

FIND MY FAMILY

Reviewed by Isabel Andrews

Find my Family is a new 'reunion' show being screened by Channel 7. Each episode reunites 2 different families. Some have been separated by adoption, others for various reasons. Jack Thompson presents the show, though his role is minimal and seems to be a largely promotional one. He is himself adopted and some time ago was the searcher in the show 'Where do I Come From', a show I didn't see, but I believe he had a good outcome.

I've seen a few episodes of *Find my Family* and have a number of concerns; fundamentally it bears little relationship to the reality of reunion. The episodes I have seen follow the same formula - each party, the searching person and the found person are videoed explaining their wish or their story. The mediator (who you don't see) shows footage of the video and/or photos to each party. Inevitably there are tears, other family members are interviewed and then a meeting takes place, often of whole families. It is a joyous event and it concludes with 'everyone living happily ever after'.

When you consider two stories plus add breaks in a 30 minute time frame inevitably it is very superficial. It is feel good TV. The viewer can identify with the joy of meeting a longed for person, the joy of acceptance and the hope of a bright future together.

Occasionally there are reunions that follow such a pattern, in particular meeting of siblings. Often an adoptee will say 'I just felt really comfortable,' and although like relationship there are ups and downs, it can indeed be a wonderful, warm and easy relationship.

However, for the vast majority of adoptees and birth parents the route is a far more complex one. The separation, particularly of mother and child has impacted on both their lives. **Both** have to deal with feelings of loss, sadness, grief, abandonment, anger, powerlessness, confusion and isolation. Additionally birth parents may have to deal with the fear of people knowing about their first child. Adoptees may have to deal with feelings of disloyalty towards their adoptive parents. In the shows I have seen adoptive parents have had no role, their feelings and challenges are not visible in any way.

I have concerns for the people participating in the show and concerns for viewers. I wonder what level of preparation and subsequent support is given to participants. I have asked the producers what counselling and support is given both prior to the reunion and later. I also asked questions about how they chose the participants and how they deal with the people they cannot assist.

They responded with '*I am sorry to tell you that we are not in a position to answer all your questions*'.

In episode one, a mother was reunited with her relinquished daughter. To the casual viewer she may have just seemed delighted to meet her daughter but underneath she seemed to be quite detached from everything. What I saw is a woman clearly struggling with her own grief. She spoke of her relinquished daughter as separated to herself eg '*then I had the child*.' Every time that she was asked a question she turned to the daughter she raised as if for confirmation, as if she did not know how she felt or what was appropriate to say. At the reunion her relinquished daughter walked towards her, she seemed rooted to the spot and could not move forward.

I wonder what support and counselling she is receiving. I wonder if she had a choice to meet in private. I wonder if she and her daughter know that reunion is simply the beginning of another chapter and that after the joy of meeting there is often a myriad of emotions coming to the surface. I wonder where they live and whether they can talk and get support from others involved in adoption. I wonder how it will be for them if they are recognised and strangers, having witnessed the reunion, feel free to ask intimate question.

I wonder why people want to participate in the most private of occasions in the public eye. I wonder if they realise that a first meeting is a sacred affair that is best shared between two people, not a family affair, much less a national affair. I wonder if they will look back and feel cheated that with cameras running they could not be themselves but had to perform for everyone. Some years ago I read the account of a US adoptee who met in such a blaze of publicity and many years later I looked back with sadness that her first meeting was a performance for the cameras, that she felt like she was going through the motions rather than her real self meeting her mother for the first time.

The show sets up unrealistic expectations; it reminds me of a 36 year old man who phoned us to discuss the fact that he was going to Melbourne on holidays and thought he might knock on his mother's door as it would be his birthday and he thought that it would be a lovely surprise for her. We discussed it and he seemed to have little conception of the pain this could create for her. He felt times 'had changed' and he wasn't upset so she shouldn't be either. He agreed to use a mediator. When I contacted the mother she was distraught, his birth was a secret and she had coped by locking this secret up in her heart and treating his loss as if he had died. She struggled to even allow herself to think that she had a son. It took many, many months for her to feel able to talk to me and many more before she was willing to have contact with him.

I wonder if *Find my Family* is going to talk about the people who do not wish to meet. I wonder how it will feel if you are one of those people. I wonder if they will arrange support for the rejected searching person or the distressed found person. I wonder if they will talk about the people they cannot find. There are times when we have searched for two years without success. Sometimes people cannot be found.

Find my Family makes it sound so easy and straight forward.

I wonder about the people who get the courage to contact them only to learn that they cannot help them as they have been inundated with requests. One adoptee told me that she was inspired by the lovely reunions and Jack Thompson's invitation to contact them. Gathering together all her courage she went to the website only to read they could not respond personally to each email. She felt rejected 'once again'. With all agencies getting increased inquiries I wonder if we will compound the feelings of rejection when we say we can try and help but there is a waiting list.

I have a number of birth mothers tell me they will not watch the show, it is simply too painful. On the other hand I've had an adopted person tell me that it helped him to see how painful the loss of a child is. Prior to the show he assumed his mother simply didn't want him. He now understood that perhaps his birth mother had no choice and it had motivated him to contact us. For him it was helpful.

I am disappointed by this show. By only showing the joyful parts it sets up impossible expectations. Whilst it does give snippets of information and insight, basically it is superficial and does little to educate the public about the real impact of family separation and the complexities of reunion. There is no mention of adoptive parents and the impact on them both of adopting a child and later reunion. Overall it just seems like voyeurism and that the main winners will be the commercial profits made by the producers of the TV station.

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