

Jena Heath: Tell me a little bit about your decision to adopt. How old were you? Why China? Why adoption?

Barb Morris: I was probably about thirty-eight years old when a colleague of mine at work had adopted a little girl from China. I thought, "That's interesting." I looked into it a little bit more. I had made a decision in my own head that I wanted to be a mom. I wasn't married. I had no prospects. I'm thinking Lily could become my matchmaker by the way. Anyway, we'll figure that out. Getting closer and closer to forty, what are my options? I had known about this person who adopted from China. I thought initially, "Why would I go to China? There are children in this great country of ours right here in the United States that need a home. I can provide a nice home." I went and met with a lawyer. She said, "It's admirable that that's what you want to you, but it's not a sure thing. If you want to be a mom, you should look internationally.

In the US with all the open adoptions, being a single mom, they're not probably going to pick you unless you're Rosie O'Donnell or somebody famous. I thought, "That's good advice." I knew that was for sure what I wanted to do. I went to a couple of different meetings at different adoption agencies. They list out all the countries that they work with. I landed on China for a couple of reasons. It seemed like the system was well organized and done. There weren't these issues that were surfacing in some of the South American countries around black market babies. I didn't want anybody's stolen baby. I also wanted a healthy baby. You were hearing all these stories in former Eastern Bloc countries of drug-addicted mothers and the drug-addicted babies as a result. I didn't think I could handle that. China seemed like, "These babies, in the womb, are loved." It's only because of some policy that they can't be kept. Someone has to make a horrible decision. Maybe that was a place to go. Then, I had six nephews. Get a girl in the deal? That sounded like a pretty good deal. That's when I started to explore China. About two years later, I was forty when I actually got my paperwork all put together and dove in feet first and went for it.

Jena: When did your paperwork go in? What was your log-in date?

Barb: July of 2000.

Jena: When did Lily come home?

Barb: December of 2001.

Jena: You were close to last of the fast ones.

Barb: Maybe there was six months, nine months of about that timeframe. Then it really slowed down after that.

Jena: Did you have much anxiety about being a single parent? Did you give that a whole lot of thought? Was it just like, "Go for it?"

Barb: I remember somewhat worrying about it. I had a big job. I was very career-minded and had a job and a career at a company. I probably accomplished more than I ever dreamed I would've. There was this, "Oh, my gosh." My whole life was my job. Could I really be a mother? Of course when my family said that to me I said, "You're crazy. Of course I'll make adjustments." I really didn't know. You know you have to schedule your time differently. What I know I didn't know is it's not just your time, it's your mind. Once you have a child, it doesn't shut down. [emotional] Every worry and everything that I did, I felt like, "Gosh, I hope I'm not screwing up this kid." It became very overwhelming. I don't think I realized that up front.

I thought it would be difficult to make the adjustments but not as stressful as it was. That was the reality for me afterwards. I also think -- my sister will remember -- right before we went on the trip I started having back problems. I'd never had any back problems. I had this tense back. I could hardly move some days. It was all stress. I am absolutely convinced. Within a month afterwards, my back was fine. That whole process two months before, while in China sleeping on those beds, my back was spasming constantly. Maybe a month or so after we were home, it wasn't. It was all very much related and probably how my body handled the stress that I was feeling. I didn't know. I couldn't articulate it as that.

Jena: Do you mind if you ask what you did? Are you still working in that field?

Barb: At the time I was a vice president of human resources for a medical supply company. I was the second HR person in a twelve-billion-dollar company. It was a pretty big job. That actually varied throughout. I don't remember exactly what job I was in at the time. I was at a pretty high level with a pretty big scope of responsibility. I am still at the same company. When Lily was eleven, I made a decision to take a step back. I gave up the VP job and started doing other things. Now, I'm in the second job since my step back. I'm a program manager, and can work from home quite a bit, and have a very flexible situation. It's fabulous.

The decision was when she was about eleven. I was stressed out. I was feeling like I was missing her life. One of my other sisters was her nanny. I really felt like my sister was raising my daughter. She had more of her life than I did. That didn't make me feel good. I said my family was the most important thing, but when I looked at where I spent my time, it wasn't aligned. My time was still at my job and at my career. That's not what I wanted. I wanted to be more in my daughter's life and involved not in such a way that was in the back end catching up with it, but rather involved with it on the front end. That was the best decision I ever made. As much as initially and even still today I miss certain things about the old job -- there was a lot of great perks -- I don't regret the decision. It was the best decision I made. I felt within three weeks a load of stress off of me that is gone. It was a great decision for me.

