

# Making peace with a family secret

The circle of life is dotted with love and loss.  
Coincidence is God's way of comforting us when least expected



(Michael Hogue/Staff Artist)

By LEEANNE R. HAY

It is a blisteringly hot June day in Texas with dazzling sun and unwavering breezes wrapping around anyone venturing outside.

I am visiting the Dallas-Fort Worth National Cemetery with my husband. The rolling hills and native plains surrounding the cemetery overlooking Mountain Creek Lake are serene and, indeed, sacred. Our U.S. veterans eternally rest here; my dad, a World War II veteran, is one of them. Nearby the Dallas Baptist University chapel bells toll regularly, and poetically, for those who visit the cemetery, too.

A new stone marker has my dad's name added to it. He was interred only a few months ago and joined my mother, who has been here since 2002. They are in prime real estate — the first columbarium built at the cemetery.

My parents were lifelong Catholics who practiced their faith sporadically over their 50 years of marriage yet were consistent believers. Before my mother passed away, she requested that my dad pursue having them both interred at the National Cemetery one day. It came much sooner for her than expected.

When my mother died, Dad asked me to make all the arrangements and selections. I chose the Roman Catholic cross symbol and the short sentiment for the marble marker, "We love you." It seemed to be the appropriate perpetual tribute for my parents. Little did I know then that "forever" sometimes isn't. It has an entirely new marker now, not just an addition to the existing one with my Dad's name and dates.

We arrive at Columbarium A and park the car. I open the door, and the finality of one part of my life weighs on my heart. Neither my mother nor my dad ever knew that I found out I was not his biological daughter. My mother took her secret to this grave.

## **I called him 'Uncle'**

I discovered the information three years ago when I took a consumer DNA test for fun. It revealed that my beloved mentor, and my mother's boss for over 20 years, was my biological father. I had called him "Uncle," a term of endearment and respect.

I never disclosed to Dad what I had learned. He was 93 when I received the test results listing my five half-siblings. I saw no point in breaking an old man's heart. So, I knotted the last thread tied to the past that might have unraveled the truth for me. I had been an only child.

My siblings were much older than I. One, I knew. My youngest brother had small children whom I babysat when I was in high school in Philadelphia, where we all lived at that time. I unsuspectingly had cared for and played with my two nieces

decades ago. As successive waves of memories hit me, I once again felt momentary grief. All the celebrations and milestones in the lives of people who are my family did not include me.

My biological father, who was 52 when I was born, never claimed me as his daughter. Yet he showed up at every school play, took me to flower shows, tennis matches, celebratory dinners, and was my partner in the annual community *Messiah* sing-along.

We often had deep discussions about American history, a mutual passion. His ancestor, *my ancestor*, was on the third ship that followed the Mayflower to Plymouth Rock.

Through my first two years away at college, Uncle Tom thoughtfully sent cards and some spending money and visited me once a year. My mother once explained his attention by saying: “He’s taken an interest in you, and you share similar interests. He wants to mentor you.” I was never aware of my dad asking why I spent time with Uncle Tom.

During the fall of my junior year in college, Uncle Tom suffered a stroke. He was 72 then and had lost his ability to speak. I visited him at his home during Christmas break, bringing some cookies I had made. His wife answered the door and showed me into their den, where he stood to greet me. Physically, he was fine. I sat on the floor at his feet while he sat back down in a wing chair. His wife returned to their kitchen. At that time, he could only communicate with audible noises and sighs. He would smile and chuckle, but words were not possible.

As a chatty 20-year-old, I provided a candid monologue of my experiences and friends during the past semester. I tried to keep the topics fun and share my plans for the future. His eyes twinkled, and he smiled often. When he tried to comment, he spoke no words, only unformed noises. I assured him that he would “get better” in time. I told him I understood that he was still recovering and “not to worry about things we can talk about later.”

After 30 minutes, I got up from the floor and said that I had stayed long enough and didn’t want him to get too tired. I also told him, “I love you, Uncle Tom.” With tears in his eyes, he leaned over and gave me a light, fatherly kiss on the lips. I hugged him and said goodbye to his wife. I have wondered about those tears for decades.

I never saw or spoke to Uncle Tom again despite wanting him to attend my wedding a few years later. My mother never sent him an invitation.

Uncle Tom died when I was 29, married and pregnant with my first child. I was deeply saddened when my mother called me to tell me of his passing. I offered her comfort and condolences on her loss, never dreaming it was mine, too.

## Converging paths

Now at this point, I know that the circle of life is dotted with love and loss, joy and sorrow, and coincidence is God's way of comforting us when least expected and most needed.

Standing here in front of my parents' grave, I check the new marker for the correct spellings, dates and the new sentiment I had chosen. I am startled to see there is another addition to the marker that I had not requested. Alongside the Roman Catholic cross, a Celtic cross carved in stone is there, too.

At that moment, the serendipity of a stone mason's error and the mysterious ways of God's universe enlightens me. Uncle Tom's maternal descendants were Scottish. Celtic women's DNA runs through me and back over 40,000 years to Ava, a Bronze Age woman.

I am wistful thinking about all the paths that had to converge for me to be standing right here, right now. I feel refreshed from forgiveness, both given and received. I read the new sentiment honoring the Catholic patron saint of the family, comforted that it is the end of this story. I hope those in need like me will, by chance or divine providence, pass by and find consolation in these words: "Pray for us, St. Joseph."

Happy Father's Day to all who have loved, cared for and taught a child.

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