

Essay

My Grandfather's Face: A Black Contemplative Educator's Discovery of Unknown Relatives through DNA

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Abstract: This narrative essay offers an exploration of the power and importance of family origin stories as a grounding aspect of collective and individual identity for Black people. The author, drawing on his experience as a Black queer contemplative scholar and college professor, gives attention to the question of whether the truth is necessary or beneficial in the creation of family narratives and what each successive generation is allowed to know. This question is explored through the story of the unintended positive and negative consequences the author experienced as a result of submitting DNA to Ancestry.com.

Keywords: pedagogy; Black family; contemplative; race; ancestry

1. The Truth Is Often Not Necessary or Beneficial

Family origin stories, and what it means to be a family that stays together across generations, has been a powerful organizing structure within our society. Individuals derive meaning and central aspects of their identity from the stories they have understood about who their families are and how they managed to survive, often in spite of obstacles and great challenges. For African American families, proud narratives about family history have been an important strategy for perseverance in the face of structural racism and other forms of oppression (Belgrave et al. 2021). Elders often fiercely guarded the truth and made intentional decisions about what the younger generations needed to know. In many cases the truth, it was determined, was neither necessary nor beneficial. When I asked my maternal grandmother what she knew about our heritage she seemed embarrassed by how little she knew, saying, “When I grew up family backgrounds were not something people talked about.”

My parents were each the product of very proud Black families that made their way to Providence, Rhode Island, in the late 19th century, and some branches of the family a hundred or more years earlier. Black people in New England (Piersen 1988) are in many ways a culturally distinct group shaped by their environment, which included large communities of newly arrived immigrants. Racism and discrimination were certainly a feature of life, and yet it manifested in different ways. My parents, for example, both went to schools fully integrated in the 1930s and 1940s, allowing for an educational experience and exposure to various forms of cultural capital that would have been possible for Black people in very few places in the country at that time. My maternal grandfather was extremely proud of the fact that my grandmother never had to work—a rare accomplishment for a Black man born in 1905. These stories of integrity, hard work, and persistence shaped my families' collective identity and by extension my identity throughout my life.

The stories that families tell about their origins and how they managed to make it in the context of the United States can often be simplified versions of the truth. Although I would say that I come from a great family and I believe that to be true, it is also true that my family, like all families, contained secrets that were deemed necessary for the balance, continuation, and wellbeing of everyone involved. What follows in this narrative is perhaps a cautionary tale of how the validity and truthfulness of closely held family



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narratives are tested by the prevalence of DNA testing from companies like Ancestry.com and 23 and Me.

2. Contemplative Pedagogy

I am a Black Queer-identified man currently working as an Associate Professor of Secondary and Higher Education at Salem State University in the Greater Boston area of Massachusetts. My teaching is heavily informed by the field of Contemplative Pedagogy (Barbezat and Bush 2014), which seeks to provide learning experiences that are transformational in the ways students are encouraged to explore their deeply held beliefs and assumptions (Benefiel and Lee 2019). With this goal in mind, I will often share stories about my lived experiences, which models for students why it is helpful for those who aspire to be educators to cultivate a rich internal life—a life that allows one to teach out of the overflow of their experiences (Oliver 2016).

The students I teach are mostly white women—undergraduate and graduate students who aspire to be teachers in K-12 schools or to work as student affairs professionals in higher education. As demographics continue to shift, I have the opportunity to engage with more students of color now than in previous years, yet our programs at present are still overwhelmingly white. Therefore, I need the students I work with to develop a level of comfort when talking about historical, current, and future issues of race in our society and how they imagine their work as educators will play a role in making the society better for everyone. Part of cultivating this sense of comfort and willingness to stay present in the midst of difficult conversations is truly unpacking what race is and what race is not. I need students to understand that when we say that race is a social construct (Ore 2019; Nieto and Bode 2018), we literally mean that these categories we have (Black, White, and Asian) are things that human beings have made up; there is no biological basis for race. This is an important distinction for future educators to grapple with in that I want them to imagine what it would mean if we did not imbue these categories with so much power. The power to determine expectations. The power to impact our ability to form relationships. The power to influence who gets access to educational opportunities and the possibility of positive life outcomes.

3. Teaching Future Teachers about Race

To bring this notion about the nuance and complexity of race home to students, I decided several years ago to take one of the DNA tests that have become readily available and less expensive in recent years. After considering all the options, I ordered a DNA kit from Ancestry.com. As an African American, I anticipated that the results would reflect the transatlantic slave trade, with most of my DNA coming from sub-Saharan Africa and the rest from Western Europe. I was less sure about whether the family lore about having Native American ancestry would prove to be true. As a child, my father encouraged me to learn about the Native American people I might have some connection to (in our case the Narraganset people of what is now Rhode Island), as long as I understood that when people looked at me they would see a Black man and not a Native American. In the years since, I often groan internally when Black friends of mine invariably get around to telling the story of how their great-grandmother was a full-blooded Cherokee with long straight black hair. The hair, in particular, was always an important part of the story, all too often pointing towards a kind of self-loathing. The notion that it is better to be part anything than to be fully Black. To be clear, I do not wish to take anything away from the people who actually do have Native American and Black ancestry and seek to celebrate all of it. It is the clinging to a story that may not be true that concerns me because of all the ways we as Black people have not been taught to love ourselves. Our Blackness does not need to be augmented or enhanced by other ethnicities. Our Blackness is enough.

