ERP 080: Finding Family (Part II)

Welcome to The Empowered Relationship Podcast, helping you turn relationship challenges into opportunities and setting you up for relationship success. Your host, Dr. Jessica Higgins, is a licensed psychologist and relationship coach who shares valuable tips, tools and resources for you to dramatically improve your relationship.

This podcast is 100% ad-free. To support this show, please subscribe and write a review today. Here is your host.

* * *

Hi, thank you for joining today's podcast episode. It's episode 80 and it's titled "Finding Family". This is part two of a personal story that I am sharing with you. If you missed podcast episode 79, I encourage you to listen to that, to hear the first part of the story. If you've been following, essentially this is a little bit of a series, because in podcast episode 78 I talk about how to honor the shadow, the darkness. In the field of psychology we talk about the shadow holding our fear, our insecurity, our inadequacy, and all the things that we don't want to look at, that are painful and that we tend to want to avoid.

It's very natural and normal for us to want to seek the positive feelings of love, of joy, happiness, excitement... Yet, they're so linked. I can tell you about times in my life, an example where I was grieving tremendously, and facing some of my biggest fear, feeling like I was going to be swallowed in my emotion of pain. It felt like I was going to die; not literally, but I felt like I did not know how to face the pain, the sorrow and the grief. I had a tremendous, immediate feeling of grace and holding and love. Maybe at some point I'll share that personal story with you, as it does relate to grieving a romantic partner.

For today, I am sharing with you a story about me researching and looking up my biological father, who died when I was three months old, and my half brother, who you can hear how that all went down in the first podcast episode of this two-part series. Let me just lay this out a little more clearly: 78 is a little more intellectual framework around what the shadow is and how it's beneficial. It holds gifts, it holds our opportunity to face things that we've been afraid of, so that we can become stronger, more whole and more complete and integrated as a person. I give you a little bit of teaching around that, and some small examples in my personal life.

In the show notes for podcast 78, I realized I could do a better job of offering you a more personal, deep example and story of what this looks like, really facing some deep pain. This occurred over ten years ago. I try to share things that are a little deeper and that I processed a little more fully.

It's interesting, I felt like it would be easy to share with you, and it's actually been pretty challenging. It's evoked quite a bit of emotion, I have felt somewhat vulnerable and insecure

to share this with you guys. It's a very tender process for me. That in itself is me facing a shadow as we speak.

I was traveling last week, so if you've been following this three-part series, I had expected to release podcast that I'm releasing today last week (episode 80). However, I was traveling and then I got behind. I think I also have been a little hesitant and resistant to doing this painful work. I didn't anticipate for it to bring up so much emotion. But it has, and here I am. This podcast is a week late, but I appreciate your patience and I really honor your listenership.

One other thing that I want to note is as I'm discussing the importance of facing the shadow, that this is an ever-evolving process. I believe in life I'm gonna have the opportunity to confront parts of myself that hold pain, hold fear. As I've mentioned just a moment ago, this is me facing a little bit of my shadow, providing you guys with this personal story and sharing it on somewhat of a virtual stage. It's very vulnerable, and it feels insecure.

Here is an example where in my life I have an opportunity; I didn't have to do this. I believe that as I grow and as I try to embark on new territory in my life, I'm gonna have the opportunity to face different aspects of myself, all within the interest and the theme of my growth, my strengthening, my healing and my becoming. I want to become a better person, and part of the development or the curriculum of me becoming a better person is for me to do the shadow work from time to time. I don't think it's a one-and-done recipe. It's part of the growth work.

Before we get started in the second part of my story that I'm gonna share with you today, I just want to encourage you, if you're interested in being on this show, and receiving laser coaching from me, you can learn more by visiting my website, www.drjessicahiggins.com. Click on Contact, and you can find a little bit more information there. Basically, you'll want to e-mail me, let me know you're interested, and we'll find a time.

Actually, I'm super excited; there's a couple people that have already reached out to me and that I'm scheduling with, so stay tuned. In the next couple weeks you're going to hear live laser-coaching calls where someone will be on the show and will be receiving laser coaching from me. I believe we learn so much through one another, and I feel so honored that we are developing this community with such respect and authenticity and grace.