Jena: This is so interesting. You wrestled with things that so many, particularly mothers who are working full time, with and without partners, wrestle with. I'm thinking it was kind of an identity change for you too, letting go of that VP title, in terms of how do I see myself? We

were talking about identity before. Do you mind if I asked, did you have to make financial adjustments when you stepped back?

Barb: I did. It's interesting. I laid out all my options. One of my options was to just quit. Financially, I could've quit. I felt in some ways, that's freeing. I'm not staying in my job because I need the money anymore. I could've afforded to leave. Then there's the logistics of insurance and things like that. I still wanted and needed to work, but I could've left. That was unto itself freeing. Any job that I wanted was absolutely a financial step back. Again, I didn't need the money. I liked the company. I felt like there were other options for me. I laid those out. The company was supportive. Was it still hard? The guy who came to move me -- we have the movers in the office -- I had a big office with the window and everything. He's like, "You're leaving this?" He knew where I was moving to. He's like, "Are you nuts?"

It was a big, huge change. That really didn't bother me though. I knew why I was doing it. I didn't care what anybody else thought. I probably got a hundred emails from people saying, within the company who knew me, "Wow. That is the most courageous thing. I am so proud of you. I'm so happy for you," things like that. I did get a couple of emails like, "Are you sure? You're going to be bored." The far and away majority of them were, "I wish I could do what you're doing," or in some other way supportive. That part of it was not difficult for me.

What was difficult was I was no longer in a position of authority. I like making decisions. I like being in the know, and knowing what's going on, and knowing why we're making decisions. What I found out very quickly is that's a problem in our company. There's not good communication stream. You hear of the decision in the job I'm in now, but you don't hear the why. That drives me insane. I miss that the most. It's a little bit of ego probably too. It was more about being able to be part of that decision-making.

Jena: There's nothing wrong with ego. It gets you places. It's interesting that you have a perspective now from the top of the ranks and the more middle level of the ranks. You probably have a better sense of the organization than you had before.

Barb: The first two years I used to kid I was like *Undercover Boss*. I would be, "Oh, my god. This is how we run this company?" It was very eye-opening. I understood our employee survey results better when I was no longer in the VP of HR role than when I was.

Jena: It must have been useful to have all this HR knowledge too when you were making the decision about adoption in terms of policies?

Barb: Absolutely.

Jena: Was there an adoption credit or benefit at your company?

Barb: The year I adopted Lily I think there was adoption reimbursement for five thousand dollars or something. I can't remember exactly. That was for any employee.

Jean Morris: And maternity leave.

Barb: Yeah, although that wasn't paid. I had three months off after I brought her home. That was great too.

Jena: You were home for three months full time with your new almost year-old daughter having been VP, second in command in HR in a twelve-billion-dollar company. How was that transition? I can tell you honestly, I remember the first few weeks and months for me. I look back and I think, "The fact that this child survived my complete ineptitude..." [laughs] I'm sure you were much more capable than I was.

Barb: No, I really was not. My mother called me every day at the same time. It was comical. Finally after about a month I'm like, "Do you realize you're calling me every day at nine thirty in the morning? We got into this quick routine. I remember one time when Lily had gotten sick. This was a little later. Maybe she was two. She's throwing up in bed. I called my mom. I didn't know what to do. I was very inept. I'll let Jean tell the story about in China when I did get the baby. [laughs] I was pretty clueless. I had this great village. My mom would say, and my sister, "We're the village." It takes a village. That is my story. When I first got home with Lily, it was Christmas time. Everybody's off anyway. That was easy with work. Once work started up again in January, I wasn't going into work but I was still checking email. People were still calling me. It felt okay. The first thing they were saying was, "How's Lily? How's everything going?" It didn't feel so bad.

