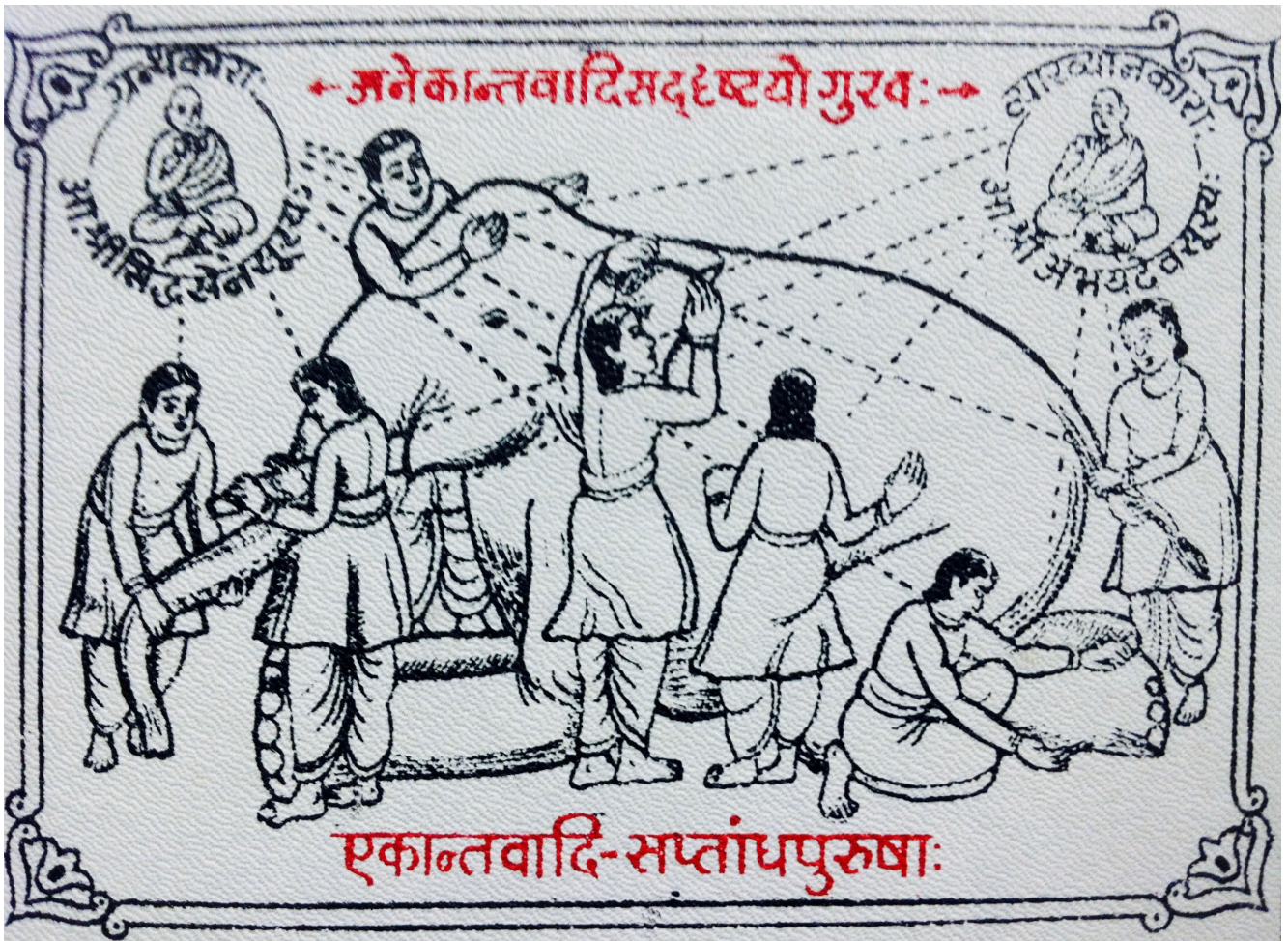


# Knowing Your Father: DNA and Identity



“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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