Tess We Hardy Knew You

Inaugural Essay Prepared and Presented to the Kit Kat Club
on
March 17, 2009
by
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Good evening.
Since this is my inaugural presentation, I would like to take a moment and deviate from the usual format.
Unlike Groucho Marx, I am delighted to be a member of this Club. I would like to thank Tom Lurie for my nomination and to thank you for your vote in accepting me as a member. So, thank you!
Now, let's get the title out of my presentation the way. I had been forewarned about the requirement to present an inaugural essay to the membership. What I later learned was that the title of the presentation needed to convey the topic without conveying the topic.

The process of choosing a title was discussed at last year's annual meeting. Rabbi Nemitoff referred to the practice, obscuring the topic of the presentation, as Rule 22. I have been told that this practice was instituted in response to a former member's proclivity to research the presenter's topic and ask embarrassingly well-researched questions to not only to embarrass the presenter, but also to enhance respect and esteem for the questioner.

In any event, my title, "Tess We Hardy Knew You" was my

attempt to apply Rule 22 to my topic. Due to the printer's correction, the literary pun intended by referring to a novel by Thomas Hardy was perhaps a trifle over highlighted. Even without the printer's correction and the subsequent correction of the correction, I am sure my literary reference was easily deciphered by most, if not all of you, particularly, those aficionados of literary puns and/or of English author Thomas Hardy.

Let me explain. Thomas Hardy wrote a classic novel that nobody has read since the invention of Cliff Notes. The title of the novel was Tess of the D'Urbervilles. (A note here: my title was presented to Artie and to Rick over a year ago and months before Public Television announced a plan to serialize Tess of the D'Urbervilles as a Masterpiece Classics program last January. Thus, even the casual television watcher now has the ability to ask embarrassingly well-researched questions.)

So, to readers and/or television watchers who were able to discern the topic was a critique of Tess of the D'Urbervilles, I am truly sorry to throw you a Rule 22 curve. In the true tradition of the Kit Kat Club, Thomas Hardy's novel is only a springboard to my topic.

Those who watched the television series, studied the novel or, read the Cliff Notes thinking that the novel itself is the topic of tonight's talk have no doubt crafted incisive questions which will clearly develop Thomas Hardy's plot and the public debate that resulted from the book's publication. Unfortunately, other than watching the television program, I am not a huge fan of either Thomas Hardy or Tess of the D'Urbervilles.

In Tess of the D'Urbervilles, the essential problem starts on the book's first page, when a troublemaking parson calls Tess's lower class bumpkin father, John Durbeyfield, "Sir John."

The disheveled dad stops in his tracks. "What might your meaning be in calling me 'Sir John' these different times, when I be plain Jack Durbeyfield, the haggler?" he says in a lower class dialect which I am unable to mimic.

(By the way, a haggler is a middleman between the farmer and the market. John is clearly not a part of British society – a step down from a stableman or a field worker.)

The parson claims he has done research. "Don't you really know, Durbeyfield," he goes on, "that you are the lineal representative of the ancient and knightly family of the d'Urbervilles, who derive their descent from Sir Pagan d'Urberville, that renowned knight who came from Normandy with William the Conqueror?"

So, lowly haggler John Durbeyfield is led to believe that he (John), and therefore his family and most certainly his eldest daughter Tess Durbeyfield, were most likely descended from the socially prominent d'Urberville family. And so, Tess Durbeyfield, the dewy innocent milkmaid heroine of Thomas Hardy's tragic novel, Tess of the d'Urbervilles, is destroyed not by rape or heartbreak; what does her in is genealogy. Suffice it to say, the topic I wish to talk about tonight is genealogy.

For a hobby that revolves around dead people, genealogy is remarkably alive. In addition, there have been some recent developments in the field of genealogy. My interest in

genealogy has always been high, but it is because of these recent developments, that genealogy became a hobby of mine.

The word “genealogy” is derived from the Old French through Latin and Greek from "Genea" meaning descent and "logos" meaning student of, and it means the study of family history and descent. Genealogies, or the recorded histories of the descent of a person or family from their ancestors, are also often referred to as family trees or lineages. The basic objectives of genealogical research are to identify ancestors and their family relationships.

Most people are interested in where they came from. Genealogy satisfies a broad human curiosity to find out about yourself and your family, and to put each in a broader context. For instance, I enjoy history – I was a history major in college. Searching my family’s ancestors enhances my enjoyment of history on a personal level. A Civil War battle is much more interesting to me because I had several ancestors who fought in it.

