

Knowing Your Father: DNA and Identity



“It is a wise child who knows its own father.”

—Homer, *The Odyssey*

Several women I know were stunned in later life by the discovery that the man they had long considered to be their father was not the man whose sperm actually fertilized their mother’s egg. Their pasts—all that they had taken for granted about their personal histories—suffered an upheaval, lifelong assumptions thrown into chaos, with a bombardment of new facts to explore and shape. Memories, experiences, assumptions became confused shards, any attempts to piece them together undermined by large chasms of ignorance.

In one case, the woman discovered through a long-withheld admission that her origin was the result of her mother’s one-night stand with a stranger. In another involving a close friend, the discovery emerged after weeks of pondering the results of an ancestry.com DNA analysis. My friend’s brother, two years younger, had mailed his sample first, just curious. His report came back that he was 43% Jewish and 50% Polish.

Perplexed, my friend agreed to be tested too, with the result of very similar percentages. She and her brother had always believed their families on both sides to be Roman Catholics who had originally emigrated from Poland. How could this be an accurate finding? The results also linked them to a young man in California. Through online detective work that included census data and a newspaper archive, she discovered that her biological father was the Jewish insurance salesman who had visited frequently to collect payment. The fact that he fathered two children clearly meant a long-term affair with

her mother, not a drunken interlude. Eventually, my friend learned his name and saw a photograph of him. The emotional result was even more confusion and upset.

Heritage Erased: Dani Shapiro

The writer Dani Shapiro, in her mid-fifties, experienced a similar shock, but with an opposite ethnic surprise. All her life she had considered herself to be the daughter of a man called Paul Shapiro and a member of a prominent Orthodox Jewish family whose lineage went back for many generations on her father's side. In fact, according to DNA analysis, she was only half Jewish, the people she had considered extended family for more than fifty years now questionable in their relationship, the culture that had immersed her only partly hers. Blonde, pale, and blue-eyed, she was used to being told, you don't look Jewish, and now she knew why. Rather from emigrating from an Eastern European shtetl, her paternal ancestors had arrived in North America around the time of the Mayflower.

When Shapiro finally accepted the DNA evidence, she was devastated. She describes the reaction in her book *Inheritance*:

I woke up one morning and life was as I had always known it to be. There were certain things I thought I could count on. I looked at my hand, for example, and I knew it was my hand. My foot was my foot. My face, my face. My history, my history. After all, it's impossible to know the future, but we can be reasonably sure about the past. By the time I went to bed that night, my entire history—the life I had lived—had crumbled beneath me, like the buried ruins of an ancient forgotten city.

Before her son's bar mitzvah, she had taken care to instill to him his heritage: "It felt urgently important to me, to make Jacob aware of his ancestral lineage, the patch of earth from

which he sprang, the source of a spirit passed down, a connection." Yet now she had lost a fundamental answer to the question, "Who am I?" Who was she and where did she belong?

She writes: "Philosophers, who love nothing more than to argue with one another, do seem to agree that a continued, uninterrupted sense of self, 'the indivisible thing which I call myself,' is necessarily implied in a consciousness of our own identity."

Existential Uprooting

For good or ill, even when tensions and alienations are deep, most people need to live with the conviction of being a member of an extended family and, in particular, being the child of a certain mom and a certain dad. That's where they came from, with all the biological, cultural, and historical baggage they carry through our lives. Even if they rebel against that heritage, they have a clear center, a distinct point of departure.

But what if those essential assumptions are suddenly wiped out after a spit into a test tube or a discovered document or an uttered revelation?

From an existentialist perspective—the assumption that we are thrown into Being—we seek the foundation of an identity, something with which to authenticate ourselves—roots. That term can be taken in its cultural connotation as well as its botanical metaphor—tentacles that position us in a firm ground. Dani Shapiro and the others were uprooted by a categorical discovery. After the shock, they were compelled to plant themselves into fresh soil and endure the bewilderment of a new cultural environment.

Beyond the personal, the existential dilemma broadens into a theological dimension. The philosopher-critic Stanley Cavell explores these implications in the introduction of his study, *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare*. A follower

of Cartesian skepticism, he interprets those plays from that perspective, explaining, “. . . what I have called the truth of skepticism, that the human habitation of the world is not assured in what philosophy calls knowledge.”

Therefore, if knowledge—what we consider to be solidly factual—is undermined, we lose assurance of our place in the world, our existence. If the knowledge of our father is discredited, our lives—to use Shapiro’s word—“crumble” through the loss of connection to something substantial outside ourselves. Cavell puts it this way:

A metaphysically desperate degree of private bonding, of the wish to become undispossessable, would seem to be an effort to overcome the sense of the individual human being not only as now doubtful in his possessions, as though unconvinced that anything really belongs to him, but doubtful at the same time whether there is any place to which he really belongs.

