

In the Grand Scheme of Things: An Exploration of the Meaning of Genealogical Research

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THE POPULARITY OF GENEALOGY HAS INCREASED DRAMATICALLY IN THE last decade, thanks in large measure to the internet, which has expedited access to a wide and still expanding range of information. Rootsweb.com and Genealogy.com are two of the world's most frequently visited websites. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints operates familysearch.org, perhaps the most comprehensive genealogical database in the world. The site, which receives more than eight million hits per day, includes a database that now includes one billion names (Kilborn 1, 24).

To date, however, little research has been performed on why individuals embark on genealogical research. This paper is a first step in that direction. I use surveys built on open-ended questions and diaries completed by a group of genealogical researchers to develop a narrative that reveals how researchers assign meaning to the information and individuals they discover through their work.

Theoretical Foundations

While there are hundreds of books on how to conduct genealogical research, as well as a seemingly endless number of genealogies and life histories in print (the Library of Congress, e.g., has more than 40,000 genealogies and 100,000 local histories in its collection <http://www.loc.gov/rr/genealogy/lhgcoll.html>), there is very little literature about the history of genealogy—a genealogy of genealogy,

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so to speak—and about why individuals begin researching their ancestors.

Taylor and Crandall offer three reasons to explain why a comprehensive history of genealogy has not been written, despite its booming popularity: genealogical research has been deemed too personal, the methodology is too straightforward, and the field lacks professional oversight. Their book came less than ten years after the television miniseries *Roots* motivated large numbers of people to embark on genealogical research. Further, scholars dismissed genealogy as an “amateurish pastime” (4), claiming that it lacks academic rigor. Others have criticized genealogists for crafting biased or romanticized family narratives that do not include ancestors engaged in criminal activity or those who may not have been famous or wealthy.

To provide a theoretical foundation for my analysis, I borrow from philosopher Martin Saar’s discussion of genealogical criticism. Saar contends that genealogy is, at its core, a “way of writing history.” A genealogical account “historicizes things that had no significant history before” (232). Names and accounts discovered by researchers achieve historical value only when they are incorporated into a broader genealogical account. In the absence of that action, they remain unrelated, undiscovered facts that have not yet been transformed, through the act of genealogical research, into relevant pieces of information.

Saar might argue that the “field of the historical”—in these cases, the families studied by genealogists—is “expanded” through research and writing. Each new piece of information revises the family narrative. Historicization has impact, he claims, “when it turns to objects whose meaning and validity is affected by revealing their historicity” (233). Put more simply, the people, places, and events revealed through genealogy “shape and structure the ways in which individuals understand and express themselves, relate to themselves, and also how they can be seen, described, and counted on by others.” Genealogy can only be performed on oneself and one’s family. It is a narrative, Saar argues, of how outside forces shape an individual—the story of one’s “own becoming” (236).

These narratives, Saar writes, are propelled by several characteristics. First, genealogy is “highly rhetorical and irreducibly hyperbolic” (238). He contends that the impact of a genealogical account is drawn from “the dramatizing gesture, from the alarming and overpowering representation of power.” Among the most significant rhetorical devices

seen in genealogies are hyperbole, "theatrical effect," an emphasis on process, and "the construction of broad historical lines and developments" around "paradigmatic moments" carefully selected by the author.

The reader is simultaneously addressed and affected by the genealogical account. In short, Saar argues that "the story is told to the one (the subject) that it is about" (239). The genealogist "supposes that they are hit, affected and concerned by historical account, that they are provoked and shocked, struck by the lightning of instantaneous insight into what they are, how they have become and what they might not want to be" (240). The author of a genealogy succeeds when his work causes a reader to go off and begin creating a version of his or her "becoming." In my analysis, I explore elements of a narrative that sheds light on how researchers go about creating the "versions" posited by Saar. I do not assess the accuracy of respondents' claims; instead, I explore the coherence and fidelity of the story that emerges from the genealogical descriptions that come out of their work.

Method

I created a one-page, self-administered survey (see Appendix A) to assess respondents' motivations for conducting genealogical research. First, I asked respondents where their interest in genealogy began and why they felt genealogical research was important to them. I then asked the respondents to tell me about the last three ancestors they had found and to give me their reactions to finding them.