When I got the DNA results there were no true surprises. Like many African Americans, about 75% of my DNA comes from West Africa in what is now Cameroon, Nigeria, Ghana, Benin, and Congo. The remaining 25% comes mostly from Scotland, Ireland, and

England. The results did not reveal any Native American ancestry and I have come to understand that there may be complicated and nuanced reasons for why it may not show up, given the tests that are available now. As I anticipated, sharing these results with students did generate a lot of rich discussion. What did it mean that as a Black man I have 25% European ancestry? Does that make me 1/4 White? What does it mean to be White? How do we define who is White and who is not? How did society attempt to grapple with these questions in the past? What does being 1/4 White mean when, according to the social construct of race that operates in our society based on phenotypes, my skin, my hair, my facial features, my build, and other aspects of my physicality communicate that I am 100% Black? How do our ideas about race shift when we fully take on the fact that many people in the United States that we call White and Black are related to each other? Our family histories are deeply intertwined. Given this essential truth, how can there be room for so much hate?

While the origins of my DNA and the ensuing rich dialogue with students were what I expected, I was not prepared for another feature of DNA testing that allows you to see the profiles of individuals (the vast majority of whom are strangers) to whom you are related. You can see your first, second, third, fourth, fifth cousins and so on. I will confess that it is shocking as a Black person to have a visual representation of how many so-called White people I am related to. I had never actually contemplated the fact that just as my ancestors who were enslaved found ways to survive and produce future generations, the people that owned my ancestors produced future generations, too, and those people were still largely concentrated in the South. Furthermore, the people who had once owned my ancestors were, in fact, my ancestors, too. Of course, I always knew this on some level, but to see names and faces was shocking in ways I cannot adequately describe. I have often wondered what the experience is like for White people who do DNA testing and discover that there are branches of the family that nobody has ever talked about or that they have Black ancestry. I have often joked that when we as African Americans talk about our ancestors, we are generally only talking about the ancestors who are Black.

Although many good things have come from what is possible now in terms of the ability to trace ancestry, there are also unintended consequences that must be considered before one decides to send their DNA to be analyzed. Indeed, people have discovered that their siblings are only half siblings, the existence of siblings they never knew they had, and that their parents are not who they thought they were. These discoveries can be devastating, and unfortunately, some families have been destroyed as a result. Our origin stories are so foundational to our own identity and self-concept that once they are shattered, it can be a very long process to put them back together again. It begs the question of whether it is worth it to risk such a shattering.

4. Discovering My Grandfather's Daughter

One day, I sat down to give attention to my DNA matches, and at first, everything seemed in order. Looking at the people listed as my first cousins, I was able to deduce that my biological parents were precisely who they were supposed to be. I also was not seeing any unknown half siblings or anything out of the ordinary. That is, until I looked a bit further and saw a photo of an elderly woman whom I will call Emma who was very closely related to me, somewhere between a first and second cousin, perhaps. What I saw instantly was that Emma, who appeared to be in her nineties, bore a very strong resemblance to my grandfather and my mother. My mother at this moment was in the process of dying as the result of a long, drawn-out battle with Lewy body dementia. I had spent many long hours studying her face as she lay unconscious in one hospital room after another. I cannot describe how intimately I came to know, in fact, had always known, the features of her face, which were also part of my grandfather's face. Deep grooves around the mouth that sharply delineate the cheeks and give them a kind of pout. Small eyes that appear almost Asian in their shape in ways I have often seen among Black people. My mother's skin was the color of light coffee with cinnamon-colored freckles and danced as she laughed.

She had a small black mole just above her mouth, perfectly positioned to function as the kind of beauty mark that models would use a pencil to draw in. The years had produced a pronounced wrinkle between her eyebrows, perhaps a result of too many years of frowning at the nonsense of co-workers and fools that she did not suffer lightly. My mother was beautiful, with features I always thought unique to her and the members of my family, and yet here were all those very same features on display in the face of Emma. Emma was eerily some 10 years older than my mother was and yet had my mother's face. It was my grandfather's face. I knew who Emma was at first sight. She was clearly my grandfather's daughter. Once I had seen it, I could not unsee it.

Investigating further, I discovered that Emma had a Facebook page where it was possible to click through photos of family members, many of whom looked like members of my family with the distinct features that came from my grandfather. Emma lived in Warwick, Rhode Island, very close to where my grandparents had lived in East Providence. I decided to send Emma a message through Facebook explaining that I had seen her profile on Ancestry.com and that we seemed to be close relatives. A few days later, I got a message from Emma's daughter, whom I will call Grace, and we arranged to talk by phone.