We don’t know where we belong and have to start from scratch to discover something to hold onto and affirm our identity.

Parental Divinity

Much more often than not, when we are young children, reaching the state of cogency, we consider our parents to be god-like figures who know and control, beings who will nurture and guide us, whom we can turn to for comfort when in distress. If not exactly worship, we regard parents with a kind of reverence. Even when we come to know their limitations, flaws, and failures, for most of us vestiges of that early-stage relationship linger at our core.

Jean Piaget, in *Child’s Conception of the World*, posits that “The child in extreme youth is driven to endow its parents with all of those attributes which theological doctrines assign to their divinities—sanctity, supreme power, omniscience, eternity, and even ubiquity.”

Cavell considers our notions of God as an antidote to skepticism, a basis of a kind of certainty that allows us to feel at home in the universe: "In Cartesian epistemology God assures the general matching of the world with human ideas of it by preserving it, its matching and its existence; in Lockean society God assures our general human claims to possession and dominion of the world by having given it to us." This notion of a divinity who created a world that embraces human needs offers great comfort. Disbelief threatens psychic upheaval.

That's why emerging doubts about parental powers can undermine the child's entire existence. Piaget cites his colleague Pierre Bovet's quotation of Edmund Gosse's reaction when Gosse first heard his father say something he knew was not true:

Here was the appalling discovery, never suspected before, that my Father was not as God, and did not know everything. The shock was not caused by any suspicion that he was not telling the truth but by the awful proof that he was not as I had supposed omniscient.

As a result, the loss of God or the certainty of God is a source of great doubt about our place in the world and our connection with everything that is outside us. Cavell writes:

But Descartes's very clarity about the necessity of God's assurance in establishing a rough adequation or collaboration between our everyday judgments and the world (however the matter may stand in natural science) means that if assurance in God will be shaken, the ground of the everyday is thereby shaken.

If Gosse considers his father's flaw an appalling discovery, how much worse to learn that the man you had always considered to be your father was, in fact, not the man who had given you life and a firm place in the scheme of things?

Even if Shapiro did not consider her father a deity, she

enjoyed years of devotion to him and to his memory after he was killed in a car crash. When a DNA test shattered her assurance in his paternity, her everyday crumbled. Cavell reached such a conclusion about the vulnerability of the everyday through a philosophy of skepticism, Shapiro—like my friend—through a personal crisis that obliterated long-believed knowledge.

Discovering the Biological Father

My friend knows little more of her deceased biological father than a name, a photograph, and some few details of his life and work. She still has not come to terms with her origins. Fortunately for Shapiro she was able to know and meet the man who had donated his sperm as a young medical student, now a retired physician she calls Ben Walden. They communicated and interacted personally, coming to like one another, Shapiro even befriending his daughter.

Shapiro, in her search, enjoyed many advantages the vast majority of people lack. She is a prominent writer, married to a successful journalist and filmmaker with exceptional research skills, connected to many people who can offer information and strategies, in possession of the credentials that allow her to gain access to physicians and theologians. She is successful and appealing. Privileged. Ben Walden and others in his family read several of her books. Clearly, she is a daughter any man could be proud of.

Yet her many attributes, as much as they helped Shapiro cope, did not shield her from the traumas of her origins. They did not answer the existential question of, Who am I? Really?

Never Knowing the Biological Father

Literally knowing her biological father makes Shapiro unique in comparison to the thousands of humans conceived through artificial insemination unlikely to ever know. Many, however, are trying. Today breaking anonymity and revealing the

identify of sperm donors has become a complex legal, ethical, and medical issue, exacerbated by the emergence of DNA testing and the resistance of donors and sperm banks.

But beyond those aware of the mystery of their biological origins, there may be many thousands more who will never know the man they assume to be their father is not the man who engendered them.

Steve Olsen, whose article titled "Who's Your Daddy?" that appeared in *The Atlantic*, suggests, "Widespread genetic testing could reveal many uncomfortable details about what went on in our parents' and grandparents' bedrooms."

Speculation on how many people don't know their real father varies. Olsen writes, "In graduate school, genetics students typically are taught that 5 to 15 percent of the men on birth certificates are not the biological fathers of their children." Russ Kirk, in a 2011 posting, cites biologist Robin Barker, who reports in his book *Sperm Ward: The Science of Sex* that the percentage of surprise fathers ranges according to geography and economic status: "Actual figures range from 1 percent in high-status areas of the United States and Switzerland, to 5 to 6 percent for moderate-status males in the United States and Great Britain, to 10 to 30 percent for lower-status males in the United States, Great Britain and France."

