

**Lori Holden interviews Sarah Saffian (transcript)**  
**LavenderLuz.com**  
**June, 2026**

## Intro

**Lori Holden:** Hello everyone, and welcome back to LavenderLuz.com. It's been a while since I've seen you on here with my podcast or the occasional video casts that we do. But I am so excited to be here today with my new friend, Sarah Saffian, who I stalked because I read her memoir, *Ithaka*, and I just really wanted to know more from her. I'm grateful to Joni Mantell who connected us, so shout out to Joni.

So just to get started, Sarah, would you tell us a little bit about yourself and what's behind the title, *Ithaka*?

**Sarah Saffian:** Well, Lori, first, thanks so much for reaching out and so much for having me today. And I'm really looking forward to getting into it and talking about all of our common ground.

So the title *Ithaka*, which is spelled with a "K," which some people are curious about, is a reference to *The Odyssey*. Maybe it was 20-something hubris or something, but I was sort of comparing myself to Odysseus in the sense of a quote that starts one of the sections of *Ithaka* that says "Odysseus returned home, but he did not remember it because he had been long absent."

And I have that right before our reunion because there's a sense with adoptees of, you know, where is home? Where do I belong? Multiple senses of home, and also how that informs your sense of self, sense of your identity, of course also a coming back. It is called a reunion. You know, you have been together—not that the infant newborn adoptee remembers that encounter, the birth mother certainly does—but, but maybe the adoptee does on some cellular level. I think so.

So *Ithaka* is a reference to *The Odyssey*, and I have as an epigraph at the beginning of the book a part of a poem by Cavafy, very much about this. And also the idea that he, that Cavafy writes about in the poem, is about the journey being more important than the arrival at the destination. And I thought that that was so important to my story, too, because I do write about the journey, and there is a destination of sorts, but it's not the *only* destination. The idea is that the journey continues, and it does for everyone. As much as a memoir is specific to one person's experience, I was trying to touch on universal themes that would touch people beyond the adoption constellation, even. But that sense of a journey—my birth father said he preferred the word "aperture" to "closure," because he said, "Well, what does closure mean, really?" And it's true that once you meet, then you have the ongoing journey of how do we fit into one another's lives? You know, it's not an ending as much as a beginning. So, it's the end of one phase maybe, but it's very much embarking on another. So, that, that would be it.



**Lori Holden:** I really, I really love that word that he came up for in replacement of closure, and I've started to use that when I, when I hear about closure again.

**Sarah Saffian:** Yeah.

**Lori Holden:** So just to give context, you were born in the Baby Scoop Era, and about the time you were turning 24, you were reached by phone by your birth parents who had married after you and built a family. And so *Ithaka* is about the three years from when they first contacted you until you met them, and your inner journey in between. Is that the *Ithaka* piece figuring out where your path even was?

**Sarah Saffian:** Yes.

**Lori Holden:** I was so captivated by so many aspects of this. You taking this journey with your birth parents in the '90s when we were still just very new coming out of the closed adoption mindset of the Baby Scoop Era, which you were born into.

And this is juxtaposed with me entering into the world of adoption in about 2000, so shortly after that. And I was kind of wired for curiosity and openness and being open to openness, but there was no path for me either. I didn't know what that even meant. And I've spent the last 25 years trying to figure out what that means for adoptees. Everybody knows what it means for adoptive parents, but for adoptees and birth parents, it's a little more obscure. Harder— harder to find. It was harder to find; not so much now.

## Adoption

So I have three groups of questions, and the first one is going to have to do with adoption, okay? So, when your parents did reach out to you around the time of your 24th birthday, you started out—I don't know if this is a word you would say is representative—but you seemed resentful of the control that you lost when it wasn't *you* who reached out to *them* when *you* were ready to search for them.

