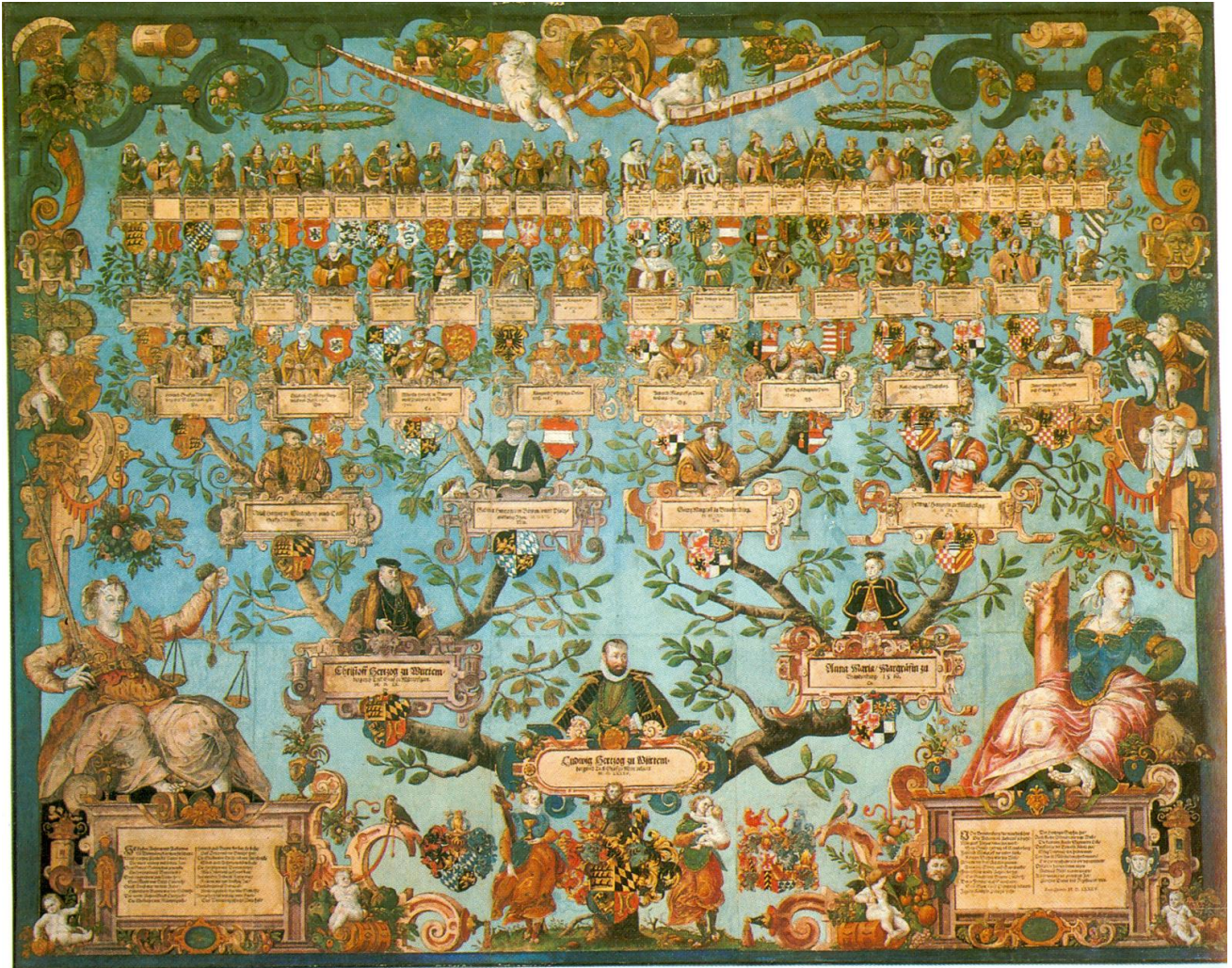


Extremely Far and Incredibly Close: A Genealogical Journey

by Bruce Bawer



Long, long ago, when I was a teenager and a 20-something and the internet was still a gleam in Al Gore's eyes, I used to make my way, every so often, to the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue – specifically, to a long-since-abolished division off one of the two main reading rooms. The division was devoted to Local History and Genealogy, and I was there to hunt down my ancestors. On my very first day there, I made a major discovery: a book devoted to the Bristow family of Middlesex County, Virginia, in which I found a line of descent on my mother's side that led all the way back to the 1600s,

when an ancestor of mine named John Bristow arrived in the New World from the English port of Bristol.