Embracing Uncertainty

While fortunate to be aware of both her social and biological fathers, Shapiro still struggled with questions of identity. Ultimately, she turns to the philosophical as an antidote to the psychological, ironically embracing a version of Cavell's skepticism as the best solution to her dilemma.

She tells of receiving in an email from her biological half sister a passage from the work of Pema Chödrön, a Buddhist teacher and writer. "To be fully alive, fully human, and

completely awake is to be continually thrown out of the nest. To live fully is to be always in no-man's-land." These words come as yet another revelation, an answer that makes her particular dilemma just one extreme manifestation of the general human condition.

I had felt every day since the previous June that I now lived—exiled, forever wandering—in no-man's-land. But the truth was that this had always been the case. Any thought of solid ground was nothing more than an illusion—not only for me but for all of us. Those words: Completely awake. Live fully, sent to me by the half sister I had never known. I had strived for those states of being all my life, while a part of me slumbered. We will have been like dreamers. Now there would be no more slumber. You will be set free.

Days later, recalling Keats' notion of negative capability and the embracing of uncertainty, she experiences a further insight. "In this direction lay freedom, and, paradoxically, self-knowledge. By my being willing not to know thoroughly who I am and where I come from, the rigid structures surrounding my identity might begin to give way, leaving behind a sense of openness and possibility."

Many of the decisions people must constantly make through the days of their existence disturb the comfort of the nest, forcing them to live in a no-man's-land of ephemeral existence while they crave the certainty of an essence.

Most of those distraught over the uncertainties of their origin, however, lack Shapiro's intellectual and emotional resources. They are desperate to know their fathers and all the comforting certainties they want to believe that entails. My friend, while not as accepting of her circumstances as Shapiro, has—I believe—overcome the initial shock of the revelation. Possessing her own creative intelligence, after seeking more information about her biological ancestry, she has moved on, recognizing that she

has become the person she is regardless of the sperm that engendered her. Yet, despite that degree of certainty, the deception gnaws.

Sources

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Writing about Our Worst Experiences: Reshaping Memories



Max Ernst's *The Stolen Mirror* (1941)

As many artists have noted, memory underpins imagination. Creating new artistic and intellectual works depends critically on the reshaping of what has gone before.

—Charles Fernyhough. *Pieces of Light*

At our recent MFA residency, I gave a workshop on writing about your worst experience, using a number of examples to

illustrate how writers confront personal crises like madness, divorce, stillbirth, and the death of an adult child. To emphasize the role of craft in the nature of the telling, I chose two examples for each subject to illustrate possible approaches. The point I hoped to make was that there is no “natural” way to write about a traumatic event, no inevitable way of retelling. Choices and strategies can’t be avoided. Memory is only a starting point, and often not reliable. What results is, in effect, an inevitable reshaping that involves re-imagining and re-detailing.

My choices for stillbirth were passages from two memoirs, Elizabeth McCracken’s *An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination* and Ariel Levy’s *The Rules Do Not Apply*. Although McCracken’s embryo had been declared dead, she still had to go through a delivery, in her retelling focusing on what other women had told her about stillbirth and on her concern that she might upset the pregnant woman outside in a waiting room. She doesn’t address her own feelings, at least not directly. Levy, on the other hand, uses a very different strategy. Hers was not a literal stillbirth. The premature baby lived briefly outside the womb. Her telling focuses on precise observation of the visual details of the child in her hands and, to a lesser degree, on her uncertainties about logistics, such as what to do about the umbilical cord. Contrasting approaches to the same harrowing experience, both avoiding explicit rendering of their emotions.

My choice of the worst experience topic was not merely academic, which is why I used examples about madness. Just a few weeks before, *Broad Street* magazine had published my essay “Commitment,” about the trials of coping with the extreme psychosis of my first wife, Judy. Living through the experience had been a hell. But writing and revising an essay about it had been a process of seeking an opening tactic, choosing and arranging incidents as best I could recall, finding words and images—essentially absorption into the

strategies of a creative process, not unlike writing a completely fabricated short story.

Vivian Gornik, in *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*, distinguishes the events that are the starting point for the act of writing from the representation that results:

Every work of literature has both a situation and a story. The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say.

But while fiction allows the writer's persona to exist in the background, memoir places the writer himself or herself in the foreground. Gornik calls it an "unsurrogated" persona and explains the demands on a writer of revelatory nonfiction: "The unsurrogated narrator has the monumental task of transforming low-level self-interest into the kind of detached empathy required of a piece of writing that is to be of value to the disinterested reader."

