

## Unearthing My DNA: The Lost Sister

Eileen Williams  
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It's natural to presume that family are the people who think like us, are born into the same cultural group, share similar political stances, and even look like us. A homogenous comfort zone called "family" might be nice to ponder, but the reality is often a far cry from this rosy Rockwell-esque tableau.

The unexpected discovery of a half-sibling made me re-think "family" and my place in it down to my very core. To put this in a Unificationist perspective: the reality of tribal messiahship with diverse members spanning two coasts and two

continents sometimes requires both flying far and digging deep.

It was Thanksgiving 2020, and I was participating in a Zoom meet-up through my local library with Libby Copeland, author of *The Lost Family: How DNA is Upending Who We Are*. That might make a good Christmas present for someone, I thought, unawares that the very person to benefit from the book would be me.



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Inspired by Copeland's case studies delving into family heritage -- its twists, turns, and surprises, the medical miracles, the family drama -- I turned to my sister Mary: "Let's buy ourselves Ancestry.com DNA test kits for Christmas."

Mary and I were curious about where in Ireland our relatives came from; she was readying to visit my father's second cousins in Germany. However, we had not anticipated that we were about to "out" our own family skeleton, although that doesn't seem a nice way to describe a newly-found half-sister.

After Christmas, I received my test results, and there staring back at me from the Ancestry.com website was a photo of a woman tagged as a first degree relative. I determined after a few stunned moments that she could neither be aunt, niece, nor cousin but rather was/must be a half-sister (really?).

She had lurked on the Ancestry.com site for two years hoping to "strike" a match. I would come to learn that she had longed most of her adult life for someone -- anyone -- she could call family. And strike a match she did.

Although myself and three of my siblings had managed to forge a bond despite the childhood rupture of divorce, my younger adopted sister cut all ties with the rest of us. Sadly, family is not always what folks want to find, and sometimes it's even those we want to lose. Yet, here on the site was a half-sister hoping desperately to discover family connections.

The first thing I learned about DNA testing is people can inherit different pieces of DNA from their ancestral gene pool. One does not neatly inherit 25% of your genetic traits from each grandparent, and then 12.5 % from each great grandparent; rather hereditary traits are expressed in a random manner.

My sister and I share a 58% DNA match, which is normal for siblings or fraternal twins; identical twins share a 100% DNA match. My sister has a higher percent of Scottish DNA than I do (ah, the red in her hair!). My half-sister was a 27% DNA match with me.

All humans share 99.9% percent DNA in common, so why bother researching your genealogy at all? Some DNA test sites suggest you can form meaningful connections from doing this -- second and third cousin discoveries, famous relatives. Maybe your ancestors go back to a signer of the Declaration of Independence, as a proud friend of mine discovered.

Furthermore, you might be inspired to visit ancestral homelands, deemed a "heritage vacation." A sunny beach ringed by palm trees is more appealing to me than a chilly castle. But you never know, identifying what region your ancestors originated from reveals some interesting history and can conjure up images of marauding Vikings in your former hometown, or Goth and Vandal forefathers off to sack Rome.

A DNA test can also confirm trivial but interesting facts if you order the trait add-on from 23andMe. For

example: Does your hair lighten in the sun, or do you have a propensity to drink caffeine? Are you at greater risk for macular degeneration? or celiac disease? ...are a few of the medical freebees thrown into the report.

However, if you want more in-depth medical information, that costs extra. My daughter ordered the BRCA test through 23andMe to see if she carried the gene variant that would put her at greater risk for developing breast cancer (which runs on her paternal side). (The test for these variants is not comprehensive nor as conclusive as a blood test performed in a medical lab)

Throughout my life, I identified with my German side (calling it a "side," I learned, is an oversimplification). My grandparents provided an oasis of calm in my tumultuous childhood -- their neat little stone house signified to me order, reason, calm.

So I found it puzzling that my test indicated only a 12% link to Germanic Europe, which includes Belgium and the Netherlands; surprisingly, I was 70% Irish. While making a trip to Germany to see distant cousins is still a possibility, this new and "skewed" information just doesn't spark the same enthusiasm. "I should have visited Ireland, not Germany," chuckled my sister.

Copeland documents through case studies and interviews the various reactions and consequences of discovering family information that might have been better left as family lore. A woman, who never fit with her family, discovers she is adopted. Another person discovers their father is not their "real" father. On the other hand, she describes birth parents with needed medical information to pass along, children given up for adoption seeking the same, revelations both desperately sought after or avoided at all costs.

In the picture, my half-sister looks like a younger version of my Irish grandmother. And I could have just left it at that. It's not like my email address was on the Ancestry.com website. However, there was a certain synchronicity afoot.

Firstly, her name, Colleen, sounds like mine. And there in one of the bubbles on her family tree chart was a hazy random image of my father, one that looked like an old creased photo she may have found in a drawer. Mary and I hopped on Facebook and found her account, but I wasn't sure if I wanted to "friend" her just yet.

I was faced with having to make a mental leap from stranger to friend to sister in one big stretch. It was a reach that felt unsettling, if not a tad threatening. My thoughts about my identity were, on more than one level, upheaved. *Why does it matter? Who am I? Who are we?* Anyway.

I reached out tentatively by messaging her on the site....