Then in March when I went back -- I was supposed to go back part time, which lasted about three days. Then, I was fully immersed immediately. When she was little, it worked out. It was less stressful because I knew she was in great hands. My sister was her nanny, came to my house every day, took care of her. I went off to work. I worked this crazy schedule. My mom was the backup. When my sister Patty would leave, Lily was with my mom and dad. I'd come home to dinner on the table from mom and dad, and pick up my daughter and come home. It was a good life. I'm not your typical single mom struggling. It was also my career was number one. I didn't know that then. For me, one of the biggest signs when Lily was about seven or eight years old, we were driving in the car. We're just driving. I don't know where we were going. She says to me, "Mom," out of the clear blue, "Will you be able to come to my wedding?" She's seven. I'm, "Yeah. Why?" "I didn't know if you'd be too busy at work." That was one of my biggest signs of, "Whoa. This is not how I wanted my life to go."

Jena: That's a gut punch.

Barb: I cried. Then you put it in perspective of, "Well, she's seven." She used to play conference call with her playmates. "I'm on a conference call. Shh!" You know she heard that from me. I remember once we were at Mary's lake house. There were two other little girls. They were sitting at the breakfast bar. The phone rings. Lily's like, "There's a conference call coming in." It was. That's the funny thing. I was still working. That's what

she knew. It was very eye-opening for me. As the years went on and I added up all those signs, this isn't what I wanted for myself, or for her, or for my life.

Jena: It's not why you decide to become a mom.

Barb: Right. I was at this seminar one time. The woman was a CEO, big job. She would say, "As a parent you just figure it out. When my daughter needs to get to piano, I call a taxi." I'm sitting there going, "You can do that. I don't want to call a taxi for my daughter." You have the money to do it. That's what she's saying. You figure out how to parent different ways. I don't want that. I want to be there. I want to take my daughter. I love taking her to her sporting things or whatever. That's great time together. I don't want to put her in a taxi. It was, again, another sign that was telling to me that something was off in my life. I had the great opportunity because I could afford it. That was, at the end of the day, the most freeing thing of it. The money didn't matter. I know I was lucky that way.

Jena: You came to the conclusion that parenting is not merely logistics. There are five sisters in your family? Are you all in Palatine?

Barb: Most. One sister lives in another suburb. She's the nanny, so she comes to Palatine every day.

Jena: You're all within about twenty to thirty miles of Chicago. Is that correct?

Barb: Yes. Exactly. Our mom died ten years ago.

Jena: Your mom really only knew Lily as a very little girl. Is your dad into being a grandpa?

Barb: He loves being a grandpa, but he's very set in his ways. He's very grouchy. Now, he's disabled. Even before he was disabled, he loves supporting his family. He loves that his family's around him. Yet, he wants to watch TV when he wants to watch TV. He's set in his ways. He adores Lily. He adores Kate. He adores David, our other sister's son. He's very generous with them. He's --

Jean Morris: -- worried about their education.

Barb: Yeah. He gives in other ways other than just being a doting grandpa.

Jena: You have a very supportive family. As you said, you have a village. Your experience of being a mother has changed over time. You've adjusted as Lily has gotten older. Around eleven you started to be home more, have more flexibility in your job. Around this time, not too long after that, you saw *Somewhere Between*, you were telling me. I wanted to talk a little bit about some of what we were discussing earlier. You saw the documentary, were moved by it, and decided it would be okay for Lily to see it. That set off, for her -- you were telling me she then watched it twice through -- catalyzed her desire to look for her birth

parents. What has that been like for you? Did you expect that reaction? Did that surprise you?

What has the experience of a birth parent search been like for you?

Barb: I don't know that I was surprised that that's what she would want to do. I was supportive of it. I kind of hoped she would want to do that. It is a part of her life and a part of her story. The more you know about yourself, and where you come from, and who you are makes you a better adult and a better person all around. I was a little surprised how quickly she made the decision. She said it immediately. When I saw the documentary, I didn't necessarily glob onto the finding of the birth parents. I globbed onto these four girls who were so incredibly articulate and deep about who were they. Were they American? Were they Chinese? That, to me, is what I globbed onto. She did as well. The birth parent thing was for me, "Okay. She wants to do it." I was a little surprised at how quick it was. I was thrilled.