That was a thrill. But it also misled me into believing that the job of ancestor-hunting would be easy. On the contrary, it ended up taking a great deal more time and work than I ever expected to trace a couple more lines on my mother's side back to colonial times. Meanwhile, despite long hours spent poring through books in the Slavic division, Polish and Russian dictionaries at hand, and writing letters to state archives in the USSR, the forebears of my father's parents – who'd emigrated to America from Polish Galicia – proved impossible to track down.

The time I spent researching my family tree was carved out from a busy work schedule. Soon enough, no longer able to justify to myself stealing so much time for what increasingly seemed like a frivolous pastime, I gathered all my notes in a folder and put it away in the basement of my parents' house in Queens. Decades later, when I'd long since moved to Norway, my [parents](#) had died, and my sister had moved back into their house after a long sojourn in California, she got the genealogy bug, dug out my file, and picked up where I'd left off.

Of course, in the many years since I'd left off my research, the world had changed drastically. Thanks to the internet, discoveries that had once come with great difficulty (if at all), after dozens of hours of poring through dusty books, could now be made instantaneously online. My sister was soon able to push past what I had experienced as an invisible boundary between colonial and pre-colonial times. For a brief while, I pitched in too, tracing a few lines back to what proved to be a genuinely impenetrable border – the one between the Middle Ages and ancient times. I learned that genealogists, despite considerable efforts to establish a definitive family connection between any medieval figure and anyone in the ancient world – or, as the professionals say, to

establish a “descent from antiquity” – hadn’t yet managed to do so: the devastation wrought by the Germanic tribes who conquered the Roman Empire had been just that thorough.

Hence the earliest direct ancestor of mine whom I was able to find was Chlodio, born in A.D. 390, who, at the very dawn of the Middle Ages, ruled parts of what are now Belgium and northern France. There’s nothing special, of course, about being descended from the so-called highborn. Everyone with European antecedents is. Once you push a certain number of generations into the past, almost all the ancestors you manage to find are going to be royals or aristocrats, because those are the people whose birth and death records are most likely to have survived. It’s been said that everyone with European blood is a descendant of Charlemagne. (I’ve established that I am.) It’s also been said that everyone with British ancestry is a descendant of Edward III. (He, too, is on my tree.)

Between me and Chlodio are 53 generations. (Include me and him, and it’s 55.) Starting with me and going back in time along this particular line of descent, it takes nine generations of Southerners to reach the first American settler. That would be the Rev. David Stuart, whose father, back in Scotland, was Charles Stuart, the Earl of Moray, born in 1656. Charles’s paternal grandfather, also an Earl of Moray, was named James Stuart. His great-great-grandfather was James IV, King of Scotland, whose own maternal grandfather was Christian I, King of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Head north from Christian along a specific path and you run through nine generations of the House of Oldenberg, then five generations of the House of Werl-Rietberg, and seven generations of the House of Bourgogne. Two more generations back and you land on Pepin the Short, King of the Franks, born 714, and then on his father, Charles Martel, who turned back the Arabs at the Battle of Tours in 732.

We then encounter a blizzard of medieval-sounding names – Childeric, Clothair, etc. – that, as it happens, are

recognizable from a single speech in Shakespeare's *Henry V*, when the Archbishop of Canterbury, at amusingly tiresome length, uses genealogy to justify Henry's claim to the French throne:

*King Pepin, which deposed Childeric,
Did, as heir general, being descended
Of Blithild, which was daughter to King Clothair,
Make claim and title to the crown of France...*

You may have heard of the "wheat and chessboard problem." Put a grain of wheat on a corner square of a chessboard, two grains in the next square, and so on. By the time you reach the 64th and final square, you'll have a total of over 18 quintillion grains. Adding up the number of names on a family tree works the same way: you have two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, and so on. Go back 54 generations, as I have on the line that leads back to Chlodio, and the number of ancestors that you have who are *also* 54 generations back is over 18 quadrillion, for a total number of ancestors between then and now that is exactly twice that number minus one.

How big a number is 18 quadrillion? Here's one way to think of it: if you wanted to publish your entire ancestral record back to that point in a series of thousand-page books, each containing a thousand names per page (in, of course, tiny print), you'd have to print out 36 billion books – 3,600 times the number of books contained in the collection of the New York Public Library. Now, it may have occurred to you that there were not 18 quadrillion people on Earth in A.D. 400. In fact, the total world population in A.D. 400 is estimated to have been about 200 million. How, then, can you have had 18 quadrillion ancestors at that point in history? Answer: massive redundancy. Even if everyone alive on earth in A.D. 400 were an ancestor of yours, each of those people's names would have to appear on your family tree an average of 90,000

times each.