*It looks like we might be related.  
You have my grandfather listed as yours.  
My father was J. M. Bader.  
Let me know if I'm interpreting this correctly.  
Would love to hear from you.  
Eileen*

*OMG! It is so great to hear from you. My father is also John Merwyn Bader, which I wasn't 100% sure about until I did the DNA testing. I have to check to see if I put J. M. Bader as "grandfather." I'm afraid I'm not quite experienced with Ancestry.com. So, yes, if your father is John Merwyn Bader, it looks as though we are actually half-sisters. I do know that could be surprising at best or shocking at worst. I'm hoping for the best. Take care, and thank you for contacting me.  
Colleen*

After perfunctory introductions and then the pins and needles of waiting, another message appears:

*I'm gay and that would make me sad if that were a problem for you.*

I confess, while some people might glide over this pronouncement coming from a stranger, neighbor or co-worker, I had to digest this new information. She may have worried about *my* response, but I was equally concerned about her reaction to my church affiliation. I messaged her:

*Colleen, 'Lil Sis,'*

*I believe there is a person beyond the label. And love is the most important thing that there is, so I hope you don't have a problem with me! ha. We have learned in my family to park our differences at the door. In other words, we don't discuss politics!*

Then I second-guessed myself.

*Did I even need more family?* Our adult differences and childhood wounds had been difficult to navigate, much less heal.

"Mary, why don't *you* contact her? I think you have more in common with her, and you are more social than I am!" I was attempting to do a little buck passing. But why? She is a divorced lesbian; I am a strong proponent of heterosexual lasting marriage. However, as a "tribal messiah," I felt a responsibility to take ownership of a situation my father had left behind even as thoughts about this settled heavily on my mental shoulders. One of my bobble heads said: *You don't need to think of it that way*, and another bobble head said: *Yes, you do*.

In her emails, she waxed enthusiastic about finding "all of us," but a part of me wanted to say: *Slow down 'Lil sis'. Do you know how difficult and complicated it can be to navigate family relationships?* I worried her expectations weren't realistic and that we couldn't be who she needed us to be. I, who had dealt with family, the joys and heartbreaks, for much longer, feared the pitfalls. And besides, siblings have a shared history. Colleen and I did not have that. We never would.

In many ways, Colleen is a "pull herself up by her bootstraps" success story. She escaped a dysfunctional situation at age 16 by winning a scholarship to college, finding mentors, and then embarking on a career as a grant writer and fundraiser for a well-known non-profit. *Resilient, intelligent, and funny* were the words that came to my mind as I learned more about her background. She sure seemed like a "Bader" I thought, chuckling into my coffee cup over one of her many self-deprecating emails.

I told her about my husband's conservatism, which can feel akin to throwing ice water on a birthday party:

*BTW, with regard to your husband being a Republican, many of my best friends are Republicans. With regard to you going to church, I am a very staunch progressive Christian, and before Covid, went to church religiously (pun intended).*

*Colleen*

And, after every email I wondered if I'd hear from her again. (Did she decide to cut off contact? Did she change her mind?) She was slow to respond, but later I learned she had a busy job that buries her in emails on a daily basis. I was navigating new territory without a road map; I decided to take it one bump at a time.



*An interview with Libby Copeland, an award-winning journalist and author of The Lost Family: How DNA Testing is Upending Who We Are.*

Then came the birth of a granddaughter in February 2021. While visiting San Diego, I found myself reflecting on my lost sister's painful history and projecting to my granddaughter's future. While my new granddaughter was surrounded by my son-in-law's loving Mexican-American family, I would not be there to help steer her life course: its challenges and choices. My mind was having trouble containing it all.

*And what about Colleen's losses? What do I talk to her about? The grandfather she never got to know?*

*The father she never met (but spoke to on the phone once)?*

"Mom, I think you're overthinking this," remarked my daughter. "Just pretend she's a friend for now – not your sister." *How do you do that?* I was feeling panicked as I threw a few things in my suitcase for a trip to visit her in northern California -- a meet up that was derailed due to a family emergency. I was relieved. I wasn't ready.

My niece, Heather, was able to visit her first, and for one selfishly stupid moment I actually felt a little displaced in the family hierarchy. *But I've always been Aunt 'Lene.* She was Aunt Colleen and of course they were going to like her better! She's the cool one, I thought glumly.

Again, I thought about my adopted sister who I felt I had failed in some vague way. I determined that I would not repeat past failures of neglect. Two sisters – two journeys.

Over Christmas, my sister Mary had played a dinner party game where guests ask each other trivia questions, such as *What famous person would you invite to a dinner party? What is your favorite movie?* and so we three sisters continued the icebreaker through email. Colleen always managed to add a measure of levity.

*If you were on death row, what would you request for your last meal?*

Her, a Big Mac -- me, sushi.

And this one:

*What would you do if you won the lottery?*

*Help the homeless,* we both answered in tandem.

What *is* family in the final analysis? *Chance or choice?* Is blood thicker than water as the saying goes? Does it all boil down to the science of DNA? The test results certainly gave me the incentive to probe further, perhaps more than if she had just been a distant cousin.

Family members -- the ones who help to shape our identity, build our characters -- also help us to stretch that narrow version of ourselves into something more expansive, into a self that learns to love, practices forgiveness, and grows in compassion in ways that might not happen without them. (And it certainly doesn't hurt if one of those members looks like your huggable, pugnacious Irish grandmother.)

I concluded for myself that the definition of family -- whether it's church family, neighborhood family, your biological or adopted family -- is not just knit together by DNA strands but by expressions of care and support. "I'm here for you. I've got your back. We're family."

In Unificationist parlance we say, "One family under God," which sounds to me a little like God is still on his throne. I prefer to think of us as one family *with* God -- the lost parent who is looking for us.

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*For further reading:*

"Before You Spit in That Vial, Read this Book" *New York Times*, March 3, 2020

"The Limits of Ancestry DNA Test" *VOX*, May 23, 2019