I was praying and hopeful that we would be successful. I would love to thank her birth family. [emotional] She's the greatest gift in my life and to me. If I could say thank you to them, I would in a heartbeat. I'm so grateful. I can't imagine the pain they went through when they had to make that decision. How could you do that without pain? I would love for them to know that she's a great, great kid and going to be a great adult, great human being. That would give me great pleasure to let them know that. I would love to find them. It was disappointing. It was one of those things when we got that final email from Shee-Shee, your mind starts thinking, "What else could we do?" I don't know. I haven't probably done enough research into it. It was disappointing for me too. It was important to her, but it was also very important to me. I would love for her to have that connection.

Jena: Shee-Shee was your guide when you adopted. Then she also became your finder, the person who you hired to do some research for you. As we said, she does this for families. How did she go about the search?

Barb: She had sent us a lot of information, forms and things. We started filling those out. We sent pictures of Lily -- she had some requirements around the pictures -- basically every two years a picture, showed her progression as she grew up. She sent us a draft of the poster. We edited a few things. She had it translated, obviously. She translated back into Chinese. She would tell us the process along the way. We communicated via email. One of the first things we did was we shared with her the address that we had for her foster parents. I had written to them a number of times. Her foster mother actually handed her to me the day we got her. I actually got to meet her. I had friends who I worked with who were from China with us, so they could interpret for us. We got her address. We'd been in touch. I'd occasionally send a letter to her with some pictures of Lily when she was one or two. We kept in touch. Shee-Shee went and interviewed or talked to Mrs. Wan, and brought her a mooncake, and made that connection to see if maybe she knew -- I didn't think she did -- but maybe if she knew who the birth family might be. Other than that, it was really just them hanging the posters all

around the Guilin public areas. I can't remember if there was anything else that she was doing. I think she did put a newspaper ad in.

Jean Morris: Yeah, she put it in.

Jena: Lily was in the SWI briefly. Do you know the name of the SWI?

Barb: It was the Guilin SWI.

Jena: Then she was in foster care for the rest of that?

Barb: For four months. According to the paperwork, six months in the orphanage and then four months with the family.

Jena: What's your gotcha day?

Barb: December 9th is our gotcha day because we got the babies at the SWI. December 10th is our adoption day. We officially adopted the next day.

Jena: December 9th, 2001 and December 10th, 2001. Do you think that you will continue to search? Where are you now with all this?

Barb: Honestly before this discussion and hearing Lily a little while ago, I thought our search was over. I'm actually revitalized to say maybe there's more out there that we should check into, and do some research, and maybe even reach back out to Shee-Shee and find out what other options we might have. I hadn't even thought about it until today.

Jena: I'm going to go over here for a minute. Hearing your mother say that, how do you feel about it, Lily? I'm going to do something different since we're in the same room. Your mother is saying maybe it's not done. Do you want to continue?

Lily Morris: I would want to continue to try to find my birth parents. I still want to even though the first time we tried to find them it didn't work. There's still hope that maybe they're somewhere in the world. Maybe we could still find them. I don't know how, but maybe.

Jena: As Lily enters adolescence and you start to see changes, can you talk a little bit about that? What is it like? How is parenting a teenager?

Barb: As Jean said earlier, Lily is a rule-follower. We sometimes push her to get outside of the box. She has evolved in such a way. I remember this shy, timid, quiet little girl in fourth grade. She started to blossom in fifth grade and beyond. It's been wonderful to watch. She was telling her story. When she got to junior high and she would brush me away, I honestly took it personal at first. Then we had this conversation about, no, she's just warning people that I look different than her. I didn't have that perspective. I don't think of her as different

from me or looking different. It is, I know, something that she sees. I didn't. I had to become more aware of that. It's good to have those things come out so you're not putting your own view of it and you're trying to see it from her perspective. I need to do that more. I'm not always a patient person. She gets very frustrated with me because I get very impatient. I'm trying to work on that and trying to meet her in the middle. I'm not always right. We have our moments of arguments. Things like phone time are very challenging. She's overall a great kid. I really am blessed and feel so fortunate to parent her.

Jena: Phone time's like, you mean prying the phone out of her clenched fist?

Barb: Exactly. Like during homework time, we shouldn't have our phone. It's a distraction. When you were in the bathroom she had to, "Can I go get my phone?" She had been without her phone for an hour and a half. That's a record. Things like that we have our debates about. Overall, we comprise a lot. We talk a lot. We try to find the best outcome and the best solution for whatever issue. Now, we're learning to drive. That's been a little stressful for both of us. We're both nervous for different reasons. It's nervous to learn to drive. Her palms sweat a lot. I'm nervous because --

Jena: -- because her palms are sweated.