Later in the survey, I asked respondents to choose their favorite story about an ancestor (question 9) and to select the story about an ancestor that they would most likely tell someone (question 13). The redundancy was intentional, designed to nudge respondents into putting information into a narrative form. Respondents were also asked to note what they knew about their family before beginning their genealogical research (question 8) and how the information they uncovered changed how they thought about their family (question 7). All of the questions on the survey were open-ended in order to encourage respondents to craft narratives in responding to the questions.

To complement the surveys, I created a diary protocol (see Appendix B). Respondents were asked to keep a diary of their genealogical research activity for three months. In each diary entry, respondents were

asked to provide the date, time, and location of their research session, the resources consulted, the results of their search, the next steps in their research, and any "frustrations you felt doing this work." As Bernard explains, the purpose of a diary "is to learn about the sequence, duration, and frequency of behaviors and about the contexts in which they take place" (260).

Ralph Nelson, president of the Delaware Genealogical Society (DGS), invited me to distribute surveys and invitations to keep diaries of genealogical research at the organization's May 2002 meeting. A representative of the National Genealogical Society (NGS) agreed to distribute the survey and invitations at the organization's 2002 summer convention, and to post my questions on the NGS website. Sixty surveys were completed and returned. Eleven respondents completed diaries. I will not use respondents' names, or the names of their family members, in this paper.

I performed a narrative analysis on both sets of data. At the heart of my analysis are the stories that shed light on the act of research, not the fruits of that research. While the typical focus of narrative analysis is a single story, it is possible to explore a number of stories that cohere and form a larger story—a metanarrative or "metastory," as Berdayes & Berdayes claim (113). I take this approach in order "to generate a more inclusive perspective, and to expand the possibilities and range of debate" about the meaning of genealogy for these researchers. This approach enables the researcher to achieve a clearer understanding of the culture that produces the narrative.

Fisher defines narrative as "symbolic actions—words or deeds—that have meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them" (58). We are all storytellers; "enacted dramatic narrative is the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions," Fisher contends (58). Foss argues that we use narrative to "help us impose order on the flow of experience so that we can make sense of events and actions in our lives" (399). A narrative's most salient quality is that it "provides clues to the subjectivity of individuals and to the values and meanings that characterize a culture" (Foss 401).

Fisher rejects the claim that narrative is without rationality. "[N]o form of discourse is privileged over others because its form is predominantly argumentative," Fisher argues. "No matter how strictly a case is argued—scientifically, philosophically, or legally—it will always be a story, an interpretation of some aspect of the world that

is historically and culturally grounded and shaped by human personality" (49).

Sonja Foss writes that narrative "functions as an argument to view and understand the world in a particular way" (400). It enables the researcher to explore and define "a coherent world in which social action occurs" (Berdayes & Berdayes 109). Narrative analysis allows the researcher to explore assumptions at work in the narrative—in this case, the motivations that prompt and sustain genealogical research. Studying a narrative also enables the researcher to isolate and explore the "linguistic and cultural resources" (109) drawn on by its creators, and how these resources persuade the reader to accept the narrative as a realistic portrayal of events and people.

At the heart of a narrative analysis is an exploration of setting, characters, the role and features of the narrator, events, time frame (the period of time during which major events occur), causal relations (the cause and effect relationships evident in the narrative), audience, and major themes (Foss 402–04). While my analysis is not generalizable to all genealogical researchers, it provides a rich case study of the motivations that sustain this particular group. What follows, then, is an analysis of the narrative—perhaps "metanarrative" is a better word—that emerges from the work of a group of people whose primary ambition is to craft a narrative that places their family in the grand scheme of things.

A Sense of Responsibility

As information is gathered, the genealogical researcher gradually assumes the role of narrator in the story of his or her own "becoming," as Saar notes. They tell the story of their families, even as they revise the story through additional research. Respondents emphasized their sense of responsibility to past and future generations and to any interested parties to craft a compelling, accurate story about their family. "I want my niece and nephews to know how important their forbears were," said an NGS member. "I feel obligated," said another respondent, "because I have the desire, skills, and the time, to continue my family research, organize it, and share it."

