

Box 62: A Mother-Daughter Search

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Abstract: My experiences growing up in an alcohol troubled home and the search for my family history provided a rich opportunity to appreciate and more deeply understand my mother, my father, and my choice to be a social work practitioner and teacher. This story is the outcome of a journey to search for my mother's adoptive birth history records. This led me to Box 62, where her adoptions records were stored in the Minnesota Historical Society for nearly ninety years. What I did not anticipate was what Box 62 would reveal to me regarding lessons about the influence of secrets and the value and power of recovery. The themes of secrecy shame, and the suppression of emotions surround this story of adoption and addiction. These lessons emerge from my dialogue with writings my mother left after her death which embody her struggles and how she moved beyond them.

Keywords: adoption, alcoholism, mother-daughter relationship, adoption records, recovery, addiction

Boxes: A Mother-Daughter Search

Being the daughter of two alcohol-troubled parents involved pivotal events and experiences that shaped the trajectory of my life's work and perspectives. One piece of this story is about my mother's search for her birth parents and the secrecy surrounding her adoption. It was shameful to be adopted and to adopt in the 1920s. My mother learned early on in her life not to ask about her past. She sealed off a part of herself. Her alcohol addiction helped to repress her emotions around the pain of not knowing. In her later years of life as part of her recovery from alcohol addiction, she was able to let go and accept who she was.

Experiences with my family of origin notably influenced my choices as a practitioner and teacher in the profession of social work. My story is different from those of my siblings as we all reacted and coped in varying ways to the disruption of addiction. I matured early and would learn to be a secret-keeper. I also learned to seal off my emotions to protect secrets about my family. These qualities ultimately influenced my early development and the replication of these experiences is notable. Both of my parents sought help and began their recovery process while I was in my early twenties. To have been the child of alcohol-troubled parents was challenging, but also taught me to be determined, resilient, and empathetic. I share this story specifically as the daughter of a complicated woman, my mother, who has left me questions to explore about her and myself and about how addiction and its secrets brought me into the field of helping others and the process of healing.

Her adoption papers rested in Box 62 since 1925. Searching for information about my mother's first two years of life and why she was given up for adoption proved an emotional journey into secrecy and loss. Life is not neatly organized within papers and institutions. Box 62 is the starting point and a piece of the story of my mother and me.

My Mother's Adoption

It was a Friday morning in the early spring of 2014 when the phone call and a message came in. There are pockets in my house where the phone will not ring so I miss those calls. It was from Minnesota Dakota County courthouse. The caller, in a Midwest accent said, "I have information for you on the adoption request." My heart pounded, mixed with excitement and anxiety, as I waited to hear the judge's decision about whether to open the adoption records on my mother's birth history. I quickly punched in the numbers on my cell and the familiar voice answered. She remembered me and said the judge had signed the order for the 1925 adoption records of my mother. They were located in Box 62 at the Minnesota Historical Society. Within a month, I was off to St. Paul to continue the search my mother could not undertake.

The Historical society staff was generous and respectful of the envelope inside Box 62, an envelope that held papers of extraordinary quality and clarity. I could not take pictures of this bundle of papers but could have chosen documents to be copied. Although I had prior knowledge of my mother's given birth name, I had little else. The consent for adoption revealed her full name, which sounded more typical of the south than the small Midwestern town where she was raised.

It was the first two years of her life of which I have no knowledge. The following excerpt was written by my mother in her early 60s as she began the recovery process:

I learned quickly not to question my birthright. I am an only child, adopted, raised in a middle-class German/Irish family. It was the 1920s and Minnesota law enacted in 1917 protected the rights of the unwed mother to guarantee secrecy. I lived in a Sinclair Lewis town and suppressed the impulse to know the secret, adoption. I felt strange. My parents were never honest with me. As a child, I turned to three imaginary playmates, little boys with strange sounding German names (Psychiatry would say my price of suppression was replaced by fantasy and imagination). My self-fulfilling prophecy was to succeed. But I wanted to know, not so much about the biological father, but who was this mother whom I could never ask about? What was she like; her face, her hair, her smile? This subject was not to be discussed within our home. And in the cold halls of the State Capital, the files were sealed by a state law legislated years prior to my adoption.

