

I've been researching my family history, and the histories of others' families, for over 40 years, and I thought I knew some stuff. I did learn that my history is straightforward: I am made up of stock that came from Western Europe, and moved north over the last 1000 years. [Genealogical DNA testing](#) helped me to prove that, but the increasing proliferation of online genealogical resources made the DNA result an anti-climax.

I wanted a challenge, so I started doing genealogy for a friend from junior high who has always self-identified as Black. He was surprised when he got his [genealogical DNA test](#) back and found that he was more Western and Northern European than he ever could have expected. In fact, it stunned him and challenged his self-identification for a while. I offered to do his work with him in conjunction with the information he was gaining from distant relatives he found via DNA. He took me up on it, but only after some months. He needed to let the shock wear off before he could accept the surprises to come.

As a White person with long-term exposure to little and big genealogical surprises, I couldn't understand why his genetic discoveries were hurtful to him. As we discussed it, I came to understand that his self-identity was 0% White. He was African and Native American, and nothing else, as far as he knew. His sense of family history did not involve institutionalized rape. Since the DNA didn't lie, he had to face up to this ugliness existing in his family's background, and to his undeniable descent from humans who purchased other humans and treated them like belongings.

I took it for granted that he'd find these things. But that was a White perspective. I didn't understand that his pride was assaulted. I had to examine my lack of understanding and learn a new lesson or two in compassion, White Fragility and the fact that I had no notion of what it is to be Black in a White-created and White-run society.

Contemporaneously, my friend and I witnessed a bigoted, hate-filled political surge among our old schoolmates that horrified and disgusted us both. I couldn't believe the comments I read daily online. In response, some of my Black friends withdrew from Facebook even after

blocking [White Supremacist](#) (former) friends because the hurt was so deep. I felt the need to fight this, so after blocking the truly vicious, I started to read and internalize hard truths about my own [racism](#), [prejudice](#), [bigotry](#), [White Privilege](#), and above all [White Fragility as defined by Dr. Robin DiAngelo](#).

Some of my ancestors were Dutch and British-descended slave owners. One 3x great-grandfather fought for the Confederacy. I was raised to believe that I was 100% Northern, and learning of my slavery roots wrenched MY world off its axis. I was embarrassed and ashamed. I felt guilty. Then, I got over myself. I started to think in terms of reparations.

Guilt in the 21st century for the actions of others 200-400 years ago is self-indulgence. I am not responsible for the actions of past generations. I can, however, change and improve myself now. My actions in the present and future govern my role in reparations.

I can't provide social justice. I can't provide financial, educational or employment reparations. But, as a genealogist, I can give Black seekers back the families that my ancestors and the ancestors of my fellow White Americans brutalized and tore asunder. I call this *Reparational Genealogy*. And working *together* with your client is the key.

I believe that Reparational Genealogy is the next wave in truthful movement forward toward honest (if difficult) discussions about race. The first step in White America's acceptance of its own privilege is to accept responsibility and find ways to improve the future. Whites benefit today from 400 years of Black enslavement, and Blacks still suffer despite all of the legal battles they've fought and won. The least they should have is access to their ancestry.

If we are aiming for wholism, for parity in our society, then we have to consider things like giving those whose ancestry was destroyed and obscured the chance to look back over their shoulders and see the strong people who formed them. My friend's genealogy shows he has a bloodline that goes back to Lancashire in England, some Iroquois Nation blood, and the blood not only of the enslaved but of free men who fought in the Colored Troops of Maryland

for the North. He even has Viking DNA markers. Initially this diversity upset him a lot, but I feel like the work that we have done *together* (and we confer almost every night as I do the research) is helping him to accept his European self as well as to see the amazing strengths of body and mind that have been handed down to him by his sub-Saharan ancestors.

Everybody deserves this. I believe in this wholism with all of my heart. So, anybody with the skills, jump in. Not everyone can get on “[Who Do You Think You Are?](#)” or “[Finding Your Roots.](#)”

As a friend said to me, “the things lost cannot be replaced. This should only be about righting the wrongs in the best way possible should those who are living it find it valuable.” Therefore, Reparational Genealogy should be available to those who want it but not forced upon anyone.

I am calling upon every genealogist in this country, of every ethnicity, to dedicate a portion of his or her work to providing free genealogical research to any person of color who wants it. It’s not about charity, or bleeding hearts. It’s not about self-righteousness or personal glory. And it’s really not about being a savior or about ramming this “solution” down peoples’ throats and expecting gratitude. It’s about making services available and being prepared to do the work should those services be requested.


Genealogists, advertise on your web site that you’re going to do Reparational Genealogy, and please put some respect on my name. Get into [Random Acts of Genealogical Kindness](#) on Facebook and put out the word. Set realistic goals for how many clients you’ll take at a time. Set yourself a policy for what percentage of your work is pro bono. Make yourself available, and see what happens.

And if you are a White hobbyist, do the very best work that you can on your own tree, and provide information to people when they request it. Be open, be gracious, be supportive, and be a part of the solution. You may not be able to assist others with their work by teaching or researching, but you WILL assist others if you can provide data on your own direct or ancillary

ancestors that can help fill in blanks for Black researchers and seekers. Let's be that community, that family, for which we all hunger and thirst.

Let the work begin.

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