently, there was a glut of MBAs and technical professionals. Since I was busy studying to graduate and looking to find a new career, searching for my biological parents took a decidedly low priority. This was partially because I assumed the search would be a monumental task and involve months, or even years, of research. Where would I find the money and time that might be needed to travel to find these people? Not having a ready answer, I decided to wait until after completing my MBA to begin investing a lot of resources in the search.

However, I was able to identify the agency that handled the adoption, Family Services of Western Pennsylvania, with only a few inquiring phone calls. I gathered information on state and federal laws relating to adoption and adoption information, which I thought would be essential to my search. I contacted different adoption support groups such as the Adoptees' Liberty Movement Association (ALMA), the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse (NAIC), the Adoption Support Institute, the Black Adoption Consortium, the Black Adoption Placement Center, and the National Adoption Center.

I figured that an important task before starting the search process would be to get the adoption agency to answer as many questions as possible. All it cost me was a postage stamp and the time to write a letter. Judy Scott, post-adoption clinician, was my helpful contact at

Family Services of Western Pennsylvania, which had been known as Family and Children's Service when I was born back in 1966.

On July 1, 1992, Judy mailed me my background history. The accompanying cover letter said that the information "was obtained from the agency record" and "was provided by the birth mother" at the time of my birth. Since the agency had no further contact with my biological mother, no current information was available. Judy could not answer many of my questions because of Pennsylvania laws as of 1992 regarding confidentiality. Judy provided all available nonidentifying information in the four-page document.

I was taken aback to receive any information at all. It was incredibly fulfilling to add additional pieces to the puzzle of my own identity. I felt like I had the majority of what I wanted after getting the document provided by the agency. My biological mother was a White American who gave birth to me at the age of nineteen. My biological father was Kenyan and about twenty-six years old at the time of my birth. I was indeed multiracial. I learned that both of my parents attended college. This was more information than I had ever expected to find. It gave me a good feeling about the contribution of both of my parents to my heritage.

As I read the July 1992 report, I noted the statement that my biological mother provided the source material for all of the information. For whatever reason, my biological father was not there to be interviewed by the adoption agency. Thus, the information about him and the paternal grandparents in Kenya was second- if not thirdhand.

Discovering in the report that some of my natural mother's ancestors were Lithuanians who practiced Judaism was positive. I vaguely viewed both Lithuanians and Jews as tough and determined, both groups having survived numerous conflicts over the centuries. As an athlete and a sports fan, I also knew that Lithuania had a great national basketball team for such a small nation. Of course, Kenyans have long been a dominant force in international middle- and long-distance running. I was happy to know that I had a Kenyan biological father, a tangible link to my African heritage.

My white maternal grandmother was forty-three years old at the time of my birth—quite young for a grandmother. She was described as “brilliant” in the document, which made me think that there might be some reason for my academic success.

My white maternal grandfather was described as a five-foot ten-inch truck driver of mostly German descent with a high school education.

Because she had given me up while she was a college freshman, I wondered where my biological mother attended college. I wondered about the pressure on her at the time to make a decision about what to do with me. Of course, I was happy that she did not have an abortion, though the July 1992 report stated that she had considered that option. The document stated that she had become a reservation agent with an airline by 1967, so I assumed that my birth might have caused her to leave college, at least for a period.

My nineteen-year-old biological mother had given me up for adoption as soon as I entered the world in December 1966. I was then placed in foster care. The identity of the foster care family was not revealed to me until 2006. I have learned that they were an African-American family in the community of Clairton, just south of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.