But as the years went by, I searched and found a name, a place of birth. I cried but it closed a piece of my life. The price is the suppression of one's life story, and it begins with the falsification of this birth certificate to the adoptee's life process. All the time that I was wondering about the dark side, the dirty little secret, the specter of illegitimacy, mine was a beautiful life. All I wanted to know was to know who I was.

I found a small piece and for now, it satisfies me. I want to live life in the now and the future, not forgetting the past, but getting on with it. There will be time for more pieces, for I was chasing, running, and now it can be a calm, methodical search, less emotional and more disciplined.

I learned as my mother and I have grown together that her adoption in the 1920s, as an only child, set the stage for family secrets. Her drinking maintained that secret until her recovery set her free. These papers afforded a new direction to search in order to know more about her birth parents and the institution(s) that cared for her prior to her formal

adoption. These revelations suggested a new search in the juvenile court opening records of her birthparents and those first two years of her life – the next box.

Our [Drinking] Family History

The late 1950s was a time of economic stability and for some, prosperity. I was the fifth of six children and the first girl after four boys. Notably I was born on Mother's Day, into an Irish-German, Catholic military family. My father was a naval officer who endured deployments that lasted for six to nine month stretches, while my mother cared for five children in a bucolic coastal city in California. I suspect my mother was tired, given the military's deploying my father every two to three years, leaving her to raise us during critical developmental periods. She had the boys to watch over one another and two daughters soon followed. She was a college-educated woman at a time of economic change. Women's roles in the workplace were just beginning to shift, and I wonder if there was discontent on her part, wanting to explore these new roles. With the tension of being a navy wife, shifting gender roles, and a nagging question about herself, alcohol slowly became her companion to cope with the busy routine and constant changes internally and externally.

Her drinking would ebb and flow as fresh naval assignments brought us to new communities and experiences. Alcohol was an integrative part of Navy life – a means to connect, to support, and to forget. In those days, a Manhattan was a common fix, along with a cigarette, and both parents grew to like those Manhattans. It afforded time to relax, to enjoy a moment of quiet disconnect. It was acceptable in the Navy culture and in an extended family where the norms of drinking were emblematic, along with a fierce dedication to the Catholic faith. At face value, we were a perfect bunch, looking and appearing just "right," yet simmering underneath was the pain of addiction and its companion, shame. The secrets endure, as on the outside all appeared fine, but the inside was filled with despair of unknowing.

My mother's steady drinking escalated into binges as I entered my early teen years. It was from those years that I recall my anxiety and search for a foundation in the face of inconsistency. By the time I was five, I had known something was not quite right. I would peek around the corner to my parents' bedroom in the

middle of night (or so I thought) to see if they were home. I would worry and wonder about where they were. I shared a room with my sister, who was only a year or so younger and slept through everything. I was not so blessed. Those early days of my mother's drinking were filled with dread of the unknown. My wakeful nights were moments of trying to control something I did not understand and over which I now know I had no control. My father drank too but he was a different type of drinker; more functional, while she was a binge drinker. This style of drinking resulted in unpredictability. When she was sober, she was delightful, but hard to access emotionally. She was never cognitively or emotionally clear, even in brief periods of abstinence, and maintaining a relationship of trust was difficult. So athletics was an outlet to cope and a relief for me, providing a foundation to feel connected where I was introduced to the skills of team building, leadership and listening. Teachers, coaches, friends and extended family established a network of support and a valuable sense of hope and purpose. These offsetting factors strengthened my resolve to do well and to eventually extend these lessons with others who have endured similar experiences.

The drinking escalated when we moved to the East Coast, during the final tour in my father's thirty-year naval career. Living in an active and busy Navy base was actually quite wonderful. You could go anywhere, see a movie for a quarter, bowl for a mere dime, and fish off of the navy piers for endless hours as the mackerel swam by. This community was a blessing. We could count on families around us, play until dark, and always feel safe. However, this is where my mother's drinking intensified. She was in her late forties and her health was poor. She easily choked on food, smoked, and continued drinking those Manhattans. Often there would be gatherings in our home with other Navy folks or at the "Officer's" club where we could be unsupervised. These years left my mother disconnected from herself and from us. She later recalls feeling terribly depressed and lost. She questioned herself and her life.