I also had another listener post a comment on the podcast show notes page for the first person that was on the show to receive laser coaching. He left an extensive, supportive feedback for this listener that was on the show, and I just felt so deeply grateful and touched to have someone step up and offer those words of encouragement, and really give some beautiful feedback, recommendations and advice based on what worked for him in his relationship.

If you want to check that out, I will post a link to that podcast episode so that you can look at the show notes, look at that person's response if you're interested. That was episode 76, "How

To Deal With Upset In Your Relationship In A New Way", where I had a listener join us on the podcast show and I offered laser coaching. This was another listener who posted a comment to support the listener that was on the show. I felt the feedback was really supportive and encouraging.

This is the second part to my story, which I'm titling "Finding Family." If you've listened to the first part, you've heard me discuss me going to my biological father's hometown with one of my dear friends who was offering support. I saw my biological father's grave site, I met his distant cousins and distant family, and learned a little bit about where he grew up and learned stories.

The second part picks up where I take my dear friend to the airport. I have a rental car, and I make my way up to the Cleveland area to meet my biological father's ex-wife. They had been married for several years, and they had my half-brother. Then they had gotten divorced several years before him - my biological father - and my mother got together. That was before he died, but obviously, they conceived me before he passed. I was three months old when he passed.

Just to give you a timeframe here, this was the winter of 2005 approaching 2006, and it was a relatively sunny winter day. I am up in the Cleveland area, outside of Cleveland, and I have the destination of meeting the woman that was married to my biological father. I had had a couple conversations with her, I knew she was open to meeting me, but I had felt her to be pretty skeptical, pretty guarded, and it just was nervous. It was an uncomfortable situation and I didn't know what to expect. I'm going to essentially some stranger's house, and really asking to hear information that for her was 30+ years ago.

I'm driving up the driveway and I'm looking at this cute, little house, well-manicured yard. As I approach the house, I see her come out of the door. She waves at me and is greeting me as I park my car, and she invites me to come in. She's basically sizing me up. I can tell that she's taking me in, looking me up and down trying to size me up. She's offering me some hot tea, and I say yes. I look around, and I comment on her beautiful home. Mind you, she's pretty small in stature, and her energy and her strength is palpable. I can feel her personality, and I can feel her character. She's a woman you don't wanna mess with, but really petite and small in her physical stature, and I could still feel that feeling of her being a little reserved and also being curious.

One of the first things that she asked me - and I was a little taken off-guard - is do I have a widow's peak? I was surprised by the question; I looked at her and I was curious, like "What?" She said, "Pull back your bangs, let me see your hairline." I pulled back my bangs and thought, "This is interesting..." She explained that widow's peaks are genetic. I don't have a strong widow's peak, but I... I widow's peak is a point in the hairline, it's like the hairline doesn't go exactly straight across the forehead; it comes down in the middle a little bit. There's

really prominent widow's peaks, or there's just an ever so slight, and I have the ever so slight. That was an awkward start of our conversation.

We were in her kitchen and we were making small talk, just trying to build some comfortability as we tried to bridge these two worlds.

This is a world from her past. At the time that we met, she had been happily married 20+ years to a man, and I was inviting her to look at a time in the past, her first husband, who she met in high-school. After we finished our tea, she invites me into the living room and she asks me to sit next to her on her couch, and she starts to share stories.

She shared stories of their young romance; they met in high-school. She tells me stories about my biological father's aunts, siblings, uncles, grandparents. We probably sat on that couch for three hours. We were both deeply engaged in conversation. As the conversation proceeded, it got deeper and deeper and more personal. She cried with me, she laughed with me... I felt as though we were in this moment in time that seemed to transcend everything, and it was just this special, sacred, once-in-a-lifetime meeting.

