

STORY TITLE: Maternal Instincts

“Give it some time. But not too much time....” These are some of the wisest words of advice I’ve ever received. Thirty-years later, I relied upon these words to make a critical decision that would have a profound impact on many people’s lives.

This true story is about life lessons learned from my maternal grandmother; a German Russian immigrant. Born in Russia, resettled in Lincoln, NE at age two in a neighborhood located underneath the viaduct which runs alongside Husker Stadium.

My grandmother only had an 8th grade education so she could work the sugar beet fields in Northern Colorado where I now reside. Ironically, my Fort Collins neighborhood was the original German Russian settlement not far from the fields my grandmother and her family likely worked. And perhaps more ironic, it is now home to “Sugar Beet Park”; a historically themed playground with a sugar beet play scape.

Despite having limited education and a financially modest life, she somehow managed to scrape enough money together to send her daughter to beauty college in Omaha; an indicator of strong maternal instincts.

Florence (Firestone) Kaufman was my maternal grandmother by birth though as a result her being my primary caregiver, I acknowledge her in my heart and mind as my mother.

She walked me to school every day, made my breakfast and lunch and even brought snacks and multi-colored ornamental pepper plants as a “class gift” for all to enjoy.

When I was sick, she made me chicken noodle soup with home-made egg noodles; a skill she taught me that to this day, at least once a year, I make by hand, rolling the dough through a small noodle cutter and drying the noodles on large white bed sheets throughout my home. Noodles dry much more quickly in the arid Colorado environment than they did in the humid, Nebraska climate!

Florence never established a career for herself but she worked hard at the jobs she had cleaning a local movie theatre and on the factory line for Russel Stover Candies. “Here’s a little secret I’ll share with you” my grandmother Florence said to me one day with a twinkle in her eye. “Those swirls on top of those candies, tell you what is inside!” A “dot and swirl to the left” was the mark for a nougat filling. A “zig zag pattern was on the caramels.” She was particularly fond of the Pecan Delight candies, also known as Turtles.

All of the most important life lessons I’ve learned are solely and most deservedly attributed to my grandmother. A devout Christian, she read the Bible multiple times a day; each time marking where she left off. She said “Never go to bed angry” and “Forgive everyone”; the Bible tells us to do this.

Honest, kind, patient, reliable, and though she struggled financially through much of life, she was generous beyond her means, always wanting to feed you something; more signs of solid maternal instincts.

Those same instincts stirred my curiosity in 2017. Being an only child, unable to have children of my own, and curious about my heritage, I decided to take a DNA test through 23andMe. Within weeks, my results were in. Confirmed ethnic heritage, German 40%. No surprise. However, at the top of my “genetically closest relatives” list was an unknown individual identified as “AS”. Female. 100% verified match predicted and identified to be my first cousin. HOW and WHO?!

What should I do with this information? Should I reach out to “AS”? “Give it some time...but not too much time...” went through my mind. Weeks went by and I finally decided to reach out to the mysterious “AS”. Below, is the *actual message thread* between us as a miracle unfolded!

9/19/17

Hello. Thank you for sharing your info with me. I'm an only child and my grandparents and parents are deceased. My genetic test results show that you are genetically related to me closely. I'm assuming this is on my mother's side. She had one sister who I was close with though now estranged. My family surnames on my mother's side, were Kaufman and Firestone.

If you're comfortable sharing information, I'm interested to learn more however, I respect your privacy.

Thank you.

10/28/17

I apologize for the delay in getting back to you. We recently moved to a new state, new home and my son went away to school, yada...

I'm so glad you reached out to me! I wish I had some information for you about our family, but I don't. I, too, am an only child but I'm adopted. All my adoptive parents were told was my biological parents were in their teens and I'm a mix of Italian and white Russian. I took the DNA test to find out more about myself (guess how much Italian DNA I have -- none!) and maybe get a match with someone, like you(!), to find out a bit more about my past. I was born in Omaha in 1968. That's all the information I have. Did your mom or aunt mention anything about her having a baby she gave up for adoption when she was a teenager? I wish I had more details for you, but I have nothing. My adoptive family wasn't close to their siblings so I didn't have the extended family experience growing up. If you have any information you feel comfortable sharing, I'd love to know. If not, I understand.

10/28/17

Yes, I was told by my aunt the same story about a girl she gave birth to as a teenager. I am certain my aunt is your biological mother. I do have more information. If you would like to talk instead of email that's fine.

My new-found cousin Amy and I ended up talking for quite some time by phone. When she sent me a photo of herself, I was in shock! Amy looked like my grandmother Florence! After visiting with Amy for weeks, I asked if she would like me to connect her with her birth mother.

The advice "Give it some time... but not too much time..." circled through my mind. I told Amy I would give this serious thought but it may be an emotionally difficult decision as a result of estrangement. Thinking more about the lessons my grandmother taught me about forgiveness, I decided to connect Amy to her birth mother. My own maternal instincts kicked in and I knew it was the right thing to do. It would please God, and my grandmother, connecting her daughter, my aunt Linda, to Linda's first born daughter she gave away at birth and to grandchildren she never knew she had.

Through my efforts online, calling relatives, and by mail, there was no response, ever. Finally, as a last ditch effort, I located my cousin Andy with the hope he would deliver this news to his mother.

I called Andy at work making myself clear that my call was extremely important and would be life changing. I assured him this was no joke and needed his full attention. I said “Andy, your mother’s daughter, Amy, wants to meet her. Your mother needs to know Amy is alive and that your mom is a grandmother to two children....” Andy was in shock but also happy and immediately began discussing the need to buy more Christmas gifts for his new-found sister, nephew and niece; paternal instincts, perhaps?

Andy agreed to contact his mother, tell her about what occurred, and ask her to check her Facebook accounts for messages from me and from a woman named Amy. Weeks later, I got an email message from Amy that she and my aunt had finally connected!

As proud Germans from Russia know, and as my grandmother Florence consistently showed, family should be first, no matter what. Despite anger, pain and inflicted suffering, you should never abandon your family.

My aunt is now reunited to her first born child, has two grandchildren, and my cousins have a sister! The ornament on the Christmas tree that was always placed for the memory of Amy is now one she can see firsthand and have her own children added to that tradition.

And for me, as an only child with both of my parents deceased not previously able to have children from my prior marriage, God has blessed me with the ability to start my own family. I’ll

be the proud and overjoyed mother of twins, a boy and a girl, due to be born late this summer through a surrogate, biologically my own.

They will be given my grandmother Florence and grandfather Johns names as their middle names.

What I will teach my children are the same lessons my beautiful, faithful, honest, God loving grandmother Florence taught me. And I will ensure they know of their German Russian heritage as I take them to play at Sugar Beet park.