This "who am I?" question quietly stayed beneath the surface and I suspect was buried during those drinking years. It was in her recovery from alcohol addiction that she began to explore her "self" and attempt to understand those early years – to find

peace. My mother wrote about an experience in the first grade when an older boy said:

"They found you. You are not really theirs because they did not have you biologically. Your name is not really your name."

All I could do was run and bury my face in the coats at the back of the classroom and wait to go home for lunch. I asked my parents. My father was quiet and my mother was crying. My father said we needed to never talk of this again. It was settled; no one would hurt me again with such talk. That day something was soiled, spoiled. I felt a change inside. Did the whole town know something I did not? It was the beginning of doubt, confusion and later denial, anger and obsession.

Here is where she learned to suppress her emotions, protect herself, and be a secret keeper as well. It was in her recovery she had the opportunity to address the secret and slowly accept who she was.

Our Journeys to Recovery

My mother started a recovery journey and never turned back. She endured at least two dozen detoxes and a handful of inpatient rehabs. She felt understood by a psychologist friend and found sensible meaning with the organization "Women for Sobriety," where she befriended Jean Kirkpatrick, its founder. Her recovery began to take hold. My mother was not a stereotypical female troubled-drinker. She was a beauty, dressed elegantly, and spoke with precise articulation and grace. That is exactly why folks did not know of her trouble or found it too difficult to address. In those days, addiction in women was invisible. Mom carried the burden of both being a woman without easy access to help and the socially-sanctioned silence of a female drinker. She fooled some by her elegance and charm, but it was a ruse.

Her recovery brought her to readdress the question of who she was. I, too, was questioning my role as I was chartering a course in life. My learning ground of secret-keeping taught me to repress my sexuality and the struggle to reveal the pain of being different. We intersected in our recoveries at different stages of our lives. As I began to work from the inside-out emotionally, I was able to embrace my sexuality and use this experience, (although it's an on-going process), to understand the pain of others. I learned the

challenges and pain of disconnection, which has brought many disguised gifts. These gifts were individuals and institutions that believed in me in times and moments when I did not. Relationships were invaluable in my healing, including painful ones that taught me to establish and maintain my own individuality. I understand being strong in broken places and the immense value of positive and safe relationships. I understand the origins of my anxiety, partly a familial, genetic history, but partially a legacy of living in a chaotic, inconsistent environment, resulting in an inner tension of self-doubt and uncertainty.

This self-doubt initiated my motivation to excel and learn to regulate my inner anxiety. My father often referred to my work in the addiction and mental health field as a direct result of the impact of familial addiction. He was partly right as it laid the foundation for my life's journey. It became the lens of understanding family, self, and community. My temperament of patience, curiosity, and determination along with family values of faith and loyalty created a natural underpinning to be a helper. It was a Navy doctor working with my mother after another detox when I was in my twenties who gently told me to move on with my life. I stood ready to let go of my role of caretaking and to live my life. This was a turning point for my mother and me. We crossed career paths as my life developed and hers began anew. She acquired a master's degree in counseling and worked in a clinic helping other women with addiction troubles. She blossomed as a woman in recovery moderating "Women for Sobriety" meetings. This was her new community. She had an identity beyond that of a mother, Navy wife and adoptee, but also as a proud, recovering woman. She found meaning and a home for herself. Letting go was growth for me to develop my passions and take charge of my life. The familial traditions of secret-keeping were beginning to be broken.

Inspiration of Author's Social Work Practice

The use of stories, my mother's journey and mine, has provided fertile ground for my focus and motivation to be a practicing social worker. To guide, assist, and collaborate with clients in their telling of stories and narratives of their lives that deepen their understanding of themselves. Stories

and narratives are fundamental to the work we do in the social work profession. Storytelling provides a way to construct meaning from our past and make sense of our current lives and the challenges we are facing (as well as our strengths). Stories are a powerful, compelling, way to organize and help others make sense of their world.

It was in my own storytelling to friends, therapists and my mother that taught me to trust, let go of shame, and to appreciate the value of listening without judgment. Part of the process as a social work practitioner is to reduce the strength of the secrets to reveal those hidden parts of the self. Embracing the new parts take time, patience and support. Secrets can be much like boxes, with little room to move, grow and develop.