At one point, I told her I had never seen a photo of him. She said, "Really? Oh my gosh... I'll be right back", and she dug out some old photos. As she opened them up and placed them on my lap and I looked at them, it was really surreal. I can't even quite put words to how I felt; it was something that I had wanted all of my life at that point. I honestly felt like I couldn't get close enough. In current day, people will show me photos on their iPhone, and one of the first things I typically do is I zoom in. I like to look at people's faces, their expression and their body-language; I tend to want to get a closer look. Yet, with these older photos, you can't do that. And they're older photos, so it's just a moment in time captured from a distance, and I couldn't quite get as close as I wanted to get. But I still got to see photos of when he was younger.

They were together for a period of time, so I got to see a few different photos, so I felt so extremely grateful. Towards the end of our meeting she said, "I want to give you something. I have been keeping them all of these years, and I want you to have them." She left for a moment and came back with this holiday box - like I said, it was winter, it was holiday season - and it had my name on it, and it said from her. I didn't realize it then, but now talking about it - she had already decided that she wanted to give these gifts to me, and she was just looking for the right time.

I open up this green, shiny holiday box, and inside is tissue paper. I open and I'm going through, and she begins to tell me that the bracelet is the first bracelet that he bought her; it's an ID bracelet, and it has a clasp, and inside there's a photo of him. Then there are pearl earrings and a necklace. Then her engagement ring and her wedding ring. She told me that she wanted me to have them, as this was something she no longer needed, given that she's been happily married for over 20 years, and she wanted me to have a piece of him.

I thanked her and I just acknowledged what an honor and what a gift it was for her to sit with me and share with me so openly, and to give her sentimental pieces to me to pass on. I was in such great gratitude to her. As our time came to a close, she walked me towards the door and she said, "I knew right away when I saw you that you were his daughter."

The whole experience felt like a transcended time, in some way. It felt surreal. For me to describe all the nuances and synchronicities and insights, it would take me hours to really capture the depth and the richness of this experience. I am in awe still, as I tell this story, of her willingness to go so deep with me and to connect so fully. I think in some ways it was really healing for her, as it was for me; each in our own right.

That night I was lucky -- as I mentioned, my grandparents still lived in the area, and I got to go home and process this and decompress, because it was quite intense. The next day I was scheduled to meet my half-brother. As I was driving to his house, I remember thinking "Okay, round two..." and just trying to prepare myself for another intense meeting.

I drive up to his place, I park, I walk up to his front door and I knock. He opens the door. He's rather large in stature. He's probably 6'5" and 250. He's a bigger guy, but his energy is soft like a teddy bear, and he greets me with, "Hey, sis!" and embraces me with open arms.

We have fun together. It feels natural, and he shares with me as if we have known each other for years. He tells me stories and talks with me, and we talk about life. He tells me about his life, and I learn how we're similar in our thinking and our philosophy. Our meeting felt more current, as if we were gonna be building a relationship. It didn't feel like a once-in-a-life meeting; it felt like this is somebody that's gonna be in my life.

Fast forward, we talk. We don't talk as often as either one of us would prefer, yet when we do talk, we drop into a deep place of connection, as if no time has passed at all. That's interesting, because the first time I met him, I felt as though we had met and known each other, and we were meeting up after not meeting in a long time. It was that sense of connection and closeness. I realize that not everybody's story turns out with this warmth and this receptivity, when people have been adopted or are searching out someone that is long lost relative or family member. There's not always this level of embrace and welcoming. Yet, I can firmly say that I was so scared to reach out. Regardless of how they received me, I think the process of me facing and confronting this pain, this fear helped me become more whole, more integrated and stronger.

I learned so much about myself. Things I already knew, but maybe wasn't fully confident or secure in. I'm not even sure that I can fully describe all the benefits or all the gifts that I got from that experience, but I can say that there's a sense of feeling like I did it. It's like an emotional accomplishment that's not like I arrived somewhere, but I overcame, and it's about who I became in that process of overcoming. I conquered a fear, I healed an old wound. That's a tremendous gift to myself, and that was all because of the willingness to face my shadow.

Interesting enough, right? If you remember, in last week's podcast episode I talked about this being the first year of my Ph.D. program, and that it was known for pushing turbo on your inner work, the fast track of personal growth and healing. Mind you, my mindset at the time going into this program was, "Yeah, I've been doing my work for years, it's nothing." I didn't think it was gonna rock my world.