And now that you're 30 years down the road, and yourself a therapist—you went from being a journalist to a journalist and a therapist—do you find this grappling with a sense of control and agency common among adoptees? I know you also work with adoptive parents; is it common among adoptive parents? And probably common among birth parents, because one of the things that brings us all together is a sense of lack of control, if for the adoptive parents if it comes through an infertility path. So, talk to us about agency and control.

**Sarah Saffian:** It's such a good question, and of course, I talk about control in my therapy practice, whether the client is in the adoption constellation or not. Control's a big one for all of us, so that's a universal theme, too. But yes, I do think particularly in the field of adoption.



I mean, the first emotion I had when I picked up the phone, the beginning of *Ithaka*, the prologue, is that the phone rings on a Friday morning, and I'm getting ready to head to work. I'm fact-checking at *Details* magazine in Soho—that was my job that day, I remember. And shock, you know. This woman says, "Is Sarah Saffian there?" "This is Sarah." "Uh, my name is Hannah Morgan. I think I'm your birth mother." Not a call I was expecting, I mean, to say the least. In fact, when the person asked, "Is this Sarah Saffian?" my thought went to, "I guess that it's probably an editor asking about work," because I was fact-checking at a bunch of different magazines. It was one of my first jobs in my 20s. And I was freelancing, so that's, that's the level of emotional intensity I was expecting when the person asked my name. It was a landline; it was 1993. So shock was the first.

And then I sat down, and because I'm a writer, I grounded myself by taking out a pad of paper and a pen. And so I started writing down—I still have that piece of paper—you know, salient details, that they were married, that they had three other children who are my full siblings, their ages and names, and where they live and what they do for a living. Just objective information, I think, is the way that I centered myself, because the emotions, I wasn't in touch with them at all yet. And she actually asked me in that conversation, "Did you ever think you would pick up the phone and it would be me?" And I said, "Honestly, no, because I always thought I would be the one making the call."

I didn't feel resentful yet, it just hadn't occurred to me that it could go this way. And I was a month shy of my 24th birthday, as you said, and I hadn't—I'd always been curious, but I hadn't taken any step at all to search. It was something I would do one day; it didn't feel urgent to me, and I actually didn't think about being adopted very much. So that was shocking, too. It's not like I was walking around feeling adopted, and then I get this call that I was always expecting—like, not at all.

So, the shock was first, and then I felt the need to slow down a little. She said, "Can your birth father call you? I'm sorry that he's not here. I didn't think I'd reach you." She thought she'd leave a message. She wasn't sure if I'd pick up the phone. That was the first moment when I said, "How about if I call? I'll call you maybe over the weekend." And I didn't call over the weekend. I think I was just processing and living my life, and then he called me the Monday after. So, she called me on a Friday, he called me Monday evening, even though I had said I would call.

And that's when it started, where I was like, "All right. I feel completely sort of..." I mean, "ambushed" is maybe too strong a word, but I started feeling out of control and kind of really in need of slowing things down and taking it at my pace. So, we did have a conversation, but with her, I was just maybe so shocked, and maybe it was her, her affect, but I didn't feel like I needed to have my defenses up yet. And when I talked to him, I started to feel that way. Nothing about him in particular except his intensity, but obviously he was positive and loving and eager to meet me, but he said things like, "I'll come down to the city on a moment's notice to meet you." And I really felt like, "Whoa, no, not yet! Who are you?"



I have a chapter titled "Intimate Strangers." That sort of paradoxical label that maybe we apply to ourselves in closed adoption when you're newly open is, yes, we have an intimate connection, and yes, we're also strangers. So, I slowed down and, and said, "You know what, let's, let's write letters for the time being." So, that's what we did. I didn't know it would be three years but that's how we got to know one another gradually on the page. And everything about that felt like I was taking back a bit of control.

So, yes, I do see it in my adoptee clients, I see it in my adoptive parent clients, and I see it in my clients who are not in the adoption constellation, too. But I think it is highlighted for our population because, yes, like there's an element of a lack of control for all three for their own circumstantial reasons. I mean, birth mothers in the '60s, the wonderful book *The Girls Who Went Away* documents their experiences, and my birth mother didn't have a whole lot of control. I mean, she had more than some people, but really, a lack of control.