Being a social work practitioner has evolved from opportunities to work with individuals and families in varying degrees of pain from addictions, relationship problems, and mental health challenges. I take seriously the stories of each client and pay attention to the narratives of their family. This often reveals experiences and feelings about who they were and how those roles may play a part in their current life's functioning. Family of origin work has been the centerpiece of my personal growth and development. The social, emotional and cultural aspects of life begin in our original families. My vulnerabilities and wounds remind me of those early relationships as well as the positive connections. Collaborating with my clients to appreciate their histories, acknowledging the pain and the joys, and weaving their stories to construct the truth and meaning of their lives are my framework in helping others. These joint interactions with client systems to encourage the telling of their stories are intrinsic to the work I enjoy as a social work practitioner.

Teaching as Knowing

Teaching was not an occupation I would have considered early in my career as a social worker, but my experience and training with addictions provided an opportunity to teach at the college level. I have had the privilege of teaching undergraduate college students for 24 years, often in a course about addictions. As a social worker, I am a teacher and a guide with others, and this very much parallels my teaching style. Educating undergraduates about the power of addiction and recovery in a story form etched

from my early family experiences and my clients, helps students to appreciate the process of pain, despair, hope and recovery. My message is that despite the impact of addiction, we can come through it and can live a quality life with the stories of our personal history teaching us daily.

Storytelling can be a tool to lessen the influence and intensity of secret keeping in addictions work. It is practiced in 12-step meetings daily. I ask my students to attend an open meeting sometime during the semester course. Their initial reaction is fear. What they learn is invaluable – the honesty, the nonjudgmental space– and the stereotypes begin to fall away. They get a glimpse of the power of sharing and its inherent value in a safe space. Secrets and shame find little room to grow where there is honesty and connection.

That Next Box

There were no records of the first two years of my mother's life, but their absence led my mother and myself to mine the records of our own lived experiences, where more fundamental, transformational truth lies. Drinking destroys stories or reduces them to repetitive, one-note interactions. Secrets, by their nature, forbid useful stories. My mother's early shame inevitably set the stage to question of who she was. She passed away not knowing her biological parents and those first two years of her life. Adoption in those early years and addiction in later years brought shame. Living with secrets is psychologically numbing. Sharing secrets with those who will listen and understand without judgment is freeing. This is part of my work personally, as a social worker, and as an educator. This is what my mother was able to do in her recovery. In the last 25 years of her life, she was free to be, to stop the exhaustive search for self, as it was right there with her.

As my mother and I reconstructed our lives within her recovery and mine, it was hard work to forgive and let go. I have learned to appreciate the power of stories which have created internal change, albeit slowly. Being vulnerable with family and a community of friends and colleagues helps to heal the wounds. Families are complicated, but shape our life's stories if we are willing to talk about those

relationships that build our character and values. I am blessed to have had a mix of difficulty and joy in my family of origin, with addiction as the background, but hope and faith front and center. This has established the basis and foundation of my career as a social worker and teacher.

What I found in Box 62 was not just partial explanations of my mother's life and mine, but also a symbol of our respective journeys. This box revealed pieces of her story, a story of secrets immersed in shame, doubt and loss. It taught me to appreciate that there is always more to come in life if we trust its process. My mother, in her recovery, found that as well. She went beyond the box once her recovery was firmly established. My clients, when they leave their re-constructed stories, and finish their work with me, continue their journey of discovery. We all do. It has taught me to grieve, let go, and to know that our stories continue. There are new boxes to open if we are willing and have the support and courage to be vulnerable. To open a new box may raise more questions than answers, but it can strengthen the resolve and desire to ask, pursue and to know.

The juvenile court responded to my petition. There are no records of my mother prior to her formal adoption. I felt sad as the letter sat between my fingers. Yet I found a small piece of her story, and the process of searching was emotional yet liberating. I look to her words of many years ago to let go and be satisfied with what I do have from when she was in her last few decades of life, in recovery. There will be more, new boxes to open to reveal pieces of my life. I appreciate the influence of family, friends and community who have traveled with me on this journey of discovery. I am humbled to travel with clients on their journey of family storytelling to reveal secrets, joys, pain and loss. I appreciate the power of one box that had safely rested on a shelf for ninety years. Box 62 did not answer some important questions but it raises new questions equally difficult to address. I am now alone on this journey without my mother, but am inspired to recognize and be surprised to open new boxes as a daughter, social work practitioner, and teacher.

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