

Family Genealogy: Our People, Our Stories  
Benefits Gained from Finding Our Roots

by Catherine J. Johnson

There are two benefits that top the list as to why so many of us want to discover our ancestors—identity and a sense of belonging. Firstly, we all need to know who we are. And it is becoming more and more difficult to figure out. The premise that we do not wholly possess knowledge of ourselves seems odd, but in the face of the external stimuli constantly bombarding us, it makes sense. Media pushes too many options on us, too many “shoulds.” We should be slim, we should be blond, we should wear this, eat that, go here, don’t go there, disguise our odours, go natural, cast that aside, believe this. A set-up rife for identity crisis.

Some of the *roles* we take on are “shoulds”—social constructions not of our direct choosing and therefore questionable when attempting to determine identity. An example is women who finished high school, got married, had children, then woke up one morning astonished that they were living a lie. Who were they really? A product of the times, of their culture, of their faith. Many situations cause us to question our identity—divorce, marriage, physical and mental illness, loss or change of career, being bullied, having children; the list is endless.

Finding ancestors may give insight into why we behave the way we do, why we have particular interests or certain feelings, attitudes or outlooks. If Great-Great Aunty Ila loved plants and knew their botanical names, maybe that explains why we excelled in a biology class and were able to sketch plant parts as naturally as we speak. If we find that our grandfather’s aunt suffered depression when she hit age forty, perhaps we will let go of the shame we feel at having the same thing happen to us—we see it is genetic and does not mean we are weak. And if Aunty Edith overcame it, or found healthy ways of coping, even better. Finding our roots can include asking living relatives what they remember about us when we were children. Sometimes we see that our behaviours, likes and dislikes, have come full circle.

Getting to know who our ancestors were can add extra meaning to our accomplishments and hobbies. For instance, if we play the fiddle and especially love Irish jigs and reels, it becomes all the sweeter if we find that Great Uncle Stewart played them as well. There is pride in following the paths of our forebears and specialness in being the one to whom the trait was passed on to. Unless of course the trait is one that we are not pleased to have, but at least then there is an explanation for it. The father of South American revolutionary Che Guevara, once said, “The first thing to note is that in my son’s veins flowed the blood of the Irish rebels” (Adolph). And

for those who believe in “memories of the ancestors,” as opposed to genetic traits, finding out about our ancestors can shed light on why we are attracted to certain landscapes, and music, and weather. Do we love grey windy days and have a fondness for sheep because Great-Great Aunty Mary tended her own flock on the Scottish moors? It can be intriguing and comforting to think so.

Secondly, we all need to feel that we belong. Somewhere. Psychologist William James felt that our whole lives are spent searching and trying to keep this feeling. On a fundamental level, human beings are communal animals, so this does make sense. When we think of being ostracized by an angry spouse who does not acknowledge us in any way for weeks at a time—no speech, no eye contact, no touch—or when we think of the “lone wolf” who has been ostracized from the pack, it is a hollow and demoralizing thing. All we want is to belong again. Finding our ancestors is a way of belonging. We discover others like us, who share parts of the same stories. Sometimes taking yourself to a place where you know your ancestors have been, either because they lived or worked there, or were buried there, will bring on strong feelings of attachment and belonging. Those people are still part of our lives—just in a different form.

We all need occasional boosts, and being able to identify with family who are no longer here is a way of doing it—they cannot judge us, and we can bring our own perspective to the bits of information we find, thereby making their stories more accessible and personal.

“Researching a family tree, sometimes going back hundreds of years, gives one a sense of rootedness, of connection with past generations. You can come to see yourself as a link in a chain that stretches into the past, but also forward into the future, which in turn may provide a feeling of strength, purpose, and identity” (Rosenbluth).

It seems most of the books on how to search for our ancestors assume we know *why* we are searching and do not address the topic. There are a lot of reasons and benefits to consider. Besides the two touched on above, there is the important aspect of aiding others with *their* own personal stories. A family who has a relative with a passion for genealogy is rich indeed. Researching our roots can “...lead to greater mutual appreciation and understanding between generations” (Rosenbluth), and it can lead to understanding of specifics and often to compassion.

We may discover domestic violence running through a branch of the family and come to a better understanding of cycles of abuse, and work toward changing them. The expression “forewarned is forearmed” applies here, just as it does with mental illness in families. If we find

that a great uncle had schizophrenia, we are then aware that it may recur, so can be alert to any symptoms appearing in our children. If mental illness is recognized and treated early, people can avoid years and often lifetimes of debilitating symptoms—certainly a valuable reason to research our forebears. Just as honesty is valuable when it comes our turn to be interviewed by younger family members; we too will one day be an ancestor.

Family genealogy can help answer questions such as, Why am I the only dark one in a family of redheads? Or, why are my brother and I so different? And if we are adopted we can search for biological relatives. We may learn about historical events, often unintentionally while following leads on a family tree and those events are “brought alive because all of a sudden, history becomes personal” (Miller). Being aware that we are part of an ongoing stream helps make some sense of our own mortality and, “In fact, we see that our lives are a story in which we are the hero, that we have come from somewhere, and that our lives have direction and purpose” (Rosenbluth).

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