As you said, adoptive parents, especially if they've come out of infertility, which has become a specialty of mine from adoption, which makes sense because they're often connected. And then for the adoptee, feeling like, I mean, nobody chooses to be born into whatever family, no one has control of that, but that sense of like, again, the belonging and, and the home and the sense of self in relation to where you come from is not taken for granted by adoptees at all.

**Lori Holden:** Thank you for sharing all that. It's such a conundrum, isn't it, about finding versus being found, and honoring the other person with your intentions, if not also your actions, especially if you don't know if the other person—because it's a black hole with the other. You can't know what the other person wants or what their preferences are.

One of my most popular posts on my blog is about an adoptee who reached out and found her birth mom, and the birth mom didn't want to be found. There are tons and tons of comments from people, mostly adoptees, who were like "I would love to have been found." And birth mothers, "I would love to have been found." So just your perspective on this filled in a narrative that I hadn't heard as much of before from an adoptee.

**Sarah Saffian:** Well, it is less common for the adoptee to be found. Like when I set about writing *Ithaka*, as anyone who is trying to write a book proposal does, they try to identify the conversation that's already happening out there, and then they also try to identify what's new and different about my story, what, what fresh thing am I bringing to that conversation. And one big thing was that adoptees are usually the ones who search.

And, and you're right that I also reached a place of gratitude that they...it was easy for me with 20/20 hindsight to say, "I wish I'd searched and found," because I knew that I would have been welcomed with open arms, you know? I knew that they wanted to know me. So, it would have gone very well if I had done that? But, of course, if I had actually done it before they contacted me, I would have had no idea, and I could have hit a lot of roadblocks. There are people, especially in that era, where you don't find. You just stymied by bureaucracy and secrecy, or you do find and, and like your story, which is heartbreaking, you know, the birth mother—and it is a



minority of birth mothers, I know from my research—didn't want to be found. And that's her right, but when, when the two sides are at odds that much, it's heartbreaking either way.

I mean, my birth father had a hard time with me slowing things down, and I tried to be compassionate about it, but I also tried to take care of myself. And 30 years later, I'm sometimes amazed at my 20-something self, just sort of knowing what I needed emotionally, especially in the face of his persistence, you know? I'm like a lot of adoptees, like a good adoptee and a people pleaser to an extent, and I was like, I had a real healthy boundary, and I tried to do it in a way that wasn't hurtful.

But it's interesting. I don't read my reviews very much, but my reviews on Amazon, I'd say the most nuanced responses are the ones that say, "These are all human beings, they're, they're flawed, they're likable, they're, they're compassionate. They have different wants and needs that sometimes are in conflict." And then there are others who see it more black and white and not as gray as it actually was, who either think that I was in the right and my birth parents were invasive and insensitive, which is not true, or total 180, that I was so...lots of words are used about how hurtful I was, and I had these loving, caring people who just wanted to know me, and how dare I, slow it down or put my hand up and, and say, "Wait a minute," or put up any boundary. Like, I'm, you know, I'm, I'm so ungrateful, etc., etc.

So, I thought I'd told the story fairly, that there could be such disparate responses, and they were so sure that they were right. And I, I wonder, I was in a support group or two, and there were adoptees who were very much grappling with their adoption in a way that I never did, and maybe hit a dead end with a birth mother who didn't want to be found. And they looked to me with a lot of jealousy and resentment, like, "What are you complaining about?" And I get it. But—I'm sorry I'm sort of going off on a tangent, but it's important. Some responses are, "You know, how could she have been so ungrateful when she had not one but two sets of parents who loved her?" And I thought that's a fascinating observation, because why is two better? It's more complicated. Just 'cause it's more people, I think that it's, yes, I'm lucky, and I got to that place of gratitude for sure, but why is not one but two better? Everything about that is more complicated, you know?