As you can tell, this is a pretty intense process. Yet, the thing that I want to share with you and was most inspired to share with you is this: during this phase of exploring those early years of my life, I was visiting my mother -- again, I'm from Portland, Oregon, so I was visiting there. I was probing, I was asking questions of my mother of those very early years, and sharing with her that my understanding and my knowledge felt pretty sparse. I remember asking her to sit down with me. We sat on the edge of her bed and I said, "Would you please be fully honest with me?" I reassured her that I wasn't interested in judging or blaming any of her choices. I merely just wanted to know the history, and a full awareness and knowing of those early years. So she did.

She wasn't necessarily thrilled about it. She has her own guilt or shame around some of the choices that she made, yet she was willing to talk with me. One of the things that she told me about was a man that she dated and that was in our lives from when I was 9 months old to about 4 years old. I had heard of him throughout the years. My mother would tell me stories or certain jokes that he was involved in, and I knew he was a good man. However, I had no idea the significant role that he had played in my life and in my mother's life.

When I was about three and a half to four, my mother went through an incredibly rough time. I'm just still now continuing to learn about the depth of this experience for her. I think she's tried to protect me from the details most of my life. Without going into her story, I wanted just to say that it was an extremely challenging time. Prior to that, it sounded as though we lived a pretty happy existence. It sounded as though I had claimed him or adopted him as my father, because he is one of my primary caregivers. We lived together, he cared for me as if I was his own, and he was a solid, consistent, positive presence in our lives.

During the peak of this difficult time, he solely took care of me. He did everything in his power to care for me and my mother. Now, knowing what I know and you're not privy to, because I don't want to share my mom's story, most people would have wanted to run, escape the situation. They would have been overwhelmed, not knowing what to do and perhaps would have shut down. Yet, he stepped up.

I'm getting emotional talking about it now. He was truly a godsend in my life and in my mother's life. Going back to this visit with my mother -- I'm sitting on the side of the bed with her and I'm learning about this time and who this man was in my life, and I was dumbfounded. I felt as though I was learning that someone had saved my life when I was younger and I never knew about it.

Immediately, I knew I had to reach out to him and just say thank you. It was as though I couldn't let another moment be wasted without letting him know and feel my gratitude, as it had been already way too long. I would imagine he would have thought that I would have reached out sooner.

Over the next few weeks I prompted my mother for her to give me the last contact information she had for him. I looked him up. I was petrified to call him, yet I knew I could not not call. I wanted to acknowledge the difference he made in my life and to thank him for his goodness. I wanted to let him know that I was doing well.

I had to make a few calls to track him down, and I got the number for his place at business. I remember picking up the phone, feeling like "Okay, I'm getting close to actually reaching him." I dialed the number, someone picks up and I was put through to what sounded as his assistant. The woman on the other end of the call said, "Who is this again?" I said, "It's hard to explain... I am the daughter of a woman that he dated about 30 years ago." She said, "Oh my gosh, I know who you are! Don't hang up!" A few minutes later I hear him pick up the phone, and he says "Hi, Jessie!" as if I was a long-lost loved one calling.

We had an exchange in that conversation, and over the next several months we had long conversations, weekly conversations, catching up. Eventually, I planned a visit to see him in the earlier part of 2006. The visit was phenomenal, emotional, and really touching.

I remember one moment that I can share with you. We were standing next to each other looking out the window; it was a few moments of just looking in silence, and my body sensation caught me off-guard, because I felt as though I was standing next to someone -- like family. Mind you, I have really no memory before kindergarten; it's not uncommon for a four-and-a-half. Yet, it felt as though my body, or the pre-verbal part of my being knew who he was, and this was our first visit.

I didn't know how to calibrate it. In my cognitive, conscious mind, this is a man that I was reaching out to that I had no memory of. We were meeting, but we had no real relationship to speak of. I didn't know how to calibrate it. In my cognitive, conscious mind, this was a man that I was reaching out to that I had no memory of, and we were meeting and had no real relationship to speak of, yet my kinesthetic feeling in my body was feeling completely different, like this is someone who is family.

