

An Unanticipated Outcome of a DNA Ancestry Test

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My daughter Michelle (not her real name) gave me an unexpected holiday gift this past year, a present of DNA testing with one of the now widely available services. She had already submitted her own saliva sample and hoped I would do so too. Being an only child, she understandably wanted to know more about her heritage and places of origin. I hesitated, remembering that 40 years ago, in medical school, I had been a sperm donor. After a period of reflection, and finally realizing that it did not matter whether I offered up my own sample, as she had already sent hers, I spit in the cup and mailed it off.

The results were as expected, and I had little interest in the 4th–6th cousins spread across the world. Then came a telephone call from Michelle asking if I had been a sperm donor in medical school. She had received a call from a woman in California, Ann (not her real name), who said I was her father from sperm donation in medical school. Feeling strangely guilty, I told Michelle that I had felt no need to tell her about sperm donations long ago. As an anonymous donor, I had no prescience of future commercialized DNA ancestry tests. Why did I suddenly feel so guilty, though?

I reviewed the DNA testing company's web site, and there she was, Michelle's half-sibling, who looked like me at age 37 had I been female. It was then that I realized that we had no language or words to describe these situations. What does the word "daughter" mean? What paradigm do we fall back on? The only one I could think of was the father who had abandoned his biological children and was later contacted by one of his offspring with recriminations and hard feelings. Swirling around in my head were questions of responsibility—and to whom and what? How would this affect Michelle, and did I need to protect her? From what, though? My view of the world and my genetic place in it, which had focused on the dyad of Michelle and me, was now potentially a triad. The shift was disconcerting initially, but there were twinges of other unanticipated emotions, such as pride in reproductive success, concern for my newly discovered offspring, and a growing cognitive-emotional inconsistency, which felt vaguely discomfiting. It was all indefinable and cognitively dissonant for me, a 63-year-old recently retired psychiatrist.

Multiple questions about contact arose. My newly discovered offspring (the issue of what word to use arises again; we don't have one yet) had already called Michelle. After some reflection, I chose to be proactive and write an e-mail

to Ann on the DNA testing company site. I had remarried, and my wife patiently walked me through the possible consequences of contact and wisely pointed out that Ann would probably want to see a picture of me at her current age and hear about the family health history. That is what I sent, wondering what doors this would open or close and what ripple effects would be created. For now, there would be an ever-larger pool of people involved: Michelle, Ann, Ann's mother, me, my ex-wife (Michelle's mother), and my wife. On the Internet—another recent technology that reduces anonymity—I read about angry donor offspring who felt dehumanized and commoditized by the rules of anonymity; others who were grateful to have found their biological father; curious and possibly narcissistic donors who encouraged their offspring to contact them; and men like me who had assumed that their past donations were secret and felt bewildered as to the right course of action and what boundaries to put in place.

I received an effusive and respectful e-mail from Ann telling me of her disappointments in life but also of her various accomplishments and her acceptance into the physician's assistant program at my own medical school university. We shared information about our similarity in height and the migraines with visual auras

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that bedevil us and our uncannily similar religious and political beliefs. Ann said that it was a gift to know that she might live at least into her 60s being healthy and active, as her birth mother had died in her early 50s, and she seemed grateful for this changed future expectation and hope. In my second e-mail, I said that I needed some time to think and reflect, for this was all so unexpected and unanticipated, but I left the door open for future contact. Ann wrote back that she had been searching for me much of her adult life, but she understood and acknowledged my need for time out.

The story is not over, but Michelle seems to be taking this news in stride and seems to enjoy the idea of not being an "only" now. At this moment in time, she appears disposed to maintain contact with Ann—her own personal decision and a boundary I respect. Michelle did ask me many questions regarding sperm donation and my activities in medical school—as in, "What *did* you do in medical school, Dad?"—after I revealed that she almost certainly had other half siblings yet undiscovered. That made resurgent a general

sense of unease and yes, guilt again—unanticipated emotions derived from choices made four decades ago with no foreknowledge of how the cloak of anonymity might be pulled away by the future technologies of the Internet and commercial DNA ancestry tests.

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