When the sister-in-law of a respondent traced their family back to seventeenth-century England, the respondent stepped in to enhance the

account: "She did have some errors in her information, I later discovered, but I've been able to track down most of these and put in correct information, as far as I can determine." One respondent noted in her diary that she found errors in a book written by a previous researcher. She stressed, however, that she would not notify the author of her findings. Another respondent's diary was peppered with notes about "fixing" erroneous or incomplete information. One researcher shared her frustration at her inability to convince other researchers to correct a piece of information about her great-great-grandmother. They "have [her] married 4 times and will not change their documentation." With each post to an online message board devoted to the family, "this myth perpetuates itself!" she wrote.

For one researcher, the impetus to begin exploring her family research came from a promise to her father "to find the first [member of their family] in the U.S." Another researcher, then "a little girl of 8–9 years old" made a similar vow to study her grandfather's ancestors. "I loved this family dearly and made it a promise I would do this research." One DGS member said that he became interested in research after his father died, so that he could "have something to share" with his mother "that was not sickness."

One researcher noted that her work is something "I can do easily now in my old age. I enjoy doing it, and I am happy to pass on what I have learned to my children, knowing that my descendants will know a lot about their ancestors because of my efforts." A respondent from Pennsylvania said that his research "makes mortality easy to take," adding that he hoped "my descendants will also keep me alive in their family histories."

Respondents take the role of researcher very seriously. Most refused to pass judgment on the people about whom they learn. "I just love to read and know more about my ancestors and I don't care what it is just so I can properly document it," wrote a researcher. As narrator, the researcher constantly evaluates information to determine how it will be incorporated in the family story. Researchers typically describe themselves as explorers working to solve a mystery or complete a puzzle. One said that her family history was "like a jigsaw puzzle that can grow as big as I can make it." Researchers often referred to elusive or incomplete information as "brick walls."

Several respondents took it upon themselves to organize, and in some cases, complete, research begun by other family members. "Their

work was disjointed and unorganized," wrote one respondent. The older brother of a respondent shared some of the information he had already gathered. "I caught the bug," wrote the respondent. Several of the respondents used "the bug" or similar terms to explain the hold that genealogical research has on them. "I am thoroughly infected," wrote one.

In describing their research, respondents also reveal less-prominent elements in the metanarrative about their work. The setting for genealogical research is a library, or perhaps a genealogical society. One respondent wrote about attending a genealogy society meeting at the invitation of her friend, a devoted researcher. She learned that a local junior college would soon offer a genealogy course. "I signed up for the class, and I was hooked," she wrote. One class soon became another, and then a NGS home study course. Much of the respondents' research is conducted using the telephone and letters to family members, as well as the growing range of tools available on the internet.

Thus, the metanarrative begins to emerge: the researcher, fresh from a class in genealogical research, works alone, at a desk, at home or in the local library, exploring resources, perhaps with the aid of a computer. It should be noted, however, that a handful of respondents, however, are skeptical of the accuracy of the information found online and on genealogy websites. The researcher strives to correct misinformation found in earlier incomplete family histories.

In many cases, the setting shifts with a trip to visit family members, or to a place important to the family. One respondent and his wife "happened to stop in Salt Lake City" and visited a genealogical library operated by the Church of Jesus Christ Latter-Day Saints, which maintains one of the most popular genealogical websites. Upon learning that the library was open into the evening, the respondent and his wife took a short orientation class, "then went into the library itself and just from the top of our heads, we looked up some info." Today, the couple tries to make time for research "in any trip we take within the U.S., if at all possible."

A trip to a cemetery fueled another respondent's interest in genealogy. "Once I saw the names, dates and tombstones of my ancestors," the respondent began his research. Another respondent asked family members to record memories of their family in writing, as part of a fiftieth birthday gift for the respondent's brother. "I was so intrigued by what we all wrote that I decided I wanted to go back further and make a family tree," the respondent noted.

"I've Found Him!"

