

Tina Fletcher: I'm Tina Fletcher. T-I-N-A F-L-E-T-C-H-E-R. I'm the mother of two daughters. One of them is a twenty-nine-year-old biological child. I'm the mom of a fifteen-year-old adopted daughter from China. I, myself, am adopted also.

Jean Heath: Let's talk a little bit about your decision to adopt from China. Why China? I'd like to hear more about your own experience as an adopted person and how that influenced your thinking about becoming an adoptive parent.

Tina: The decision to adopt a child was something that was in my subconscious for a long time. The reason I say that is because I recently found my high school diary. At the end of that I wrote what some of my life goals were. In there, I said I was going to adopt a child and give birth to a child. I was shocked because I don't remember having said that. I even showed it to Lily. I was like, "Look at this." It really happened. That was a little steady tom-tom beat underneath everything.

The decision for us to adopt came about because I met someone who was about to go to China and adopt a daughter the next day. I came home and told my husband and our oldest daughter about it, as in saying, "Isn't this a nice story?" Being forty, I wasn't thinking about it for us. I thought we were done having kids and raising a family. I noticed that they were looking at each other. Our daughter went upstairs. About an hour later she came downstairs -- this is when people just barely had computers -- she came downstairs with a picture of a Chinese baby sitting by a Panda bear. [laughs] She said, "I think we need to do this." I was shocked. My husband said, "I do too." I really had to recalibrate my thinking because I was thinking we were almost done with our family. I thought about it for a day or two. I decided, "Okay. Let's do it." It was just like that. It was a very quick decision, but maybe not since I'd been thinking of it all those years. Our experience was that we didn't know anyone personally that had done that. We didn't know a lot of the logistics about it.

Once we started looking it became pretty easy to figure out what we needed to do. The next thing we needed to do is make sure our extended family was on board with it. We talked to my mother. She was beyond excited about the whole idea. Having adopted a child, me, she loved that whole thought. We talked to my husband's family. I was a little concerned because they're a very close-knit Italian family. They seemed to think it was a good idea. We spent the next couple of weeks really asking ourselves if that was what our future could hold. Once we all agreed, then we went forward. We knew that our oldest daughter would be almost out the door because of her age. I think she was going into her junior year of high school when we got Lily. We didn't have too long as a family of two kids and two parents all living under the same roof. We just had two years like that. Sometimes I think of our oldest daughter as being Lily's cool aunt.

Jena: Do you think that's how your oldest daughter thinks of herself in relation to Lily?

Tina: I think of her as thinking she is Lily's behavior management specialist. [laughs] As she gets older -- she's now almost thirty -- she also sees that in addition to giving us advice on how to manage Lily's behavior, that she is a role model for Lily. It's made her a better

person. I know she tries harder. She will frequently say, "This is something I think Lily needs to think about." I really think it's because of Lily that she's made herself do certain things. One example that I can think of is joining the Air Force Reserves. I really think part of that was spurred by wanting to be a good example for her sister. Their role had changed over time more than ours has with our kids. We're still the parents of these girls. Rose's has evolved more in terms of seeing Lily now as more of a peer, maybe a co-conspirator sometimes, and collaborator. They've started having trips where Lily will go out and stay with Rose without us being there. That's good for both of them.

Jena: That's awesome. She has an older sibling who's also a quasi-friend/role model. You brought Lily home to Commerce. She was telling me she's the only Chinese kid in her school. I'm raising my daughter in a largely Anglo place. What's that thinking like for you and your husband? Did you sort through how much Chinese culture do we provide? What's the larger context for all of this?

Tina: One thing about Commerce is because it's a university town and there's not a lot of other industry or business in this town, you definitely see the ethnic diversity more than a typical, small Texas town by far. For example in her class, there are kids from India, Central America, South America, and East Asia and West Asia. It hasn't been as difficult as I think it would be in some places.

Another positive aspect for Lily of being Asian, Chinese, is that if you're going to get stereotyped, typically the stereotypes involving Asian people tend to be positive stereotypes. In fact, we just talked about that last night or the night before. People automatically assume that she's got talents, that she can play instruments, which she can; that she's smart, which she is; that she works hard, which she does. We talked about stereotypes are unavoidable so if you are going to have them, it's nice to have positive ones. Beyond that, we did find it interesting that a boy from Taiwan, a boy from India, and her being from China are the top three students in their class. That's just interesting.

Jena: Sometimes stereotypes are stereotypes for a reason.

Tina: That's what Lily said. One of the things that's interesting is when we go back to my home state in Montana, if you don't look too closely at Lily, she looks like a Native American. Occasionally, that's been interesting if we go somewhere that's a predominately pro-Indian event. They don't think of her as being with us. They're trying to figure out who she does belong to. There are some differences in her appearance. From the back -- I just told her, "Please don't wear your hair in two braids when we go to these events. It makes it confusing. I can't find you." [laughs] Also, we've experienced that when we go work overseas in Asia.