The Dilemma of Memoir

That certainly was my dilemma in writing "Commitment." How would I provide vivid descriptions to convey what I remembered experiencing and turn them into meaningful insights? Ironically, though I was hoping to give the reader an emotional frisson, I—while composing—was compartmentalizing, concentrating on finding effective words rather than reliving the decades-old agonies. Yet reading the magazine's proof months after completing the essay turned out to be an emotional experience, even though the events had taken place some forty years ago, and I was long remarried. But at this point I was just a reader, not the author.

This wasn't the first essay I had written about Judy; the earlier, called "Fade Far Away," was based on the intense

presence of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night* in our lives. The relationship and the title choice of another phrase from Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" had become the basis of my deliberate essay design. (When that work was selected as a "notable" in *Best American Essays*, I felt an unease about exploiting pain for praise.) With "Commitment," a title I had long been contemplating before the actual writing, I worked with the ironic dichotomy of commitment to marriage vows and commitment to a mental institution. It became the basis of my strategy.

Living with the nightmare of Judy's madness had been, by far, the worst experience of my life. Yet, for me, writing about it was inevitable, just as many other writers find themselves drawn to creating poems, essays, stories, and novels about their most distressing times. An old saw among writers is, everything is material. Even, or perhaps especially, trauma. While non-writers often can't stop replaying the worst in their brains, writers use the page to recreate the awful, much like picking at a scab. Some have to do it immediately, while it's still raw, others—like me—decades later or on several occasions over the years.

During our MFA residency, for example, one colleague read the opening section of a book about her husband's dying at age forty. Another read the beginning of a memoir about being harassed by her graduate school mentor, and her anger at university officials who, unable to deny her evidence, badgered her into silence about it.

Other colleagues in the audience had published essays about topics such as their father's suicide and their own teenage indiscretions. Students I've worked with have also written about the painful deaths of spouses, about the abuse of a dead spouse's family, about post-traumatic stress from serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, about recovering from addictions. These are only the examples I'm aware of, certain many others exist.

Why Do We Do It?

Why do we dredge up emotional pain? Why do we spend so much time immersed in reliving the most terrible times of our lives, times most people strive to suppress? Why don't we just cry and scream?

Regarding screaming, I recall what I had been told about a former faculty colleague, a clinical psychologist with a private practice. He was an adherent of Arthur Janov's primal scream therapy, treating a patient who had dropped her infant from an upper story apartment window. Every visit, she came into his office and just screamed and screamed and screamed.

Although some writers may have screamed their own distress, as I once did, that's not sufficient for individuals with a commitment to finding words for emotions. Rather than screaming, we seek the language and the craft strategies to present our greatest unhappiness. The process is not simply a matter of writing as therapy, a raw verbal outpouring, even though that might be a help to non-writers desperate for immediate psychic relief. Those writing for therapy are really just pouring feelings onto paper or screen, seeking a release rather than—like the serious writer—seeking to produce a creative work. The writer knows first and foremost that he or she is seeking methods to best convey the core of the experience, and make that core resonate with a reader.

Some writers certainly have deliberately written about worst experiences with a goal of emotional consolation or even healing from a trauma. And some may be unaware that such ends lay behind their creating. Whatever the writer's goal—relief, healing, or just a crafted memoir—the writing itself cannot avoid revision, embellishing, and reorganizing the materials evoked through acts of memory. While any person who relives a worst experience is involved in a similar process, that person is almost always unaware of the shaping. Writers do it consciously and deliberately as they employ literary

techniques to turn life into art.

Remembering as a Creative Act

When we write about our worst experiences, we are, of course, accessing memory; but memory is not a reliable tool. What we retrieve from the dark nights of our souls is some recollection of emotional anguish and some sense of the events behind that anguish. Such recollection is far from an exact replication of what actually took place.

The way we remember—as the psychologist and writer Charles Fernyhough explains in his book, *Pieces of Light*—belies the common notion of retrieving a literal reproduction stored whole in some mental file cabinet. Each remembering, in fact, is a recreation from the bits and pieces stored in different areas of our brain. Remembering itself is, in essence, a creative act. Fernyhough writes:

The truth is that autobiographical memories are not possessions that you either have or do not have. They are mental constructions, created in the present moment, according to the demands of the present. ... Memory is more like a *habit*, a process of constructing something from its parts, in similar but subtly changing ways each time, whenever the occasion arises. This reconstructive nature of memory can make it unreliable.