The most significant event in the genealogy metanarrative is the discovery of new (or previously elusive) information. Respondents were elated when they located a long sought after relative or piece of information. "It varies from 'Eureka!' to 'It's about time,'" wrote the lone respondent certified as a genealogist and a genealogical instructor. A respondent who kept a diary underlined the word "found" in red pen to indicate success in finding information. In several responses, the elation was anticipatory—the respondent said they would be elated when they found what they were looking for. "When I am certain I have solved that relationship," said one respondent, "I will really celebrate. I will be ecstatic!" Another respondent had a more visceral reaction upon finding her great-great grandfather: "I was almost jumping in excitement. I kept saying to the friend with me—whispering loudly, 'I've found him! I've found him!'"

Not all of the respondents were that elated, but most acknowledged the significance of their accomplishments. "I am always glad, of course, and happy to fill in some blanks in whatever family I happen to be working on at the time," one respondent said. Sharing the information is often of utmost importance. The father of a respondent is the first to be notified with new discoveries. "When he was able he helped me with my research and made many research trips with me. I usually start the conversation with, 'You won't believe who I finally found!'" Other researchers are less demonstrative, and quickly redirect their efforts to the next search. "It's a good feeling, and I usually sit back, take a deep breath, then I re-focus to look for more," said one respondent. A researcher from New Jersey was even more low key: "[I] just take it in stride and try to decide where to go from there" once a family member is found. "No shouting or screaming. More or less—just check that one off and move on."

Of only slightly lesser importance are the event or events that motivated a respondent to embark on genealogical research. In many cases, a researcher's curiosity about his or her family emerged as the result of a single memorable interaction with a family member or during the celebration of a family milestone—in one case, the fiftieth wedding anniversary of a respondent's parents. Several respondents reported that they began their research after reading books about genealogy or taking courses on genealogy. During one class, after the instructor explained

the range of online tools available to researchers, a respondent reported that she "was immediately bitten by the genealogy bug. Now I am thoroughly infected."

One respondent wrote of receiving "a book in which to fill in family group sheets, stories of ancestors, and photographs" for Christmas. The gift motivated her to begin writing to relatives, including "cousins by the dozens," asking for information about family members. Her interest in genealogy waned after the deaths of several relatives made information hard to come by. Thirty years later, however, an aunt who had been living with the respondent "rekindled" her interest in family history. "She used to tell stories about her family, and I thought I would go crazy if I heard them one more time, until it occurred to me that unless I wrote them down, I would never remember them after she was gone," noted the respondent. Soon, "I began checking them out."

The desire to reestablish connections with ancestors and with family members often spurs interest in genealogy. A question by one respondent to her parents and grandmother revealed that her great-grandfather had been a Union officer during the Civil War. One respondent wrote that she began researching her family because she "couldn't understand how all the people we visited weekend after weekend, were related to me." An answer to a question about an ancestor who settled in Tennessee led another respondent to realize that she "enjoyed playing detective."

Stories told by family members led several respondents to begin, or in several cases revisit, genealogical research. As part of their work, they now cobble confirmed versions of these stories together into a broader narrative that they will pass along to their children. One researcher "started by just writing down the stories they told." The father of another respondent "was a well-spring of family knowledge." Another listened "to stories at night before I went to sleep from grandmother about when she was a child." After both her grandmother and mother died, the respondent was "the only child interested in the family albums and letters," from which the respondent tried to "piece together" the stories she had heard years before.

Ordinary People

The next major event in this narrative is the decision made by the researcher (narrator) about what to do with the information—how to

make it part of the family narrative. Respondents asserted that they go to great lengths to ensure that the narrative they work on is accurate, even if discovery of information is painful. One respondent wrote about learning that her family had owned slaves during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. "Seeing human beings traded alongside the livestock and cutlery, is horrifying," she wrote. "I was delighted to learn that my family, once Episcopalian, within three generations embraced Methodism" and became staunch abolitionists. Their change of heart did not cause the respondent to forgive her ancestors. "Just made them a bit more bearable," she wrote. "I went into research knowing my ancestors had 'clay feet,' just like mine," wrote a researcher from Delaware. "I didn't expect saints and so far haven't found any."