Grace and I had a wonderful conversation as I shared my thoughts about how we might be related. I sent Grace several photos of my mother and grandfather and she, like I, was taken aback by how strong the resemblance was. Grace sent me pictures of her mother throughout the years, which only strengthen my belief that she was my grandfather's daughter. Grace shared that she grew up believing that the man she knew as her grandfather was her mother's biological father. When my grandfather died in 1985 at the age of 80, Emma showed Grace the obituary that appeared in the *Providence Journal*. Emma told Grace that that was her real father. Grace went on to say that when my grandfather died, people were offering condolences to Emma. This was mind-blowing for me, because it meant that this secret we were uncovering was commonly known within the Black community in Rhode Island. Somehow, my grandparents had done a masterful job at keeping this information from us. They must have decided that it was a part of the story that we did not need to know. I have often wondered if they were right.

Ultimately, it was Grace who was interested in learning more about who Emma's father had been. In fact, Emma asked Grace not to go trying to dig up any information. Eventually, they reached the compromise that Grace would look and simply not share with Emma what she found out. I gather that this compromise did not hold, as Grace did show Emma the photos of my grandfather and she, like all of us, could not help but see what we all saw, too. My grandfather's face.

Grace and I eventually agreed to meet in Providence along with her husband, my husband, and one of the few cousins who was excited to learn about the existence of new family members. It was a very emotional experience meeting Grace, and we hugged for a long time. I will never forget that one of the first things she said to me was, "I can see my son in your face." The fact that we are related was undeniable to me and I felt as though somehow I was closer to my grandfather now that I was connecting with his people, who were also my people. I realized that I knew so little about my grandfather's life, and now here I was with another of his grandchildren, trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together. There still are things we do not know, but we had a great time getting together and we will get together again in the near future.

My mother sadly passed away in 2019 at the age of 82, and Emma also died the following year at the age of 90. It was so surreal to think that my mother had a sister all these years that she never knew about. I am not sure whether she would have wanted to know, or perhaps she, like Emma, would have preferred to let the past stay buried. I also wondered whether I had somehow betrayed my grandparents, who clearly never intended us to know and went to their graves secure in the notion that we would never find out. Yet here we are with this new capability they could never have imagined, and we have found out. After having had such a wonderful time meeting Grace, I wondered whether it

is important to protect the secrets of those who are dead or whether it is more important to tell the truth if it enriches the possibilities of those who are living.

To be honest, I have not come to a solid conclusion. When I went to my mother's remaining siblings with the news of Emma and Grace, photos that showed the resemblance, and the possibility of meeting a new branch of the family, at first my aunt and uncle seemed open and fascinated by the possibilities. It was only later that I found out how upsetting this revelation had been for them both. In some ways, it shattered their understanding of what their parents' lives had been about. It brought back memories of overheard conversations that only now made more sense in light of this discovery. It was unsettling to realize that so many people around them in the town they grew up in knew the truth and yet nobody ever said anything to them. Most unbearable for them was the fact that the news of Emma and Grace came just as we were all coming to terms with the fact that my mother's death was imminent. It was too much to process, and in some ways I wish I had never told them. Was this something that they really needed to know? What difference did any of it really make now? Other members of the family greeted the news with either ambivalence or anger. One cousin told me that when it comes to DNA testing, whatever I find out they do not want to know. They considered it extremely dangerous to uncover things best left hidden, citing, as I previously mentioned, the potential it can have to pull families apart.

5. Being with Things as They Are

I had a good conversation with my aunt where we were able to make sense of what had happened. She revealed that she had not wanted to express how upset she was because we had always been close and she did not want our relationship to break. I had no idea how angry with me she was for bringing this information to her. It was almost as if I were the one who had done it, rather than the one who had discovered it. What if my aunt and uncle had wanted to know? What if they had wanted to meet Emma, who was still living at that point? There was no way for me to know what their reaction would be other than to tell them and find out. This piece of information was too big to keep to myself. Wasn't it?

The first point of clarification was the fact that Emma was born before my grandparents were married, although admittedly the dates were all very close. Still, the existence of Emma did not mean that my grandfather had an affair and had somehow betrayed my grandmother. Did my grandfather have two girlfriends and ultimately choose to be with my grandmother? Did Emma's mother choose to be with someone else other than my grandfather? We will never know exactly what went down and how. Perhaps the details do not really matter at this point beyond being a point of curiosity. What we do know is that nothing can negate the 57 years that my grandparents were married. Emma's mother and indeed Emma herself both enjoyed long marriages. Emma, by all accounts, lived a long life and was a wonderful and well-loved human being. I regret that I did not get to know her, and I am happy to have learned of her existence. I will be interested in getting to know these new family members, even if other members of my family are not. I have to respect where others are coming from and their need to keep the family origin stories intact. I understand what they represent and the ways in which they are central to our identities and a kind of grounding we need to survive. The truth, as it turns out, is not always necessary or beneficial. Yet still I am fascinated and in awe of these familiar strangers I have found moving in the world wearing my grandfather's face.

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