**Lori Holden:** Absolutely. I read those reviews, and I was like, this is another circumstance in which what the general public "knows" about adoption, which makes it harder for those of us who do live in adoption to live in the complexity of adoption. Because it seems so simple from the outside. You get both of your sets of parents. Yay! It's going to be all good. All good or all bad is kind of where people come from if they're not in the complexity of it.

I often say that adoption creates a split in a person between their biology and their biography, and that openness is one way to help bring that split back together for an adoptee. And that since adoptive parents are the leaders in the relationships, we're tasked with making the conditions for that healing of that split to happen. In the three years that it took you to be ready to meet your birth parents, one of the things that you struggled with was your loyalties to your dad and your beloved Kathy (after the loss of your adoptive mom), the loyalty between them



and your birth parents. Could you talk about what you went through to heal that chasm in those three years and maybe in the intervening 30 years?

**Sarah Saffian:** Yeah, it's a, it's a great question. I was in the closed adoption era as, as most adoptees were at that time, all that it was through Louise Wise, made famous by *Three Identical Strangers*, those triplets who were in that study where they observed identical multiples separately to compare nature and nurture. I have a friend who was in that study. I would have been in that study if I'd been a multiple, because I was of that era.

Anyway, it was a Jewish adoption agency, and so all that my birth mother knew about my adoptive parents and vice versa was that they were Jewish. That's it. That was all the information there was, and in terms of loyalties, I think that's a big issue for adoptees. It is aggravated by the closed adoption into openness. I think you're right, because I'm old enough where some adoptees still weren't told that they were adopted. And, again, it was a Jewish adoption agency. I'm very ethnically similar to my adoptive father as well as my birth parents and my adoptive parents. My birth parents were younger, but they came from the same ethnic background because there's still that idea of matching so if you don't want to tell, or even if you do tell, you can feel like you belong, and you don't look dissimilar.

It's so different from now with international and transracial adoption, and domestically. And that's not even a new thing. But at the time, that was a priority. So, going from that, where you don't know anything about each other, you don't know anything about the birth family, you can kind of act as if there was no first chapter of this book. Like, this is where it started, Sarah Saffian, even though you were three months old, we don't need to really think too much about what happened before that.

So, to go from that to a phone call and then now what? How do I integrate these people into my life? It was very much, this goes along with that sense of healing which is coming to see them as additional, not substitutional. So in addition to the loyalty issues to my father, especially, was a sense of...my rational mind knew that it was not a thing, but there was a sense of "this new family will somehow undermine or take away the family I've always known, and therefore the identity—I had a birth name, a different name—a split identity connected with the two families. That sense that it would take away something from my family, my identity, my reality that I'd always known. How is it possible to integrate them?

And so it was mainly a matter of time and getting used to the idea of them existing as particular people, and that is fantasies or abstract notions of "I guess I have birth parents out there somewhere"...and also definitely talking with my parents about it. And so after the phone call, I went to work. I didn't know what to do. I was sort of on autopilot after the first phone call with my birth mother. I sat there looking at the articles on my desk and I just couldn't concentrate. So, I called my dad and I told him what happened and he said, "Come over." And that helped and I did feel the loyalty thing and I definitely wanted to take care of his feelings, but I really needed to go back to the house where I'd lived since I was 13 and sit at the kitchen table with him and talk about this with him. And that helped me feel grounded like, "Oh, he's not going anywhere. He's



my dad." Like, here he is. Here we are as we've always been. We've been through a lot. Like you said, my adopted mother died when I was in first grade. Like he's here. He's not going anywhere.