"This is history about ordinary people," wrote one respondent about the fruits of her research. "Whatever I learn is part of my roots—the good and the bad. We are human, and [we are] sinners," wrote another researcher. Genealogists are criticized for searching only for ancestors who add status, wealth, or, in some cases, infamy to the family story. While the richness of a family's history clearly is important to researchers (a respondent said that one relative's story was "juicy"), researchers tended to downplay the importance of status and wealth to their family narratives.

One researcher said, "I do not have any famous ancestors—just hard-working people who fought hard to survive." Another respondent embraced his family's eccentricities and tragedies: "It is interesting to find out what kind of characters your ancestors were." "Whatever they did, they had a reason, and I can learn from them," said another. Perhaps this is an attempt to deflect criticism of their work. Still, most researchers seemed sincere in telling this part of their story. One even questioned the importance of genealogical research, adding "Does it matter that I am descended from four Mayflower passengers? There is a very good chance that anyone who has colonial New England ancestry also descends from Mayflower ancestors." It is not a researcher's place to judge, wrote a respondent. Of utmost importance is to "learn about the people who preceded me, warts and all, and try to understand the times in which they lived and why they may have done what they did."

Respondents are quite content to find "average" ancestors. "My ancestors, so far, have seemed very run of the mill. Most of them were farmers. Nothing major has seemed to happen in their lives," said a

respondent without regret. "I think one has to go in with open eyes and realize our ancestors were humans," said another. The only researchers "who would be disappointed" with the information they discover "would be those poor souls who have illusions that their ancestors were dukes and earls or came over on the Mayflower." Several researchers assessed the quality of their responses to my survey based on what they believed was the blandness of their ancestors. "[I] don't know if mine is much help since there isn't anything terribly exciting or world-shaking—just quiet, hard-working generations," wrote a DGS member on the top of the survey sheet.

While accomplishments and peculiar events pique the researcher's interest, an ancestor's values and qualities sustain the work. "I find that those about whom I have done research are interesting people, but mostly that they were hard-working, religious, and law-abiding," wrote one respondent. Making judgments about an ancestor's behavior "has no place in genealogical research," said a respondent from Louisiana. Another researcher was more blunt: "You have what you have and there is nothing you can do about it."

My Place in the World

The desire to carve out, through narrative, a place for one's family in the larger picture is a key motivation for these researchers. "It grounds me," wrote a respondent about her research. "It keeps me in touch with the human condition," wrote a DGS member. Genealogy "tells me who I am," said another respondent. In short, the narrator works to determine where the narrative they have compiled relates to, a grander narrative. "We all want to know from whence we came," wrote one. "Finding the point where the seeds were planted gives one a feeling of belonging to something. Coming from somewhere." For this researcher, the origin of this desire is clear: "In this day and age of impersonality, I can understand why more and more folks are turning to genealogy."

Another respondent said of his research, "it gives me a sense of my place in the stream of mankind." Learning about one's family provides clues "as to why you are the way you are," wrote one respondent. Genealogical research also helps to "personalize . . . history and make it seem to be more just dates and names." Another researcher went fur-

ther: "I am now in awe of my past generations and how they came here in the 1600's and made a way for themselves, and for me." In one case, at least, this realization came only when she became an adult. History would have been much more interesting, she said, "if I had known the family stories when I was in school. Maybe I did know them but wasn't tuned in until [I was] older."

Researchers attempt to establish causal connections between themselves and previous generations. "I believe that the living owe a lot to the generations that went before," wrote a DGS member. "[U]nless we get to know who they were and what they did we diminish the value of their life work." Here, the researcher historicizes by premising his argument on an imagined desire by his ancestors to leave a legacy (Saar). Through research, "I feel I'm honoring my ancestors, not just prying," said one respondent. Another researcher expressed disbelief that a few living members of her family had not tried to meet each other. "It makes me crazy to think that there were descendants of a long lost ancestor living and they just didn't get together. I know life keeps us busy . . . but I am pretty adamant about meeting new cousins and keeping in touch," she wrote. A Delaware researcher was more adamant about building connections between herself and her ancestors: "This is my family and I am a [family name]—I will find the answers," she wrote.