The Edict of Nantes which granted toleration to the French Huguenots was of little significance to me when I studied European history, until I learned that my French Huguenot ancestors were driven from France and eventually came to the United States as a result of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Family history and world history coexist. The study of genealogy helps understand the two on a personal level.

Genealogy produces a product and that product is a family

tree, a family history or report that can be shared with your children and other relatives and thereby provide them with a sense of their place in the family with respect to their parents and their grandparents.

Genealogy in most families was frequently the hobby of a remote family member, usually an aunt or cousin, trying to trace family roots to qualify for membership in the Daughters of the American Revolution (or in the Children of the Confederacy if you were raised below the Mason-Dixon Line).

It may interest you to know that the first genealogical society in the world was founded in 1845 in America. The New England Historic Genealogical Society was chartered in that year, two full years before a similar society was begun in England.

Even though genealogical societies were formed in the nineteenth century, genealogy has been important to many civilizations since ancient times.

Family history was important to the ancient Hebrews, in part because males had to prove decent from Aaron, the brother of Moses, in order to be eligible to hold priesthood. Indeed, the Bible provides, sometimes with excruciating detail, the linage of many biblical people. The first eight chapters of the book of First Chronicles give genealogies from Adam down through Abraham. First Chronicles 9:1 states, “so all Israel were reckoned by genealogies…”

Ancient Egyptians, Chinese and most other civilizations were well versed in the genealogies of their ruling dynasties as evidenced by the meticulous records they left behind

Genealogy was practiced by the ancient Romans to

distinguish between the patrician class (those with proven noble ancestry) and plebeians (commoners). Incidentally, the Romans were the first to give male children two or three names, personal names and the clan or family name.

The ancient Greeks employed genealogy as much as their neighbors, but their goal was to prove descent from a god or goddess. Thus they sought to use being related to a god or goddess as a means to achieve social status.

Times have not changed much. Today, people mention their being related to well-known people, both living and dead, as a sense of place. My wife's family likes the thought of being related to Stonewall Jackson; despite the fact this relationship is remote at best.

Genealogy would probably have remained a quiet, research oriented hobby it had been for years except for several relatively recent developments. First is the growth of personal computing, and second is the internet.

Just five generations of a husband and wife can produce over a thousand direct ancestral parents, grandparents and assorted great grandparents, and that does not even count the brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins. It is not unusual to have several thousand family members in a typical family tree database.

There are about a hundred million personal computers in the United States. The use of the personal computer has taken genealogy to a level not dreamed of just twenty years ago. With a personal computer and an off-the-rack genealogical program, people who are interested in their family trees can easily organize the mountains of data that each family tree contains. Personal computers have allowed genealogy

enthusiasts to quickly organize their files systematically.
The internet quickly adapted itself to surname lists, geographical lists and gave researchers access to information formerly only accessible by travel to libraries many miles away. All of a sudden, it was easy to locate information on cousins you did not know existed and to contact them and share information. Since it was so easy to obtain information and to organize it, more and more people began to pursue the hobby.
Genealogy has been described as the second most researched topic on the internet, just behind pornography.
The internet allowed these researchers to swap blocks of organized and collated family data. The internet encourages sharing, but sharing comes at a price. Sometimes information is on the internet is just plain wrong. Mistakes occur in transferring from records, incomplete information is sometimes fudged to get a logical result, and sometimes family stories get reported as fact. Every family history researcher wants to be accurate. So the source of information on the internet is or increasing importance.
One important source, the Mecca of genealogist, is Salt Lake City with its Family History Library maintained by the Church of Latter Day Saints. Today the library has records of more than 2 billion names in data bases; 2.4 million rolls of microfilm; and 278,000 books. This Mormon library's website gets six to seven million hits per day. In addition, Ancestry.com, a subscription service with a healthy fee, has 15 million users and 3 million contributors.
It is surprising, the number of times that private family details are inadvertently shared on the internet. Details that some

family members do not wish the world to know are blithely shared at the touch of a “send” button. Too late, once on the internet, family secrets are no longer secrets and have a shelf life of forever. The family has forever lost control of embarrassing personal family information.

A huge new business has grown up around servicing of genealogy researchers. (Not a replacement for Tad’s lost manufacturing businesses, but still a new enterprise that provides information for a fee to genealogists, young and old. These people spend money for information which they willingly share with others.)

