

## Jewish at 60

I heard about a company called 23andme, which would tell you your origins and ethnicity by a DNA sample. I was 60 years old when I sent in one and was shocked when it said that I was 24% Ashkenazi Jewish. My parents never mentioned any Jewish relatives although my mom said at one time that the men on her side of the family often married Jewish women. I guess she never thought that her father might be one.

My first suspicions about my Jewish roots focused on my dad. Family talk was that he was one of the "black Irish" who were the descendants of shipwrecked Spanish sailors from the Spanish Armada in 1588. The black refers not to skin color but having black hair and brown eyes-which my dad had. Ships back then didn't have engines or motors so they were at the mercy of the winds. The prevailing winds at that time meant that the only way to return to Spain was to sail north and west around Scotland and Ireland. 24 ships and 5,000 sailors and soldiers were lost off the coast of Ireland as a result of taking this route. It was thought that these Spaniards, as fellow Catholics, might have assimilated into the local Irish population. Historians have had doubts about the story of the black Irish but it just seems to me with 5,000 shipwrecked Spaniards, I have to believe that some of them may have survived.

I remember when my brother and I were in our twenties and, along with our dad, we would open some beers and shoot the breeze. We were all comedians and knew how to make the other 2 laugh. My brother and I had blond hair and black beards which would grow at the bottom and not the front of our chins. I was 6' 3" and my brother was 6' 8", and my dad said "you two look like you're on the House of David basketball team!" This had us convulsed in laughter for several minutes. Thinking back on it now, I'm wondering, what would make him say that? He was born and raised in New York City and evidently there was a House of David basketball team that he knew about so to say that even jokingly, that we looked Jewish makes me wonder if he saw that in my 50% Jewish mother also. Did my dad think she was Jewish? Did my mom think she was Jewish? Did they know and decided not to tell us so we would be safe from anti Semitism? I can't see them hiding something like that.

I talked my cousin Judy, on my fathers' side, into taking the 23andme test and it showed her as having no Jewish ancestry so this seemed to eliminate my dad.

But then, I thought he could be a love child of my grandmother. Dad was 5 and 10 years younger than his older brothers . My grandfather was an affable alcoholic who was not a good provider for his wife and 3 sons. My uncle once told me that his mother would have to send him to meet his father at his place of work on payday on Friday or else he would not come home until Monday or Tuesday. Perhaps she was starved for companionship, had a relationship, and my dad was the result.

Speaking of love childs, my mom had one when I was 12 years old. Neither me or my brother have spoken to her in 17 years. If she took a DNA test, it would tell a lot. If she was one quarter Jewish like me and my brother, that would be proof that the Jewishness came from my mom. If no Jewish, we would be back at step one.

Growing up I would somehow FEEL Jewish, in a way I could never be conscious of when knowing yourself sounds like a good idea but involves putting on some subliminal scuba gear and taking a journey to the depths of your subconscious. I remember wanting to be Jewish when my mom told me that the Jewish equivalent to Christmas-Hannakuh, had EIGHT days of gift-giving, so if I was Jewish, I would get 8 times as many presents!

I remember an Aunt, Aunt Irene, who, at family get togethers, would always remark about my "oriental eyes" (they didn't use the term "asian" back then). I've read that the Ashkenazi Jews did not originate in eastern Europe but western Asia, so that must have been what she was seeing.

San Diego California has a century old park in the middle of the city called Balboa Park. There I saw a table for a Messianic Congregation which was mainly made up of Jewish people who believed that Jesus was the Messiah. Running the table was a Barbara Streisand look-alike and after talking with her for a few minutes, I was in love and started attending their services. In the college I went to-San Diego State, there was a similar group called Jews for Jesus who were very visible on campus...

Most men have a trigger feature of women who spur their attraction and mine was women with black curly hair. When I would see them walking around the San Diego State campus, I would approach them and start a conversation. They were all Jewish except one who called herself "Arabian" So I guess being semitic was the trigger. Many of these women were not interested in me when they found out that I was not Jewish.

From a very young age I was always interested in religion and, at San Diego State I took a Hebrew Scriptures class which was the study of

the Old Testament. There was a class on the New Testament but I felt that I knew about the New Testament and I wouldn't get as much out of it. The Jewish teacher would have disputes with some of the Christian fundamentalist students and how to interpret certain Scriptural passages. I remember him talking about why God created the flood and had Noah build the Ark. and he wrote the Hebrew word for violence on the board, meaning that the world was flooded because it was too violent. Drowning almost the entire world seemed to me like a violent solution to a violent problem. There was always talk in religious circles about when and why God would destroy the sinful world so it could be seen as a lesson on what to avoid in the future.

My Irish Catholic father was an Alter boy who went to Catholic schools his entire life but I never remember him giving us any type of religious instruction growing up. I remember being about 12 and asking him straight up "what religion am I?" And he answered reassuringly "You're Catholic". He didn't expound on what that meant but at least I had a label.

The only Catholic thing I ever remembered him doing was a time we went to Tijuana Mexico-which was right across the border from San Diego. We went into a Catholic church there and he got to his knees and crossed himself. At the time I didn't know what he was doing and he never gave a word of explanation. Many years later in my early '20s, I remember telling him I was thinking of becoming a Priest. Knowing his Catholic background, I waited for some kind of response...nothing-total silence on his part. Many years later after hearing of the rampant pedophilia in the Catholic Church, I suspected that he was abused during his years as an Alter boy and this accounted for his total lack of encouragement to have anything to do with the Catholic Church.

My mom, being a wasp (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant), I thought, was trying to fill the void. I remember one time the whole family got in the car and headed to church but then halfway there my dad demanded to get out of the car and started walking home, leaving his family to go to church without him. We went to some Protestant church and I remember spending one day in Sunday School and feeling like I was in a dream, sitting there and not processing anything that was said.

Toward the end of his life, dad began attending Catholic Church, services, calling it a poor man's psychiatry and my mom joined it too and became a fervent Catholic after he died and joined the Alter Society which was made up of lay people who volunteered to help the Church.

I remember her always trying to emphasize the religious side of Christmas and not so much the buying part. That's where things stood until I entered a local Community College and took various classes trying

to figure out what interested me. I took a Religious Studies class and learned a lot from the teacher. He said that at one point he was so obsessed with the Bible that he learned Greek so he could read the New Testament in its original language. Since then, he studied other religions and I remember being taken by what he taught about Hinduism and Buddhism.

The college bookstore had a book called the Tao Te Ching, which was the sacred book of a Chinese religion called Taoism. The version I bought had the original Chinese verse, the English translation, and beautiful black and white photos for each chapter (there were 81). I never tired of reading it and pondering its' sometimes cryptic messages. The study of all these religions helped begin the slow process of finding meaning in life and helped me deal with the trauma and depression my life was filled with up till then. Eventually I came to realize that all religions had the same message- that there was a power or force far beyond human understanding that we must struggle to perceive and worship.

I have often wondered if the void I felt in my life growing up was due to the ignorance I had of my Jewishness. When I bring this up with people, many people told me it was a good thing that I didn't know since I was spared a lot of the anti-Semitism that many Jews had to deal with and that I should be glad I didn't have to experience that but still I can't wrap my head around what the ignorance of my Jewishness meant for me and whether it was a good thing or a bad thing.

I tell myself I am on a journey of discovery, like a deep sea diver into the dark waters of the subconscious. I am still searching for the hidden treasure and hope that the future will provide me with the enlightenment and understanding that I hunger for.