When she was little, I was so worried about getting separated from her in the airport in Seoul because she was able to get around on her own. I would write on her arm with a sharpie what our names were. I was so worried that we'd get separated and she wouldn't be able to ask someone for help. There wasn't an assumption that she was with two Caucasian Americans.

We frequently would get separated from her or people would push in between us. I realized, "They don't realize that she's with us," until she opens her mouth and starts talking. Then people will say things to her like, "Your English is so good." Yes, it is. We had that happen when we were working in Japan once too. A woman had on a cowboy boot on her shirt. Lily went over and said, "Where are y'all from?" The lady very carefully said, "We are from Oklahoma," not even realizing that Lily had just said "y'all." We started laughing. She goes, "I'm from Texas." I know that lady was not expecting that.

Jena: It sounds like you haven't let yourself get too angsty about some of the things that other adoptive families we've talked to do get a little bit angsty about, about cultural context. It feels like you have a good way of looking at the inverse of these things and seeing that it doesn't all have to be negative.

Tina: When we first got here, we spent a lot of time doing Chinese celebratory events. Then it made us realize after a couple of years of doing Chinese New Year and all the things that are involved with that -- which I still think is a great holiday for a number of reasons -- I felt like we were misrepresenting how China really is, not only to her, but it wasn't doing a service to the country. If we had Girl Scouts or the school got involved, of course we had all the Chinese dragon things. We had banners and all kinds of stuff. I think I was giving everybody that we were interacting with a fake impression of what life is really like over there. It's not a nation of people just having a big party all the time and making lots of racket with firecrackers. That's when we started thinking about actually going back and trying to experience China out of the context of tourism too.

That's not to say that I haven't worried about her being bullied or being excluded. She has adjusted that situation and made it not a factor by her own personality. I do find myself gravitating toward schools when I know they have Rachel's Challenge events, which is an anti-bullying campaign. I like that because I think about my own kid. I also know that sometimes people who are bullied may inadvertently participate in creating the situation that leads to bullying. They say that if a child is removed from this context and enrolled in this school, they get bullied over there too. People want to know what it is that's happening. Lily is a strong person. When her own personality got to show itself through, I can't think of any instances where she was bullied or that she didn't feel like she could get back on top of things. That's her strength of character.

For me as an adopted person who didn't meet my own birth family until I was almost fifty, I came to learn a lot about nature versus nurture from that. I was raised with a sister. I met a brother. The sister I was raised with, of course, was not my biological sister. The brother I met is. I am probably way more like the brother whom I just met than I am like the sister I grew up with. He and I both find it almost startling how many similarities we wear from the clothing and shoes we prefer, to our eating preferences, and the turns of speech we use. Our life story was very different. You can tell he grew up in a culture of poverty and food insecurity. I grew up in a middle-class, stable home. The wolf is not always at the door for me like it is for him. He's reflective enough to see the difference and explain it to me. He'll say, "The wolf's always at the door for me because I didn't have enough to eat when I was

growing up.” We see those differences. I just know that Lily’s birth parents had a certain strength of the way they were. It’s transmitted to her. I’m not going to take credit for her solid personality. She came to the table with a lot of the stuff that she’s got. That’s courtesy of my own rambunctious biological brother.

Jena: You wouldn’t know any other way, but I’m just curious if in some sense it’s a little bit liberating to be an adopted person who becomes an adoptive parent because you don’t have these assumptions about how your child is a kind of absolute, complete expression of who you are in some direct way.

Tina: I agree with you on that. I have always said that being an adopted person is tricky in general. You can look at it in two different ways. You can look at it as you are a blank slate. You don’t have that sense of genetic connectedness. The liberating part of that is you don’t wait for the bad stuff to happen either, like the long family history of breast cancer or schizophrenia. Therefore, you also don’t unwittingly play into making that happen, like, “This is my destiny. This will happen.” This is like the movie “What the Bleep Do We Know?” If you haven’t ever seen it, you should watch it. You create some of your own reality. If you don’t know what your reality was, then it’s somewhat freeing. It’s good and bad. I forgot what else you asked me.

Jena: That was what I asked you. My daughter came home with a big keloid scar on her knee. We don’t know how she got it. She was asking me about it because kids will ask her about it. One day instead of panicking about it, I thought, “You know what, Caroline? You can make up your story. How did you get your knee? Who cares what happened. You can decide what happened.” There is a creativity to being able to invent your story.

Tina: I will say that when I met my brother, it answered a lot of questions for me. Some of the stories that I heard were not good. In fact, they were really bad. I was glad I was an adult when I heard some of the stories about my birth mother and her head injury, and what people did with her after that. Living up in Montana in the thirties, forties, and fifties was a frontier culture anyway. I even think about some of the bad things that happened to him. I was glad I was an adult when I heard them. On the other hand, it’s very satisfying to know some of the ways I am are not just unique to me. They’re connected to a long line of people. “You stand this way because... You do this because... You talk just like our mother.” That’s been kind of satisfying. It’s also been somewhat disconcerting.