In one sense, then, all this family-tree stuff could hardly be more meaningless. Similarly meaningless is to describe yourself as having this or that ethnic identity. I used to say that I was Polish and German on my father's side and English, Welsh, Scots, Scots Irish, and French on my mother's. Then my sister's early efforts uncovered the fact that we were part American Indian. Furthermore, while I'd always suspected that we were part Jewish on my father's side, my sister established that we were, surprisingly, Jewish on my *mother's* side – even though all of her American-settler ancestors, with the exception of a few French Huguenots, had come to America from the British Isles, with the most recent arrivals reaching our shores in the early 1800s. Further digging into our European roots disclosed ancestors from pretty much every corner of Europe – people with titles like Count of Holland, Margrave of Brandenburg, King of Leon and Castile, King of Italy, and so on. What am I, then, ethnically? Go back far enough and the question, indeed, loses all meaning.

Yet meaningless though it may be, it's a thrill to find the name of someone like Geoffrey Chaucer on one's family tree. Back when I was a student reading Chaucer, I didn't realize – I don't think most people realized – that beyond a certain point everyone with European blood is descended from pretty much everyone. I became aware of that reality some years ago. Yet finding one specific tie to Chaucer was a kick. It was one thing to know that he was back there someplace, another to be able to trace an exact connection. In one sense, the thrill is irrational, but in another sense it's understandable enough. For whereas 36 quadrillion is an incomprehensibly large number, 56 is a very small number.

Think, after all, of what a 56-generation-long family tree really is. Each link of it connects a child to his or her parents. Extend this single link by a generation or two in either direction, and there will still be intimate ties.

Nowadays, when many people know at least one of their great-grandparents and live long enough to know at least one of their great-grandchildren, you can extend that link even further, for a total of seven generations experienced directly by a single consciousness – fully one-eighth of a 56-generation chain.

Given such personal connections between great-grandparent and great-grandchild, a family's memory should, theoretically, in such circumstances, stretch over at least six generations. But does it, in practice? Consider one of my great-great-grandfathers in that line of mine that leads back to Chlodio. James Valentine Dozier (1837–63) was an ordinary fellow in small-town South Carolina and was the great-great-grandson of the son of a Scottish nobleman, the Earl of Moray. But did he know that? I suspect not. And I'm certain that his own grandson, my maternal grandfather, didn't know – even though, knowing what I do about him, I'm sure he would've found it fascinating, and would've shared the information with his children and grandchildren. How quickly the clouds of time close on such things!

William Maxwell (1908–2000), the gifted novelist who grew up in Illinois and went on to become the long-time fiction editor of the *New Yorker*, reflected on this phenomenon in a 1971 book, [Ancestors](#), about his own family tree. Unable to trace it back more than six generations, he observed that when you're dealing with an American family from the Midwest,

no sooner do you begin to perceive the extent of the proliferation of ancestors backward into time than they are lost from sight. Every trace of them disappears, through the simple erosion of human forgetfulness. They were in movement in a new country. The women were committed to drudgery and died young. The men had no proper tools to farm with, and weren't good farmers anyway... With their minds always on some promised land, like the Old Testament figures they so much resembled, they did not bother to record or even remember the

place of their origin.

But is this forgetfulness just a Midwestern thing? It seems to me that most people who aren't aristocrats don't know or care much about their ancestry. When, as a teenager, I triumphantly informed my uncle Everett and his wife, Virginia, that they were fifth cousins, they couldn't have cared less. Other relatives have greeted such information with similar indifference. Which is healthy, I guess. There's no sensible reason to care about these things. As I've indicated, the further back you go, the more meaningless the whole thing becomes, as one's own tree stops looking like a tree and becomes, instead, part of some massive spider web in which all of us, alive and dead, are trapped.

The ultimate lesson of genealogy, namely that we're all related, is also the point of the famous concept of "six degrees of separation." The notion that everyone on Earth is connected to everyone else by only a few links on a chain of social relationships – a notion born out of the growing awareness, in the early 20th century, that technological advances such as the telephone and commercial air flight were making the world smaller and smaller – was explored by, among others, the prolific, eccentric Hungarian mathematician Paul Erdos (1913–96). In 1929, Erdos's countryman Frigyes Karinthy, an author, wrote a short story, "Chains," in which one of the characters challenges the others to find one person on Earth who can't be connected to him through five steps. In 1967, Yale social psychologist Stanley Milgram coined the term "six degrees of separation" and tried to test it by sending packages from the West Coast of the U.S. to the East. But the person most responsible for the popularization of the "six degrees" concept is apparently John Guare, author of the 1990 [play](#) and 1993 [movie](#) *Six Degrees of Separation*.