Similarly, three years later after my reunion, I felt people talk about that sense of wholeness when you have a reunion. And I think that takes time because first it opens everything up. So, I felt less whole for this three-year period, a lot of it, you know, but the reunion happened and then the night after I came back, I stayed at my parents' house and that felt, I mean to use the word closure for a second, it felt a little bit like again I can return to the home that I am familiar with still. This is not taking away actually. I can integrate, you know. So yeah, I thought a lot about my own feelings of integration and loyalty to the family I'd always known for my own sake as well.

And one last thing I'll say which is not in the book because it happened after in terms of loyalty to my father and and again also to myself. When I got married in 2004, I did not have my birth family there and I had a lot of talks with my birth mother about it. They had not met and it just felt super intense for everyone including me, the bride where I wanted to be focusing on something else. So it was not excluding rejecting it just wasn't our reality, like they hadn't integrated. I was still very much split in a way. Now various configurations have met but at that point nobody in my birth family or my adoptive family had met yet. I was the one going here and going there. So, even if they'd met one or two times before the wedding, it still felt intense, including for them. Like that fishbowl thing of, "oh, those are the birth parents. Oh, I read Ithaka and oh, there they are." And that sounds horrible for them.

And I definitely thought about my father the most. You know, he's my parent. And so for all of our sakes, including my birth parents, we made the decision together not to have them there. And it was the right decision. And my birth mother admitted she felt a tiny bit relieved. So that was very generous of her. But like you said, there's that fantasy of oh, and everyone will walk you down the aisle and you know, we'll all hold hands and that's not always how it goes. But that's okay. You know, that's okay.

**Lori Holden:** That would be a lot to hold on a day. You're already holding a lot, right? You came to the answer that worked for everybody and you had clear communication. So, what else is there?

I also love that you brought up the concept of Adoption Math because I think the way we practiced it in the 20th century was subtraction, substitution, division. And what adoptees need from us, I've come to understand, is addition, multiplication, expansion. And I think we're starting to catch on. It's slow. Everybody hasn't gotten a memo yet. But that's what I consider what openness is, this creating space for inclusion when inclusion makes sense. It doesn't mean no boundaries. It just means being open to being open. A couple questions about right. Oh, I'm sorry. Did you want to say something about that?



**Sarah Saffian:** So that's great. That was a great way to put it. Adoption Math. I love that. That's exactly right.

**Lori Holden:** I just wish we could all talk about that. That's one of the reasons why I keep writing. I want to talk a little bit about writing, speaking of that.

Clearly you were always a journaler, who became a journalist. I was also thankful that your birth parents seem to be people who were so effective in processing their thoughts, clarifying their thoughts, putting their thoughts on paper to share with you. That made me think in the '90s, this was pre-internet, pre-email (that probably email was starting, but you guys were not doing email). Have you ever stopped to think how different that three-year period would have been different if you weren't writing letters? If you didn't have that in between time to process what they said, to ponder what you wanted to say, to have patience for the next letter to come after you sent yours. What was what was just that pre-internet time like for this process this *Ithaka* journey you all went through?

**Sarah Saffian:** Yeah, it was such a gift to slow it down and have that pace, and sometimes I say this in *Ithaka* because the letters are sort of skeletal. They're like a backbone for the narrative. It's maybe 20% of the book. It's not an epistolary memoir, per se, but I feel like that kind of takes you through the linear three-year period and then I weave in childhood memories and relevant experiences at the time and that kind of thing. But it's interesting because some people have said to me "if I had tried to write letters with my birth parents the relationship would have died on the vine because we're not writers and we don't communicate that way."

And I wrote this memoir long before I became a therapist. The author was not an expert in any capacity except of my own experience. So when I was promoting *Ithaka* back in 1999 I was like, all I know is my experience, and if it resonates with other people that's great. I am absolutely not saying there is one right way to go about this, and yes thank God it worked for them. They really did express themselves so beautifully on the page and they were able to slow down and just articulate. It really was a conversation, but it was a slower conversation, which is what I needed, and I felt like it was what we all needed.

