

Finding out that the man you call 'Dad' is not your biological father from a consumer DNA test can have a devastating impact. Now there is a story guide for people who make this discovery, their loved ones, and genealogists who uncover them.

NPE* A story guide for unexpected DNA discoveries:
(*a non-paternity event - when 'Dad' is not your biological father)
By Leeanne R. Hay

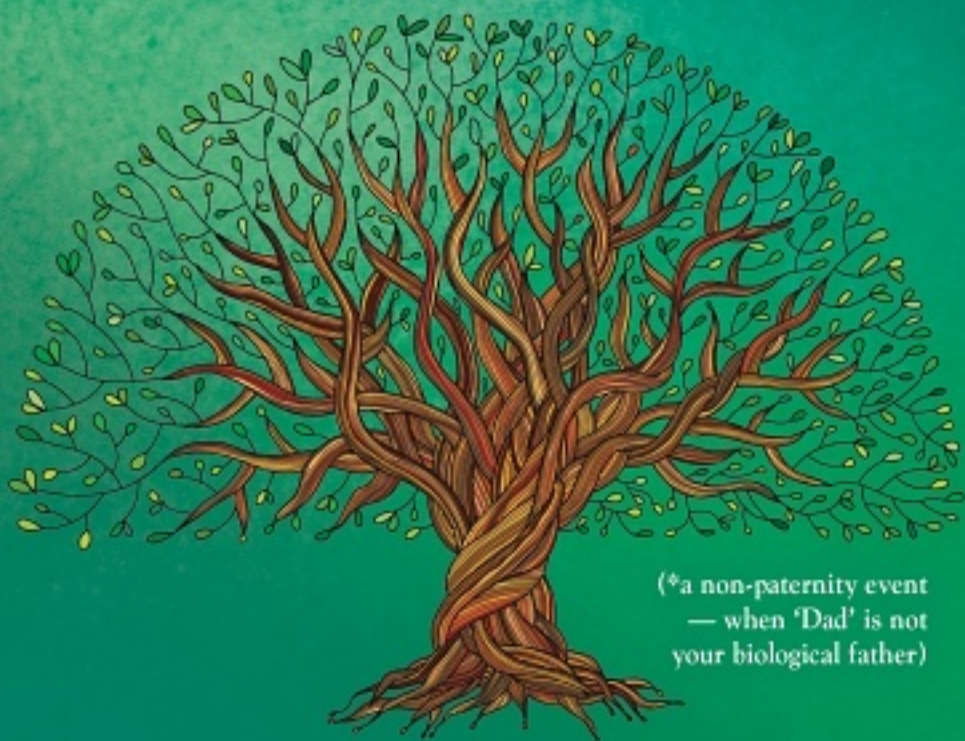
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NPE*

A STORY GUIDE FOR UNEXPECTED DNA DISCOVERIES



(*a non-paternity event
— when 'Dad' is not
your biological father)

LEEANNE R. HAY

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-64718-608-1

Epub ISBN: 978-1-64718-609-8

Mobi ISBN: 978-1-64718-610-4

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hay, Leeanne R., 1959 –

NPE* A story guide for unexpected DNA discoveries

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020909169

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2022

First Edition

DISCLAIMER

This book details the author's personal experiences, research, and opinions about unexpected DNA discoveries leading to non-paternity events (NPE), the genetic genealogy term for a break in the hereditary line. Most commonly today, it is attributed to people who find out their biological father (BF) is not the father listed on their birth certificate (BCF). The author is not a geneticist, attorney, or healthcare professional, nor does she represent herself as such.

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Introduction

In 2013, *The Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) reporter Elizabeth Bernstein interviewed me for her regularly featured column “Bonds” about human interactions and relationships. The topic and subsequent title of the article was, “When being alone turns to loneliness.” She questioned me about being an only child and the behaviors I embraced to enjoy being alone and minimize loneliness. The article was well-received, and an invitation to be a guest with Elizabeth on an episode of *Lunch Break*, a WSJ live-streamed webcast during the workweek covering news, business, and life interest stories followed.

Elizabeth presented the insights of experts she interviewed and spoke about their findings during the show. I discussed my life experiences and interactions as an only child when I was young and an adult. It was a public testimony about how my mother raised me to be independent and responsible for my enjoyment in life. I recalled being persuaded by her to “do things on your own because you never know who you might meet or what you might learn.”

As I said the words at that moment, I had a quick flashback to my feelings of aloneness while attending church as a small child by myself for many years. Those circumstances had seeded my faith that grew into a constant companion. I didn’t mention this.

I also didn't reveal the painful memories of my mother and the man I believed was my biological father then. I still wondered about their turbulent relationship and why they limited their involvement in my childhood by choice.

Inside our small home, my mother's verbal cruelty and deceit also resided. During that webcast, I did not fully understand my childhood family dynamic. I only knew how my parents' words and marriage impacted me then and how I chose to respond. I had yet to discover the truths of my parentage, ethnicity, and half of my family culture were incomplete.