Flaws in existing historical narratives can be corrected through genealogical research, but correction should not turn into alteration. "I have seen how history has been 'changed' in order to be politically correct," one researcher wrote, "and I don't believe that is right. No matter WHAT (her emphasis) our forebears did in the past, it is history and should be known. We can always learn from mistakes." As a respondent from Tennessee noted, "[i]f one is serious about researching family history, he/she has to keep an open mind." A DGS member added, "there are skeletons in every closet."

Still, finding one's place in a broader family narrative is not always a comforting or positive experience. "My father's family has always been very strong," wrote one respondent. "My mother's family was not so strong—and I find myself wondering whether or not it was the divorce of my grandparents," which threatened the family's stability. Ironically, when the respondent went through a divorce, members of her family "rallied round and were my strongest supporters."

A Job Well Done

From responses and diary entries emerged an image of the researcher/narrator as tireless, always searching for more information. "I am a gatherer," wrote a respondent from Pennsylvania. "Like a squirrel with nuts, I gather up every tidbit of information I can find anywhere that references names of my family." Another respondent stressed that she was in the search of the long haul. "This is going to be a slow process and I plan on finding out every last thing I can." Many talked about work they had carried out to stitch together threads of information found by other researchers. In the early 1960s, a respondent asked a great aunt to write down in a notebook what she remembered about their family. The respondent later received five notebooks, one for each family line. "Proving" what was in the notebooks became the respondent's "mission." Corroborated information brings "a sense of accomplishment" to researchers.

Another respondent expanded on earlier research by four family members. She used one of several available genealogy computer programs "to pull it all together." The joy felt by a researcher when a key discovery is made must be tempered by the realization that there is more information to find. After the elation, wrote a respondent, comes the "time to move on to another problem that needs to be solved." Thus, the narrator exercises his or her authority by improving on the "hearsay" and "drips and drabs" of information offered haphazardly by other family members. Another respondent offered an even more clinical explanation of how he approaches research: "I usually form suppositions and then seek to prove them. If my supposition proves false, I'm surprised, but it is a pleasant surprise because now I have firm evidence that will take my research in a profitable direction."

Effective research means thorough, although not always meticulous, record keeping. "I just love to read and know more about my ancestors and I don't care what it is just so I can properly document it," wrote a researcher from Washington. In many cases, respondents had successfully gathered information, but were not as successful in organizing it. "I'm not totally organized, because I find information faster than I can consolidate it," said a DGS member. "I wish I could say it was 'compiled,'" said a respondent from New Jersey. Like many of the respondents, she placed information on each branch of her family into folders (others used three-ring binders). Her folders included "leads, things to

check, items in progress." Still, she admitted, there is room for improvement: "I have just retired and hope to get to all the piles of clues, notes, and unfiled papers and get them in order, in books, and in the computer."

Respondents use computer software to help them organize information, but only in combination with older methods. "Computers need to work better for people without a lot of skills," wrote one frustrated respondent in her diary. "I still keep my records by pencil and paper," said a respondent from Virginia. Family Roots, a program sold through the early 1980s, was balky, and then its manufacturer went out of business. "I continued doing it by hand," she wrote, adding that she hates entering data—"what a boring occupation." A Florida researcher walked me through a less-than-satisfactory experience with *genealogy.com*. She decided not to renew her subscription when she surmized that the program is "heavy on New England," which I've just about done with on the [family name] line, or on other states that don't hold much info or promise of it for me yet." And even the most complete program or website is no match for a common surname. "I am on the mailing list for this family," wrote an Oregon respondent in his diary, "but everything that is distributed is not my line. It is all so close, but no cigar."

A respondent from Oregon acknowledged that he "did not trust the computer entirely," so he keeps a notebook that "has the basic information in it"—comparable to the previous respondent's "surname list" that accompanies her on all research trips, and the "wish list" kept by an NGS member. "I write down various things about ancestors that I want to find when I go to a particular library," the researcher said. Thus, the personal computer plays only a small role in the narrative. "My three ring notebooks are the heart of my research," said a DGS member. Still, many respondents are regular visitors to discussion groups set up to share information on their families. Posting queries is a popular tool for gathering information.