But it wouldn't be for everybody, and that's okay. But this worked for us. And in terms of it being pre-internet, I think of email as letter writing without the paper. So, I think that that might have felt similar. It just would have been digital. I did write it on a computer and print it out. I didn't handwrite my letters. But uh I could have waited to open an email just like sometimes I'd get a big thick envelope from my birth father for example, and I sometimes wouldn't open the letter that day. So, not only wait to respond, but sometimes I was like, I'm not in the mood to take this in right now. and I could wait and I could open it on Saturday and I could take my time to respond.

And I think I mentioned this in *Ithaka* that over the three years I noticed at some point in the third year that the frequency of our exchanges increased. I needed less time to respond as the



relationship progressed, which I thought was interesting. It was way fewer exchanges that first year and then it increased in frequency, which is interesting.

It's funny like some people say, "Oh gosh, you know, people are finding each other on social media." Like, "Oh, what if you got a message from your birth mother on Facebook or Instagram?" And I'm like, "I got a phone call." Like, that's harder. I get it. You can be stalked online, but I had to talk to a live human being. What, am I going to hang up the phone and say, "Oh, call back and leave a message." There was no screening. There was no caller ID. It was a landline plugged into the wall. I didn't know who it was. It rings and you answer it. That's what we used to do. We didn't know who was on the other end. So, I think that that is more surprising than seeing a message from someone and you're still receiving it in privacy. You're not interacting with the person yet. You're taking it in and then you decide what to do. So, I actually don't think that's more invasive or immediate at all.

**Lori Holden:** That's a really good point. No caller ID. You answer the phone and you figure out who's calling. I had forgotten that piece too from living in the 90s.

**Sarah Saffian:** Well, like I said, I thought it was an editor. I was like, that's what I was ready for. Like, oh yeah, maybe I'll be free next week to work at your magazine. No, it was my birth mother. What? She was like, live. So, I had to respond. So, it's interesting. There's immediacy in different forms, analog forms, too.

**Lori Holden:** I have to say that in reading the letters from each of your birth parents—they wrote to you separately—I really came to adore them because of their coherence. They were themselves. They were not hiding anything. There was so much clarity with you knowing when you could open up a letter with them knowing what to say and when to say to you, even if it was hard. And I was also loving your dad and Kathy for just being so solid and there for you. So there's no bad guys in this journey at all.

**Sarah Saffian:** Right. Thank you.

## Writing

**Lori Holden:** It's an inner journey, right? There's no bad guys.

This brings me to my next question about writing. Writing a memoir is tricky because while you're telling your story, you're telling other people's stories. In this case, both sets of parents, and you have three siblings by adoption and three siblings by your birth family.

**Sarah Saffian:** Two two siblings by adoption.

**Lori Holden:** Okay. Yeah. So, how do you walk that line between telling your truth and getting into other people's truths?



**Sarah Saffian:** I also teach memoir, and I always advise my students that memoir is meant to be subjective and that there's room for multiple truths. That does not mean fabrication. Since I was a journalist first, I take that very seriously. But it is a matter of how things landed with you.

For example, in the book I point out differences in memory because I thought it was interesting. I remember the conversation I had with my father when he told me I was adopted. I remember it happening in our apartment where we lived til I was 13, I remember being in the living room on a weekend; it had that feeling. I had the feeling it happened after my adoptive mother died, so I put myself at maybe 7ish, not long after that, because I felt young.

I have all these memories of that conversation. Years later, whether it was when I was writing *Ithaka* or maybe before then when I'd asked my father about it, he didn't remember the conversation. He said, "Oh, you always knew." It was, of course, an important memory for me. I mentioned that discrepancy in *Ithaka* that was interesting to me. For whatever reason, he doesn't remember the conversation. Maybe emotionally, again, as generous and solid, to use your word, as he was, I've written essays about him since. Of all my parents, he feels the most like my parent, even though we don't share biology. In so many ways, we're the closest.