There have been internet genealogy sites developed to search Native American ancestry, Asian ancestry, African ancestry (made popular by the television series “Roots”) and a myriad of others. Just recently, there was news of a way to trace the Phoenicia gene.

Well within the last ten years, there has been another recent development that has also transformed genealogy. As anyone who has seen even one episode of “Law and Order” on television can attest, DNA is here to stay. DNA is a very good recorder of family lines since it carries specific indicators or markers unique to an individual and also unique to a family line. So that's why DNA has become so popular for genealogists. Family lineages can be accurately traced and the result “guaranteed” when DNA verifies the information is accurate.

The hobby of genealogy, first transformed by computers and the internet, now has bifurcated into a genealogy sub-specialty, “genetic genealogy”.

Genetic genealogy is the use of the DNA to trace a family

line, usually the paternal line. Genetic information is passed from male to male, from father, to father, many generations back. Quite often the object is to trace ancestors and see if a questionable cousin is really a part of the family. All the descendants of a common ancestor will share the same or very similar family DNA. So a questionable male cousin gets tested along with a male family member. Their Y chromosome is used to trace up their direct line up to a common ancestor who should have matching DNA. In a nutshell, that's what genetic genealogy is. It is the use of DNA markers to match cousins up, to match lineages up, and to verify family groups.

Essentially, males always carry their Y chromosomes with them and genetic genealogists using DNA tests in tandem with family tree paper trails see if they're related. The maternal line can also be traced in a similar manner using the X chromosome since females do not carry a Y chromosome. DNA is perfect for genealogists because it's a very good record, and it is kept with the person at all times. Papers can get lost, burned or simply not copied accurately, so usually, DNA evidence trumps paper documentation.

At first the cost of genetic testing was very expensive. Genetic testing has been drastically reduced each year. For instance, Ancestry.com will furnish a basic DNA analysis for $79 while a complete DNA test costs less than $500. This reduction is something on the order of one-half each year for the last ten years.

Such a price reductions fueled a greater use of testing services. As the cost of DNA testing dropped, more tests were ordered, and more results were shared on the internet.

More sharing created more interest and demand, which resulted in lower prices.

While such DNA tests are completely voluntary, companies doing the tests have ownership rights to the results. Only recently has the use of these DNA databases come under own examination as potential invasions of privacy. The federal government has enacted legislation that forbids genetic discrimination. (This legislation passed the House 417 to 1 and the Senate vote was unanimous.) The potential harm that has been recognized, but this legislation is new and un-interpreted. Many believe there is a real danger of improper use of genetic material collected for genealogical reasons.

As I mentioned, DNA testing is individual specific, but family group members share common DNA "markers". Consequently, any family member that volunteers to be DNA tested is, in a sense, volunteering for other family members, whether they like it or not.

I recently read an article in the New York Times titled "As Data Collecting Grows, Privacy Erodes". Family DNA collections are growing and are being widely shared over the internet. Aside from embarrassing issues such as paternity, there are many health issues embedded in this material.

Just last week, billionaire Google founder Sergy Brin, who also co-founded a genealogy DNA testing facility, announced a Parkinson's disease genetic marker search and offered participants a subsidized DNA test for just $25. His genealogical DNA testing service would help subsidize the venture, along with his undisclosed large donation for the study of Parkinson's disease. His idea is to provide a research data base to help scientists find a cure for Parkinson's disease.

His goals are not totally altruistic, his mother has Parkinson's disease, and he has a genetic mutation that sharply raised his risk for developing the disease. The genetics company conducting the tests suggested that the studies may become a source of revenue for the company, if, for instance, drug companies were to pay to mine the data base.

A stated goal of the new administration is to have all health records on the internet. Genetic genealogists may have already beaten them to the punch.

If there is a take-a-way to my remarks this evening, it is the concern I have about potential abuse of these huge DNA data bases. While there are enacted laws against discrimination based upon genetics, I can see developing issues of privacy and subtle discrimination as more and more secrets of genetics are discovered.

If poor Tess Durbeyfield (or Tess D'Urberville) were alive today, she could easily have searched whether her family was related to the D'Urberville family, and had her father's DNA tested. She could have ascertained if the D'Urberville family retained any wealth. Ultimately, she could have gotten answers to her life's worries, but in doing so, she might lose a bit of her privacy, Thomas Hardy would have a lost a plot for a novel, PBS would have lost a television series, and I would have lost a title for this essay.

Thank you!