Daniel Schacter, a Harvard psychologist, in *The Seven Sins of Memory*, explains one aspect of this unreliability by noting the impossibility of separating the actual events of the past from all that has happened in one's life since then. In effect, memory is an interaction of past happenings and ongoing inputs derived from our later happenings:

We extract key elements from our experience rather than retrieve copies of them. Sometimes, in the process of reconstructing we add on feelings, beliefs, or even knowledge we obtained after the experience. In other words, we bias our

memories of the past by attributing to them emotions or knowledge we acquired after the event.

In addition to the "intrusion" of new after-the-fact material, even the roots of the original memory are not contained as a whole in some corner of our brains. Instead, they are scattered throughout a number of different cerebral areas, requiring a reassembly that in itself introduces uncertainties. Fernyhough calls them "close collaborations between the medial temporal lobe circuits."

While Schacter addresses the "bias" that results from subsequent living, Fernyhough adds "distortion" from the workings of the brain. Fundamentally, it's impossible for anyone to recall past events with anything like photographic accuracy and reliability (excluding the rare memory savants with hyperthymesia, the ability to recall most details of their lives.) But even a photograph from our past, while compete in itself, is seen through the eyes of our present.

While I suspect that few writers who find words to relate and contemplate their worst experience are experts in the psychology or memory and the functioning of the human brain, they know instinctively that their work will only be an approximation of what "really" happened, not unlike a movie that purports to be a retelling of historical events. But while the screenwriters' fabrications are conscious choices for dramatic effect, the writer no matter how intent on avoiding falsifications cannot avoid creating something different from the actual events. Beyond matters of selection and organization, even the choice of a single word to describe an aspect of an experience brings connotations unlike those of a different word, and no "right" word exists.

Certainly, the primal-screaming mother who dropped her baby is accessing a raw, excruciating emotion. If she were forced to put what happened into language, the result would be only the shadow of a retelling, probably different each time she

constructed sentences.

How Memoir Writers Remember

The novelist Jack Smith recently interviewed several memoir writers for a 2018 article in *The Writer*, "Is the Memoir Market Oversaturated?" Two of the writers address the reorganizations and limitations of memory.

Kate Braverman, author of *Frantic Transmissions to and from Los Angeles: An Accidental Memoir*, states:

Memoirs are not acts of journalism, either. The writer selects from the monumental possibilities, strategizes, omits, truncates, and then surprisingly expands. One examines and revises, denies and exaggerates, and in that active engagement with the page, the unexpected emerges. Memoir writing is about the illusion of truth.

Peter Selgin, author of *The Inventors*, emphasizes the role of imagination:

Among the memoirist's greatest challenges is to rescue memory from imagination, and to do so with the understanding that the one can't survive without the other. The trick in writing memoir as faithfully as possible is to be aware of the role imagination plays in shaping our memories, in making them cohere into scenes.

Both writers emphasize the central role of creative choices and the awareness that what will result is not a literal replication, but rather a shaped imaginative work based upon actual events and people.

At our MFA residency, when questioned about their essays and chapters about a worst experience, the authors all noted a detachment, a compartmentalizing, as they immersed in creative strategies to get a reader to share their distress. And they knew what they were producing was a literary approximation.

Because the creation was—invariably—separate from the actual experiences, the biases and distortions of memory were givens. The inevitable choices of vocabulary, selection, and organization made while writing produce additional alterations.

A New Version of What Happened

Fernyhough goes further in distinguishing memoir from memory. As a conscious art form, memoir is much more detailed and specific, and “vividness does not guarantee authenticity.”

Writing about our worst experiences produces remade memories, which, as Fernyhough and Schacter demonstrate, is true for all remembering, but even more so for the writer aware of consciously manipulating his or her past for literary goals. In a real sense, finding words, images, and relationships results in a new imaginative version of that worst experience.

In light of Schacter’s explanation, any future remembering of that painful event will incorporate the “fabrications” of the written piece as one more influence when trying to reconstruct what has happened since the original. As hard as I tried to capture the “real experience” in my essay “Commitment,” I couldn’t avoid reshaping and, no doubt, recreating. Any of my future attempts to remember those painful long-ago events are now inseparable from the details of my reconstruction.

As much as a writer may strive to recapture the authenticity of how it was, an accurate depiction of awful events, no matter how painful, both the nature of memory and the consequences of craft choices will result in a variation of what actually happened, an echo of experience. The result is not a falsification. Beneath all literary remakings of worst experiences lies the core of something real that shook the writer’s life. When the result is successful literature, the writer has something to say that matters to readers, perhaps not discovered until the process of recreation.