He liked the closed adoption world and he would prefer that I was just his. And that's how he treated me, which is loving and great and unconditional, and I did feel like I fully belonged and was related to him. This is not a criticism of him, but, leaving out an important part. I think that the multiple truths is not a drawback. It can strengthen a narrative.

Oh, and this is important. In terms of including excerpts from the letters, I was including their voice. And I really appreciate the kind words you're saying about the way they expressed themselves. And every time I received a letter, even if it was intense, I felt grateful for that, that they were so clear, that they were so generous and so open. They really wanted to share with me and I didn't feel like we were missing anything by putting it on the page. In fact, maybe people were being more thoughtful and comprehensive in the way they were communicating.

So, having them in their own voices gives a bit of their perspective and I'll give you a quick process note which is, and not all memoirs do this but it felt again right to me. I wrote the book I was gonna write and didn't really share it—everyone in my family knew about it. First of all, I had to ask them how they felt about my writing it in the first place. Everyone gave me their blessing or said they felt comfortable. And then once it was done and it was the book I wanted it to be, but there was also still time to make changes. I gave each parent a copy of the manuscript and I gave them two weeks, three weeks, whatever it was to read it, not read it, to talk to me about it. And I said, "I can't guarantee I'll make any change you request, but I can guarantee that I will hear you and we'll talk about it."

So, that was my least favorite part of the process because I was afraid of hurting people's feelings or hoping I got it right. The person who had the most to say was my birth father by far. and we had some long phone conversations about it and he made an excellent point and I always bring this up when I teach memoir. He said, "You know, I'm fine with your negative



reactions to me sometimes. Obviously, that's how you felt. But sometimes I feel like you excerpt the letters in a way that takes me out of context. Like you just excerpt the intense part pushing to meet sooner than you're ready, when I wrote to you about all kinds of things in that letter.”

And I thought that was a great point. So I realized that if I'm not going to produce all the letters in total. It just would have taken up way too much space. But I might even summarize and point out it's so much more interesting. Like my birthfather sent me this 10-page letter and he told me all about the kids' sports and activities and they went on this trip and this thing and that thing just about their lives...but what I homed in on was the last paragraph where he pushes me to meet sooner than I'm ready. So, it shows something about me, the protagonist, that that was what I was focused on. But it also gives you context about...he was writing a letter about all kinds of things. And yes, that paragraph's in there, but it's not all he said. So, it actually helped him feel more comfortable and improved the integrity of the narrative. It accomplished both. So, those are not always at odds, which I love.

**Lori Holden:** I just love how it came out that even though there was no bad guy and things went as well as it could— people are self-aware, people are focused on the needs of the adoptee, people are clear in their intent, communication is good. And even though all of those ingredients are there, it's still hard. It's still complex. And that's what adoption is.

## Post-Ithaka

**Lori Holden:** And after writing this at some point, you became a therapist maybe because of all of that. Can you tell us a little bit about that journey becoming a therapist and who you work with? And you've kind of touched on that.

**Sarah Saffian:** Yeah, it's it's interesting. Back up to after when 9/11 happened I was working in entertainment journalism. I wrote for magazines and I covered the arts. Like a lot of people after 9/11 kind of grappling with how am I contributing to the greater good exactly? I enjoyed my job but it didn't feel as meaningful and as contributing as it could. So I applied to social work school then, and then I decided I was too old to switch careers.

10 years later, I still had that itch and I thought, who cares how old I am? Life experience is just going to make me a better therapist anyway. So I went back to grad school in my early 40s and I finished my MSW when I was 45. It's interesting...I knew that memoir would be relevant to being a psychotherapist, helping people tell their stories. And I do use writing, sometimes memoir prompts in therapy.

I've talked to groups of therapists about this and I've talked to groups of writers about this. The difference between writing for ourselves and writing for others because it's important to know that a memoir workshop is not a support group and since I do both, I know the difference and there is a thin line but it's very important.