One respondent described her research process this way: "All research is done in pencil [and] taken down in notebooks. If something is a true source, we will have that source printed out as a hard copy. **EVERYTHING IS SOURCED** [respondent's emphasis]." When a piece of information is corroborated, "we then enter our data into our computer. All hard copies of information are kept in a filing cabinet in case we have to refer back to something." One respondent wondered in

her diary whether she had gone too far in her documentation efforts: "Beginning to footnote the timeline—is this a sign of obsessive—compulsive genealogy?"

Storytellers

Respondents repeatedly cast themselves in the role of a storyteller, almost always willing to share information they have uncovered. The act of sharing is a key event in the genealogy metanarrative. In one diary, a respondent noted (in red ink) that she had donated a copy of a family genealogy to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in Utah. After making a key discovery, respondents often seek out family members. "I call my parents and tell them who I found," said one. "I make sure my nieces and nephews know what I am doing and what I find. It's important for them to know," wrote another respondent. "I could scarcely wait to send the information to other 'cousins' who I knew were working on the same line," said a Pennsylvania-based researcher.

A respondent from Delaware wrote that she freely shares information with her husband, who also conducts genealogical research, her children and grandchildren, and "the interesting people that I have met who have found and/or are finding genealogy a rewarding way to spend their time." The couple tracked down their nephew in England to tell him they had found the ship on which the researcher's great-grandfather had journeyed to the United States.

At least one respondent, however, was skeptical that audiences are always receptive. "Even after trying to assess what might appeal, we generally wind up boring folks with stories about people they can't relate to," he wrote. Researchers are disappointed when corroboration reveals that an ancestor did not accurately keep track of his or her exploits. "I was so disgusted with my grandmother and what she told the census taker on the 1930 census," said one researcher. Her grandmother said she was born in California and that her parents were from France; both pieces of information turned out to be incorrect.

At times, researchers make leaps of personality assessment as they compile information. Reading a will, wrote a Delaware researcher, "gives you an excellent sense of the writer." Just from reading the will of an ancestor, the researcher was able to posit that he had "a warm and loving relationship" with his children. An ancestor's failure at farming

led the same researcher to conclude that he was “a gentleman—used to others doing such labor.” After moving to Virginia, the ancestor enjoyed more success as a land speculator. “But, he was by no means a shining stat. And, he never missed an opportunity to ‘shave’ the truth or grasp an advantage.”

But before a story is finalized, information (and instructional advice) must be shared with colleagues, either via email, through one of the many popular genealogy websites, or through membership in a genealogical society. “I just can’t wait to share [information] with other researchers with whom I’ve been working and with my family, especially those who are working on the same problem as me,” said one researcher. Respondents often prefer to share information in person. “It has been gratifying to share information and to build new friendships in this way,” wrote a researcher. Instructing those new to genealogy is an important part of the narrator’s role. In her diary, one researcher described a session in which she assisted a woman looking for information on her family. “Her cousin has helped her get started, but she really didn’t know how to go about things,” the researcher wrote. “I asked her questions to get her thinking.” Later, she directed the new researcher to the 1880 census. “She had done some looking on the computer. I don’t think she really knew what she was looking for,” the researcher wrote.

Conclusions

Our metanarrative so far: Diligent researchers (our narrators), motivated by curiosity and a desire to create and pass along a compelling family history, travel to libraries, genealogical society meetings, to visit relatives, and to important family sites—all to collect information. The narrator/researcher is driven by a strong sense of obligation—to current and future family members—to keep gathering information. The narrator/researcher is not concerned with the wealth or status achieved by their ancestors; most are thrilled to discover that their ancestors were simple, hardworking people. No attempt should be made, the researcher/narrator argues, to embellish the information incorporated into the family narrative.

Saar might argue that asserting, as one researcher did, that genealogy should be a “history of ordinary people” is as much a rhetorical

flourish as claiming that one's descendants traveled on the Mayflower. In both cases, the researcher increases and confers meaning on the information and people he or she discovers. Choices are made—choices undergirded by sincere motives, but choices nonetheless. The narrator—not the accounts of rich, eccentric, or ordinary relatives—has the power in our metanarrative. As a respondent from Oregon remarked, “Only you can tell your story.”