What Lily and I have talked about is I told her I would help her, just like my mother told me. “I’ll try to help you locate your people.” I think we would wait until it’s a legal thing to give up children for adoption in China. Some smart person will come up with a DNA registry or something. The other piece of the puzzle that could be very interesting is if she has a sibling who was raised in the United States. That represents in itself a whole different set of constructs. You might have an American-raised, Chinese-born biological sister. That’s a different world.

Jena: One last thing, when you say you want to wait until it's legal, is that because you have concerns about implicating the birth family in difficulty?

Tina: Yes. We know that Lily was abandoned on the back steps of a women and children's hospital. I feel like the decision for her to relinquish her in that kind of a controlled environment was very intentional on someone's part. I told Lily it's like the story of baby Moses when his sister's along the Nile river watching to make sure someone picked Moses up. I feel that way about her, that somebody watched and waited until she was picked up, which was incidentally the doctor. The first doctor on duty found her. Somebody figured that out. Good lord, I can't remember what you asked me.

Jena: If the reason you're waiting is -- I thought that was an interesting point. No one else has made that point. You have a concern that when you go on a search, it's not just your life that's getting upended.

Tina: I think that her family was intelligent, and they had a plan that was in her best interest. I've heard a lot of times the husband or the father's parents make the decision. They say if you have a daughter it's like watering someone else's grass. I've heard that phrase. If they said, "You must relinquish this child," then they did it in a manner that indicated intelligence and care for her. If they are people who are still in that community and still living responsible, productive lives -- I know at the time they relinquished her it was illegal to do so. I don't want to cause them further suffering by jumping back in there.

I know also from my own set of circumstances that because no one knew of my existence, the emotional aftermath for my birth family -- that really doesn't even have to do with me, it's them all interacting with each other over, "How could this have happened?" -- I know that the ripple effect is probably broader and more pervasive than we would even know. I would encourage Lily to wait until it's easier and more practical, especially since we'd be having to go overseas or doing a lot of interacting with non-English print, but also for her to be older so that she's ready for the story, whatever it might be, and them too.

Jena: You really have an interesting perspective because being an adopted person whose older daughter found your birth family, with your permission, you've experienced how this affects, as you said when we arrived, everyone, not just the searching child.

Tina: I will also say that it was very hard on my adoptive sister. All of a sudden, she was having to share me. The two people that are not very strong individuals, one is my adoptive sister. It was very hard on her. My brother's finance, suddenly another woman was in the picture. He and I, at first, were talking on the phone three times a day for months. I actually went to a counselor and said, "This is too intense. This is too intimate. It's too much. I'm addicted to it." He said, "Don't worry. It's all going to calm down real soon because you can't sustain that level of emotional intimacy. What most people find is they go back to living the life they had. This person is a bonus person." That's exactly what's happened.

Now, my primary people are the ones I grew up with. My primary relatives are the ones I grew up with. I don't want anybody else's new drama. They try to tell me a family story. I'm like, "I'm not in that one. That's your story. I already have some over here. Thank you." [laughs] Also, it takes a little pressure off my brother too. I worried about him feeling kind of gypped because he did grow up having such hardship. I grew up with a nice, steady life. Honestly, we have calmed down. I think that for her, they just to need to have more time elapse. Then they can all think about it.

I'm sure somebody will start a movement. It's already going on in Korea. There's a TV show on Wednesday nights where it's like, "Meet my Birth Mother," or whatever. When we were working in Korea, we would host at the orphanage. We were some of the hosts that were asked to help with that because we spoke English. A lot of them were coming from Scandinavia. You'd see this Korean-looking guy. Then he'd be like, "Hey-low." [laughs] They'd be there to meet their birth mother. For some of those people, that was pretty earth shattering over there.

Jena: My last question is knowing everything, are you glad that you let your daughter Rose search for your birth family? Would you do it again?

Tina: Oh, yeah. Of all the things about Lily's adoption and my adoption if I could change anything, instead of being forty-two when I got her, I wish I'd been about thirty-five. I've been a medium-aged mother. I've been an old mother. She and I were talking about this. I have more wisdom now, but my body craps out on me sometimes. Some of the things I wish I cared a little bit more about like band fundraisers. [laughs] I don't really want to do that stuff anymore. My peer group, none of them have children in the age of my daughter. My peer group, if I call them about Girl Scout cookies or something like that, they laugh hysterically that I'm still doing that. Sometimes I feel like Lily gets a little gypped because she didn't get me when I was in my super, go-getter, "Let me do all those cupcakes and twinkie things with your peer group."

Other than that though, everything's played out really nicely. Looking back, no complaints. I still look at this time period in our country where people are able to adopt children from other countries as a grand social experiment that we'll look back on someday and say, "Wasn't that amazing that we were able to participate in that?" Ultimately, people will adopt children in their homelands. It will be destigmatized. It'll be easier in some ways to do that. I do wish that Lily could have been raised in China, for her. On the other hand, sometimes we feel like, "This is your fate. This is where you were placed. Now we have to let it unfold and see why you were brought here." That's the story we don't know yet.