In *Six Degrees of Separation*, a charming, intelligent young black man enters the life of Flan and Ouisa Kittredge, a

prosperous couple on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. He identifies himself as Paul Poitier and says he's the son of Sidney Poitier and a friend of their children at Harvard. He certainly knows a lot about them. And so they open their home to him. But it turns out that he's not Poitier's son and not acquainted with their kids; he's a grifter. But how did he find his way to them – and learn so much about them? Even after they kick him out of their home, Ouisa remains preoccupied with, and worried about, Paul. No, he has no real connection to them. But what does it really *mean* to have such a connection? This is where the “six degrees” idea comes in. In one scene Ouisa says, reflectively, to her daughter,

I read somewhere that everybody on this planet is separated by only six other people. Six degrees of separation between us and everyone else on this planet. The president of the United States, a gondolier in Venice, just fill in the names. I find that extremely comforting that we're so close, but ... I also find it like Chinese water torture that we're so close, because you have to find the right six people to make the connection. It's not just big names, it's anyone. A native in a rainforest, a Tierra del Fuegan, an Eskimo. I am bound – you are bound – to everyone on this planet by a trail of six people. It's a profound thought.

It *is* a profound thought. But is it true? A few years ago, the honchos at Facebook determined that fully 99.6 percent of the platform's users were connected by only five steps, and 92 percent were connected by only four; the average number of steps was 3.5. In Norway, where I live, the “six degrees” thesis has been tested on a weekly basis by a TV series called *Jorden rundt på seks steg* (*Around the World in Six Steps*), on which an ever-changing team of two Norwegian personalities is sent to one spot on the globe and tasked with establishing a chain of acquaintances between some randomly chosen person there and a given celebrity somewhere else on the globe.

Week after week, they succeed. Starting with a cook in a remote Panamanian hamlet, our TV hosts found their way, step by step, to an actress in Helsinki; in the same way, they established a connection between a Vietnamese farmer and a soccer star in London. They also managed to link a tuk-tuk driver in a Cambodian fishing village with Michael Bolton in Los Angeles, although that one took seven steps and involved visits to Germany, the Netherlands, Idaho, and Arizona. Then again, the hosts of another episode managed to get from a village elder in Lesotho to Wyclef John in just five steps.

It's moving, actually. The fact that it's possible to establish such a short connection between any two people on this planet stirs the human imagination, and the human heart, in much the same way as the ability to trace a line of descent between Charlemagne and anyone with European blood. The mathematical processes whereby an inconceivably large set of items – people, in this case – can be parsed in such a way as to yield a small group of elements that link one end of the set with another and make the whole picture seem comprehensible seems to hint at some kind of inherent magic of nature whereby each of us, in spite of everything, is able to feel as if he or she isn't, after all, a mere grain of sand on some endless beach.

To be sure, sometimes while watching the Norwegian series I get the impression that I'm being nudged in the direction of viewing myself as a global citizen. This form of sentimentality, which is often tied up with a belief in socialist economic programs and a starry-eyed idealization of the UN and other international organizations, finds expression in such songs as John Lennon's "Imagine." In her *Timeless* special, recorded on New Year's Eve 2000, Barbra Streisand sings a song, "At the Same Time," that includes this lyric: "Think of all the hearts,/ Beating in the world/ At the same time." In her introduction to the song, Streisand seems to imply that if you embrace its message of human brotherhood,

you should also necessarily subscribe to a radical politics of worldwide income redistribution. No, thanks.

Yes, the Norwegian series highlights some very charming encounters between the Norwegian hosts and locals in various far-flung places, proving that people everywhere can be lovely and that if we have a touch of humility, a love of adventure, and a sense of humor we can get along well enough with most of them. But, intentionally or not, the series also underscores the vast cultural differences between, to put it simply, the West and the rest. In Cambodia, the hosts come across cooked dog at an open-air market. In Kyrgyzstan, they meet a man who acquired his wife by kidnapping her from her family. In Jordan, the “start person” is a judge who, it turns out, sentences petty thieves to have their hands cut off.

“We’re more like one another than we think,” somebody on the Norwegian series tells us. Well, yes and no. Agreed, we’re all members of the human race, with DNA that’s more than 99.9 percent identical from one individual to the next. But cultural barriers are very real – as are temporal ones. How similar are we to Edward III or Charlemagne? “The minds of different generations,” wrote André Maurois, “are as impenetrable one by the other as are the monads [atoms] of Leibniz.” Perhaps the most interesting thing both about visiting foreign countries and about studying the worlds of our ancestors is the opportunity that these experiences give us to learn about people whose elemental loves and hatreds, hopes and fears we may identify with quite readily, but who live in circumstances that may strike us as utterly alien, and that give rise to thoughts that may well diverge dramatically from our own.

Which is fine. Why, after all, would we pursue genealogical research or travel the world if these activities led us only into a hall of mirrors?

First published in the