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Rolling Credits



There is a story, hopefully not true, about a man offering to register the birth of his un-partnered sister's girl-and-boy twins. He names the girl Denise and the boy Denephew.

I have recently stopped being Denephew to anyone. The last of my aunts died some weeks ago and she was the last of my aunts and uncles. My father is an only child and my mother had two sisters and a brother. I do have first cousins and the other sort: first cousins once removed, second cousins, etc. – I still haven't got my head around the taxonomy.

The straight lines and avatars on Geni.com show how I am connected to hundreds of living people around the world – Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, Finland, Spain, England, USA, Australia, Peru ... It also shows me people with whom I'm connected by birth back to the eighteenth century.

This record of familial connection is fascinating, but the richness of the records lies in the stories behind the lines. There are portraits that have dotted horizontal lines representing deaths of spouses or divorce. There is a representation of a man with solid nuptial lines in two continents, each with progeny who didn't know of the existence of the other until a family gathering some ten years ago.

The interconnectedness on Geni.com represents 'permanent' pairings and the children, if any, that resulted. It is predicated on traditional notions of marriage, although some relationships represented here may not have been sanctioned by secular or religious authorities. It does not show the many attempts most of us make to find someone to settle down with permanently. If it were to show the short-lived relationships on the way, it would probably have to be in three dimensions.

How would a representation of familial connections cope with the growing acceptance of same-gender pairing and the birth of children through surrogacy and donor IVF? How could the resulting complexity of genetic and 'legal' connections be shown?

The genealogical map is also incomplete, as it does not acknowledge the complete second family of a bigamous relative of mine; at least I assume it doesn't. The other family may appear, with no indication that the father in each was one and the same person.

The passing of my last aunt and, thus, the disappearance of that complete generation from my living family tree, reminds me of the scrolling credits in a film: lines disappear at the top of the screen and new ones appear at the bottom. I also have an image of a living tree that, through a quirk in nature, is slowly sinking into the ground, with the trunk and lower branches gradually being swallowed up. The middle and higher branches keep growing outward and upward – the tree grows bigger even as it sinks.

The most 'ancient' people I have ever known in my family were my widowed paternal grandmother, born in 1889, and my maternal grandfather, born in 1888. I only knew my grandfather briefly when we lived with my grandparents for a few years when I was very

young – he died in his seventies. I didn't know my paternal grandmother well, because I only lived anywhere near her between the ages of three and seven. I saw her a few times after that and, finally, a year or so before she died at the age of ninety-two. Despite this, she is vivid in my memory.

I have first cousins I know only vaguely, spread around the world. I have sisters on two continents and, consequently, nieces and nephews all over the globe, and my son lives half a world away.

I don't know if it is a myth or not, but it seems that, in the past, related people lived most of their lives more geographically connected than is so often the case now. Ease and affordability of travel possibly has a lot to do with modern dispersion.

Why do we regard relatives, even distant ones, as special, compared to people we develop various relationships with as we travel through life? Is it purely cultural or is there something about the genetic closeness that has us drawn together? Either way, there are many examples of closely-related people fighting each other for power or wealth, or over beliefs, historically and today.

What has so many people, me included, be so fascinated by genealogy, leading to TV programs and websites and gigantic depositories of ancestral records?