Barb: [laughs] Exactly.

Jena: You're like, "Hands on the wheel, kid. Hands on the wheel!"

Tell me about being single. We've been talking about parenting with a village. You're so very, very blessed to have a close family and supportive sisters, and your mom. My mom was huge for me too. I wonder in terms of whether you've thought much about it over the years in terms of balance, balance of temperament, stuff like that.

Barb: I do feel a void in my life. There's no question. It would not have been the course I would've charted. When I would dream of my life when I was in my twenties, I would definitely have a husband. We'd have a minivan in the driveway. I never in my wildest dreams would've thought that I wouldn't have been married. Now, that was when I was in my twenties. If I'm really honest, and looking back at almost fifty-five years old, I'm not sure how I would get along with somebody in my life. [laughs] It would be very difficult for me to compromise on things like when I decided on Lily's name. I didn't have to talk to anybody else about it. When I decide what school I wanted to send her to, there were no decisions that had to be discussed. There's some things about that that are really good for me. I often reach out and ask for advice from sisters, but at the end of the day, only if I want to. I don't have to. When you have a partner in your life, a fellow parent, it doesn't work that way. That would be a bigger adjustment for me. I don't know how good I'd be at that, honestly. Maybe it all works out for a reason. That's how I've come to process it. I also hold out the hope that who knows? I'm fifty-five, but you can live thirty more years easily. Who knows?

Jena: One of my very close friends got married at fifty, first time, and is living this whole second life. I think you're right. You never say never, never. Take it from me, the whole partner thing, it's a mixed bag. [laughs]

Barb: I get it. I have friends who have wonderful marriages. When we talk about what they go through at times, it's like, "Is that really worth it?" I do think I have a balanced view on that. Again, it wouldn't have been the course I would've charted. Maybe I'm just not the personality that really can share everything with a partner, with an equal. I don't know.

Jean Morris: You do take time to do your own things and have...

Barb: True. I have great girlfriends. I spend plenty of weekends or evenings, we'll meet for dinner about once a month, that kind of thing, which is important time for me. I love being with them. I have a lot of other social things. I have friends still from grade school and high school that I still get together with occasionally, not as often as my core group.

Jena: Is it fair to say, is it too simplistic to ask you if you're happy?

Barb: There are things about my life that I'm truly happy with. Are there things about my life that I wish were different? Yes. I wish I had a companion. I get invited to a wedding. My first instinct is to say no because I don't have anyone to go with. That's hard. My neighbor's daughter got married last fall. I really debated about even going. Everybody on the block was going. They all rode together. Then, Barb showed up. It's hard. I feel very self-conscious about it and very inferior about it. Then, in my own personal space of my own personal home in my own life, I realize that there's lots of things to be happy about in my life.

Jena: We all have our things that we feel self-conscious about, wherever we are in the universe.

Barb: We don't have all the answers. You make do. You figure out how you get through it. I'm glad I went to that wedding. There've been others that I've said no to for the same reason. You choose your moments. You work through it. I find I do that.

Jena: Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you'd like to talk about, or anything that you would like people to know about a family like yours, anything you'd like to correct about public perceptions or add to?

Barb: It's interesting. I can't think of anything off the top of my head other than to say don't judge. I hope Lily doesn't mind I tell this story. When Lily was in sixth grade, I don't know what happened but I was calling her. I was getting frustrated. She wasn't coming downstairs. I called her. She came running down. She was sobbing. I'm like, "I'm not that mad. What's wrong?" She said that one of her friends told her that some boy in her class said something about, "Lily's mom is a lesbian with her Chinese mother." Lily was devastated. I laughed. I found it one of the funniest things I've ever heard. Here's the sixth-grade boy thinking he even knows what he's talking about. We must have been headed out to dinner because I

remember being at Chili's talking about this. Lily was so surprised that I laughed about it. She was hurt. She felt really hurt for me. I said, "You have to know that people are makin' up their own stories." We know what we know. Even if I was, who cares? It was one of those moments of you know you're judged by other people. You have to not worry about it. It's hard for me at times. I try. I really try to not worry about it.