I remember returning home from this visit - mind you, this was ten years ago - and a colleague of mine at my PhD program said, "Oh, he's your allofather." I was like, "I don't understand, what's that?" and she said, "Your other father." So in my own mind, I have labeled him as my allofather.

Fast forward - this has been ten years - he is now one of my closest family members. I consider him family. We continue to have our weekly conversations, that are about an hour.

We spend time really sharing, talking, and we visit one another a couple times a year; my husband and I go up there. We've traveled together, and I just am in such gratitude because of the person that he is, and the history that we share. It's very unique. I don't imagine many of you can relate.

Although we have mentors, we have aunts, we have uncles that show up and play a very special part in our lives, what's fascinating and what we both find humor in is how many similarities there are between us in our personality. I could go on and on about the similarities between us, so in some ways I believe him being such a strong presence in my life during those formative years of 0 to 4, he has helped shape who I am.

When I talk about him, my heart is overwhelmed with love and gratitude. I want to just be really honest, as I'm describing facing the shadow... Essentially, that year, 2005-2006 of my life, I did a deep dive with my biological father and this man that I call my allofather, who played a pivotal role in my fundamental years, and has for the last ten years been a pivotal part of my life. If I talk about the shadow, this part of me that has felt grief and loss over not having a father figure that's a real strong presence, and this finding him, finding my biological father and healing that part of myself, finding my allofather and really developing a relationship and nurturing that bond, it feels as though I am witnessing a natural wonder, the most beautiful thing you've ever seen in nature, that almost brings you to your knees in awe. I feel so touched by love and the wonder of how beautiful, amazing and wonderful it feels.

In addition to feeling that little kid in me - that sad, grieving little kid is receiving comfort and warmth, and that it's all going to be okay. Through the process of this, and ten years ago healing that part of me that grieves the loss of my biological father, but that is comforted and healed by my allofather, and who is also teaching me about the experience of having a loving, strong father presence in my life.

To wrap this up, I am sharing with you this personal story of my journey of going into my shadow, looking at painful parts that were difficult to look at, and the transformation in me and also what I created in my life, what I opened up space for. Had I never made that call, I would not have created or opened up the space in my life to have relationship with someone that I call family. Finding Family is the name of this story. Had I not been willing to look, I'd still be in this place of wondering... I wonder what my biological father looked like; I wonder what my half-brother is like; I wonder who my biological father is in me. Maybe one day I'll look him up. Filling that void, that unknown...

I could live my whole life feeling that way; it wasn't terrible. There was really nothing wrong with it. It just was a part of me that I had never really delved into. Now the strength, the solidarity, the knowingness and security in myself, and then now creating space to have this deeply beautiful relationship with an amazing person that I call my allofather - that would have never happened.

I think the gifts that come from looking at our shadow, facing our shadow, are unknown. We have no idea what our work will result to, but I can tell you I have several stories that I could share with you about when I have faced my shadow. I kid you not, I think they have all resulted in a golden gem, a nugget of brilliance, of growth, of strengthening, and I am just letting you know that it's not always easy to go through the fire and feel this level of intense emotion, yet I know that it brings healing, wholeness, growth and transformation.

Thank you for listening. If you have a comment, a reaction or a question, I want to encourage you to go to the show notes of this podcast episode and leave a comment. That allows it to be shared with our whole community, and I think it would be really wonderful for us to develop more of a dialogue together.

You can find the show notes on my website, DrJessicaHiggins.com. Click on Podcast, and you'll find the most recent episode there at the top. This is episode 80. Scroll down to the bottom, and you can leave a comment there. You can also reach me by clicking on Contact, and you can find the ways to reach me there.

Thank you for your listenership. If you have any questions about anything else, you can also reach me, again, on my website - DrJessicaHiggins.com, click on Contact, and I will respond. Until next time, I hope you take great care.

* * *

You've been listening to Empowered Relationship, your relationship guide. Remember to take a moment to write a review and subscribe today. You can also get your free relationship gift by visiting drjessicahiggins.com