

Invisible Threads

In combing through her family history, Cherie Gilmour also traces the history of Australia.

I had never been interested in dead ancestors. They'd had their turn. History was irrelevant and, with the arrogance of youth, I was the centre of the world. Then last year, my uncle put together some family history in a Word document: the stories of people who came before, one after another.

I scrolled through their sepia faces, all posing with demure smiles and names like Jabez and Hepzibah. Both familiar and strange. Little echoes of uncles, cousins, brothers and fathers resonated in the glint of an eye or the curve of a jaw. A short paragraph of information – who they married, how many kids they'd had, perhaps a triumph or tragedy, all contained within a dash bracketing the years of their life. I looked closely at these people, these ghosts appearing in pictures and letters; the prime of their lives captured in a period of history now only found in old books. I was entranced.

Now that I've had two children of my own, I can perceive the thread of life that connects me not only to those who have come before, but to my own kids, who will carry it into an unknown future. Who are these spectres smiling enigmatically in photos?

There's Walter Lawry Waterhouse, my great-grandfather, born a hundred years before me, boyish and grinning as he takes a bite out of a sandwich next to his new wife. A twinkle in his eyes as all possible futures unfold before him like a kaleidoscope, even though you know how it'll end. The moustache will stay, but the twinkle will fade. He'll go to war and lose the use of an arm. His youngest child will have heart problems. He'll be awarded for his scientific breakthrough with rust-resistant wheat. Walt will pass away in his sleep.

My great-great-great-grandma in 1901, with the button-up wedding dress and feathery hat, looking nervously at the camera. Would we have had much in common? When she was all gussied up, was she secretly dreaming about a warm bed, a cup of tea and a good book?

My beloved grandpa as a 12-year-old boy, leaning against a Buick at the beach where he was always the last one out of the water. He looks cheeky, and I imagine us at the same age climbing trees together. He would fix aircraft in World War II and sing in Methodist church choirs. His future wife would spot him first, whooshing down her street on his bike. They would get married in 1950 and have a girl and three boys, including my dad. My grandpa would witness the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, and his pharmacy would be robbed for opiates. He would swear by cold showers and KFC. He would die after battling bone marrow cancer, slipping out the door with little fanfare like he always did.

Every life is boiled down to a one-page summary, leaving so many unanswered questions. I imagine the mountains of data that my generation will leave behind. Social media profiles and tens and thousands of photos floating around in digital clouds. Perhaps tracking your ancestry won't be as fun as it used to be – chasing down a name or photo through newspapers and archives. Everything will be there, on full display, like a dissected frog.

Dwelling on the lives of my ancestors puts my own into perspective – a reality check that my life is a short interval on an endless continuum. My ancestors show me that life is a many splendoured thing and that you cannot have love without loss, joy without sorrow, and victory without failure. There have always been wars and rumours of wars, diseases, love, discoveries, families and tragedies, but we do our best in the face of toweringly uncertain futures.

My kids and I share the same hairbrush. I run it through their thick, unruly hair, leaving the it full of all our strands blended together. I think of the DNA codes in each strand of hair, both my children's and my own. Information splintering back, generation upon generation, thousands of people. They are not just stories and faces on a Word document. They are my DNA, alive and vivid, travelling through my bloodstream and pumping into my heart. ■

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