But back to our story: the narrator/researcher diligently tracks ancestors, traveling great distances and spending countless hours in libraries and in front of computers, hoping to find information that will bring them closer to solving the puzzle. Armed with knowledge gleaned from the latest genealogy courses and computer software, they “fix” errors in previous family histories. They freely share experiences with other family members (often via online discussion groups) and their expertise with other researchers, no matter what their level of skill. Their accomplishments are called “hits”; they speak with frustration about hitting “brick walls” in their research. These terms are part of the “compelling” vocabulary described by Celeste Condit (1990). Despite the desire to share information, colleagues and other family members (after the genealogist receives his or her initial charge to begin researching) are minor characters in the narrative. Researchers typically work alone (one respondent revealed in her diary that she hides her hobby from her husband), or, in some instances, with a loved one. They shout for joy upon discovering a new ancestor, and frequently call relatives with news.

Information gathered by researchers becomes meaningful when the researcher confirms it and incorporates it into the family narrative. The genealogist ties together disparate moments in a family's history in order to gain “insight into what they are, how they have become and what they might not want to be.” New discoveries, and the attendant elation felt by researchers, punctuate the metanarrative—they are “paradigmatic moments,” as Saar describes them. The genealogist's goal is often to establish causal relations (as Foss would call them) by creating the family narrative. They want family members to be “struck by the lightning of instantaneous insight into what they are and what they might want to be,” as Saar would argue (240).

Each revision of the family narrative changes, and at the same time confirms, how these researchers understand and explain their families—and themselves. They position themselves as the keeper of family

experiences. The genealogical narrative often becomes the mechanism through which the researcher interacts with members of their family and with other people. It is important, genealogical researchers believe, to honor their ancestors by learning—sometimes publicly—from their actions.

Both the “story of one’s becoming” (Saar 236) crafted by genealogists and our metanarrative lack a key element: an ending. Researchers repeatedly acknowledged that genealogy is an ongoing pursuit. They will never complete their research. Their contributions will be added to and enhanced by future family researchers. A perfectly accurate family history will never be written, because history continues to be made. This makes it even more important that a researcher not set out to trumpet the family “pedigree and escutcheon” (Taylor and Crandall 7). It is the goal of the researcher—and the thematic heart of our metanarrative—to “remind persons of whose shoulders they stood on,” (8) even as they acknowledge that they cannot learn everything about those shoulders.

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Appendix A—Survey

The Genealogy Project
Ronald Bishop, PhD, Drexel University
October 2002

Instructions: Please carefully consider your answers to these questions. You can complete an answer all at once, or come back and add to a response, so long as you number the portions of your response.

1. How did you get started researching your ancestors?
2. Tell me why genealogy important to you.
3. Tell me a story about each of the last three ancestors you've tracked down.
4. Describe your reaction when you found these folks.
5. Tell me about how you compare notes with others active in genealogy.
6. What's your typical reaction when you find someone for whom you've searched?
7. Has searching for your ancestors changed your thinking about your family?
8. What did you know about your ancestors before you began researching them?
9. What's your favorite story about a relative to come out of your research?
10. Have you ever been disappointed with what you've found about an ancestor?
11. Tell me about how you compile and keep your information.
12. Have you ever been unpleasantly surprised by anything you've found out?
13. What relative's story would you be most likely to tell people about?

One final question: Would you be willing to keep a three-month diary of your genealogical research activity? You can complete the diary via email. If so, please call me at (302) 737-3834 or email me at rcbsam@aol.com.

Thanks so much for taking part in my study. Please return your completed profile in the postpaid envelope by November 15, 2002 to: Ronald Bishop, PhD, Drexel University, 31 Helios Court, Newark, DE 19711.

Appendix B—Diary Protocol

Instructions: In each diary entry, please try to discuss:

1. The date and time of your research session.
2. Where you did your research.
3. The resources you used.
4. The results of your research.
5. Frustrations you felt as you worked.
6. The next steps in your research.

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