But I do integrate, in the sense of if it's useful for a particular client, encouraging them through memoir prompts to self-reflect and gain insights through this frame.

I was also interested that journalism has been more relevant than I thought because journalism also...you're trying to make someone comfortable so that they will talk about themselves. That's what a therapist does too, just for a different goal, not to write about them, but to help them lead more fulfilling lives or grapple with their issues. But when I'm in the room in a session with a client, I always say that I'm a nicer therapist than memoir teacher. I try to be nice all the time, but do you know what I mean?

I have a memoir workshop that's literally called Get Over Yourself. Like I'm not going to say that to a therapy client! But it's that sense of like profound and meaningful to me does not automatically translate to profound and meaningful to my reader if I'm in a craft workshop trying to write it for other people. If I'm writing just for myself in my journal or my therapist gives me a prompt, I am the audience. That's it. It's all about if I care, that's enough.

So that's the big distinction. So yeah. I started in adoption and then that's expanded to infertility as I said and now it's more general. I do grief work and I work with, I mean everyone does depression and anxiety, but I work with people who have more OCD tendencies, definitely relationship issues, attachment issues. So even if it's not someone in the constellation like attachment, control, grief work, like a lot of adoption themes, even if I'm not working with an adoptee and adoptive parent specifically. So it's interesting how the areas I'm interested in sort of spring from that perhaps.

**Lori Holden:** Do you do your work by telehealth too or is it all in person in New York City?

**Sarah Saffian:** I do both. I'm hybrid since the pandemic. So I have a few days virtual and then a few days in the office in Manhattan. And they're both great. I prefer in person. I think it's a very different experience for the client especially in terms of transition time. They're not going from a work meeting to therapy 5 seconds later.

And also they have said there's something very powerful about being in a physical space that's neutral. It's my office. That's all it is. It's not their kitchen table or their bed and they're not being interrupted by a partner or a child or an animal. Even if they're not being interrupted, just the sense of privacy or the sense of other things happen in this space. It's almost like this physical like I can leave this at Sarah's office I think is very helpful to them and and also they have the time to think about what they want to talk about on their way to my office and then after the session on their way to the next thing they can process what we went over instead of that immediacy.

But honestly it's good to have the convenience too. I'm glad we have both.



**Lori Holden:** So just like the email and the caller ID and all the technology, there are gifts and there are non-gifts.

**Sarah Saffian:** We're trying to use it for good. Yeah, exactly.

**Lori Holden:** Well, Sarah, thank you so much for answering all my questions. I just want to reiterate that I thought *Ithaka* was so beautifully written and it so resonated for me because of the insights it offered about an adoptee shifting from this Either/Or mindset from the closed era to a Both/And heartset of this more open era. It fits so well with what I feel to be true in my bones about what we all in adoption need.

Do you have any closing words you'd like to end with?

**Sarah Saffian:** First of all, I love the language that you use to talk about this. And I really appreciate your kind words and your interest in this. It's interesting to talk about all these years later, too. And just how it continues to resonate and it's an ongoing improvisation, too.

I'm still in contact with my... still have relationships with my birth relatives, very much. And it's just interesting how it is that sense of aperture and the journey. And that's good and that's okay and it's exciting and we continue to evolve together and figure it out. And that's a good model for anyone in the adoption constellation or in general, I would hope.

**Lori Holden:** What a beautiful way to close our conversation with the word "aperture." Thank you so much, Sarah.

**Sarah Saffian:** Thank you. Oh, thank you, Lori.

## Show Notes

- [Sarah Saffian's website](#)
- [Collection of Sarah Saffian's writings](#)
- [Ithaka](#) on Bookshop.org
- [The Girls Who Went Away](#) by Ann Fessler
- ["My Birth Mother Rejected Me by Letter"](#)
- [Three Identical Strangers](#) documentary
- Louise Wise Agency: [Defending the Indefensible](#)
- [Gabrielle Glaser](#) of *American Baby*

