



23 and We, Diversity, and Identity

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(Fam Med. 2021;53(10):894-5.)

doi: 10.22454/FamMed.2021.387356

In 2017, I received a DNA kit for Christmas. I spat in the tube, sealed it, and put it in the mailbox. At that very moment, a flood of emotions came over me as I wondered, “What if I am not really who I think I am?”

Two months went by before the report arrived. I stared at it in disbelief. The report said I was 80.2% European and 15% Native American. “Does this mean I am not Mexican after all?” I thought to myself. Panicked, I called my half sister, who told me that my mom had a relationship with another man other than Juan, the man I always thought was my father. She told me he may have been Irish. “WHAT?! I am 42 years old and this is the first I have heard of this?” was my shocked response.

Fortunately, I did not take this report at face value and did some research about the findings on the report. I am 30% Iberian (Spanish) and the Native American is from Natives of Mexico. A wave of relief washed over me; at least I am who I think I am... but who is that exactly?

I have always struggled with my identity. My half siblings all have the same father, who is Jewish. I look like them, but subtly different, enough so that when I was a child, my family would point out the differences. I have always felt I have the right to identify as Hispanic, but

have felt conflicted, not having the cultural background.

I have never met my biological father. I had never even seen a picture of him. By the time I was born, my mother already had three almost-grown children. My mother suffered from severe mental illness and I was placed in foster care at age 8 years, and mostly raised by my half sister. I last saw my mother when I was 17; she provided very little information about my father and died when I was in my 20s. I have spent much of my life referring to my half sister and her husband as my mother and father to shield myself from the discomfort of explaining the complexity of my identity.

In 2015, I started working as family medicine residency faculty in Salinas, California, a farming community with a large Hispanic immigrant population.

One of my family physician attending colleagues, “M.,” is of Mexican descent, grew up in Salinas, and is enmeshed in the community. Despite M.’s great positive energy, I always felt anxious in her presence, wanting her to like me. I guess in some ways I felt like a fraud, caring for a community I would never truly be a part of. I invited her to teach advanced life support in obstetrics with me in India in 2017. During that trip, we swapped life stories. M. was born at the same hospital we worked at. She told me that her

mother was one of 20 kids, and that both of her parents were migrants from Mexico who sacrificed everything for their children.

After I got my DNA kit back, I looked at the DNA website and it listed many of my relatives with Hispanic names. I showed M. a picture I found of one of my possible relatives from Facebook, and asked, “Do you think he looks like me?”

“I don’t know, but he’s from the same town as my family,” she said.

Surprised, I told her, “Maybe we are cousins!” She rolled her eyes and smiled.

I joked with her about doing her own DNA kit, which she finally did in 2018. One day over text message she sent me an eye roll emoji. We are third to fifth cousins!

A few days later, M. talked to her mom. After M. shared with her the name of my biological father, her mother said she knew him. She also knew the name of his wife, and one of his daughters. One slow call night in the hospital, I cross referenced the names with the DNA site and Facebook for about 4 hours, making very elaborate diagrams. I determined the identity of my half sister and direct-messaged her. Much to my relief, she responded very graciously. She confirmed that the story I knew as

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likely true: my mother was a waitress at a restaurant where my father also worked as a cook. He commuted back and forth in the 1970's from Orange County, California, where I was born, to Mexico. My half sister sent me pictures of herself; she looked like me. I scanned the next picture and saw the first image I had ever seen of my biological father. I stared at my phone with no thoughts, just tears. I whispered to myself, "Now I know."

In 2020, I left Salinas to take a faculty position at the University of New Mexico. When I left, M. gave a speech, telling the story of our connection. She said, "When I met Jessi, I wasn't certain if she was friend

or foe. Could I trust her to serve and care for my *gente*? I discovered there were many commonalities, including a passion for empowering women and improving the health of the most vulnerable communities. I began to feel a strange connection with this once-potential threat... she was neither friend nor foe. She was family." M. then handed me a certificate that read "World's Best Cousin." We embraced with tears in both our eyes. I will forever be grateful for my relationship with M. and our journey together.

Reflecting on my career as a family physician, I have always known I wanted to help people who grew up underserved as I did, but the role

my ethnicity plays is something I am just learning to recognize. Sharing my story has helped foster relationships and certainly has helped with my own sense of identity and belonging. This journey has taught me to be brave and get to know and see my colleagues, residents, students, and patients, and to let them see me. Forming connections can reap rewards and may reveal something extraordinary, like it did for M. and me—a missing piece of who we both are.

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