Four years later, in 2017, I would be enticed by a television commercial to purchase a home DNA testing kit in a moment of reflection about my mortality. Confident in the big picture of my heritage at that moment, I hoped in the tiny DNA percentages that consumer testing revealed there might be an unknown connection that was interesting and fun.

The results were devastating.

Unknown to me then, I was at the beginning of a quest to make peace with this new truth, my identity, and three families. I would be persistent in pursuing answers and information; I would be angry over the facts uncontrollably lost to time. Two years would pass as I unraveled what I could and purposefully put aside what could not ever be known.

Seared in my memory were the out-of-context snips of old conversations. These kept me searching and reaching out to others through emails, phone calls, and secret social media platforms. With every personal interaction and the dozens of stories I read, I kept asking myself an unanswerable question, "How could this be happening to me now?" It was a question many others were asking, too.

I hoped that the hunt to translate this mountain of information into a story would lead me to understand why my mother and biological father had crafted an open relationship between him and me - in full view of the man I loved and called Dad.

My anger and feelings of helplessness were sometimes overwhelming. Initially, woven into my identity was the debilitating hatred for all lies confronting me. The discovery was physically damaging my quality of life, and I had to unleash myself from it. Yet, I was determined not to let anyone (dead or alive) destroy my self-respect and desire to know my ancestors. I understood that forgiving those who echoed lies for years would release me from the dead weight of my anger, but I *just couldn't let it go* until I allowed myself to comprehend what I was honestly undergoing.

“I sat with my anger long enough until she told me her real name was grief,” my cousin, Emily-the-therapist, posted on her counseling practice’s Facebook page one day.

And there it was. The answer I was searching for in a meme.

I felt the weightlessness of relief when I identified my feelings as grief – a deep, unrelenting sadness. The burdens of being gaslighted as a child and the subject of harsh judgments for something I did not do from a new sibling gained a new perspective. I had nothing to be ashamed of in my pursuit of the truth about my existence. Instead, I needed to mourn what I had lost, what had been denied me through no fault of my own. The realization of naming my shock as grief was healing, and a flood of refreshing thoughts and emotions enveloped me.

I was secure in my straightforward pursuit to understand my new identity, and it no longer mattered to me whether encounters about my discovery were rich with exchanges or a complete shutdown to requests. Others’ recollections, opinions, and even silences were not a reflection of me. Instead, I accepted positive connections as gifts from those who

wanted to share their stories and selves. Those who were unproductive dead ends I allowed to dissipate from my life like a harmless mist.

Long ago, others paved my life's path with a lie that they had chosen. I could stay on it or take a different direction with the truth and no guarantees of acceptance.

I set out to find new bonds.

Genealogy is the pursuit of truth,
and if you choose to begin researching your family's history,
you had better be prepared to accept whatever truths you uncover.

- Bill Griffeth
American financial journalist,
author, genealogist (and NPE)

Chapter 1

My story of an unexpected DNA discovery

One of my earliest memories of a moral dilemma happened when I was six years old and talking to our milkman, Al. It was the 1960s. I can see him in his dark green Abbott's Dairy uniform with his name embroidered in red on the left side of his shirt, brown eyes smiling down at me. My grandmother had been standing beside me. Then, she abruptly left the front door stoop of our small house in Philadelphia. She needed to get some more money to buy her favorite cinnamon raisin bread.

Al patiently waited with his basket of 'add-on sales' to go with the milk he delivered. I stood there entranced by the boxes of chocolate-covered doughnuts I was never allowed to have. The packages, wrapped in crystal-like cellophane, crinkled as Al adjusted his inventory. He said to me, "Where's your mom?" Glancing away from the doughnuts, I looked up at him and said, "She's in the hospital."

"Is she having a baby?" he asked with an expectant, half-smile.

That's when the dilemma presented itself.

Did I want to be like every other kid I knew in the neighborhood?

I wanted to say, "Yes, she's having a baby," more than I wanted those chocolate-covered doughnuts. I had wished and prayed for a

sibling. I idealized siblings as built-in friends and playmates. Another child there with me in a house of adults meant I wouldn't be alone.

For half of a split second, I thought how good it would feel to say that I was going to have a sibling even though I wasn't. I stood there longing to tell a lie like tasting those little doughnuts in search of sweet comfort. I thought I would never experience either. But, as small as I was then, I still felt a pull towards the truth and the safety I believed it would provide.

In the other half of that split second, my survival instinct kicked in. It reminded me that I would eventually be caught in a lie when no baby showed up. Even for a moment, it wasn't worth a beating from my mother to feel just like all the other kids I knew.

I told Al, "No, she's having an operation." Al must have said something nice to me as my grandmother reappeared and paid him. Then, standing at the door, I watched him walk back down the front steps to his delivery truck, carrying his basket of pastries with one less loaf of bread. I remember feeling sad. There was no baby sibling and no doughnuts for me.

I would one day buy myself those elusive chocolate doughnuts when I was an adult. It would feel empowering, even though the taste wasn't as enjoyable as I imagined it would be. I also continued to remember my little self-aware morality interchange throughout my life. I held the importance of telling the truth above all other attributes and morals. Truthfulness was something sacred instilled in me by my mother.

In 2017 a few weeks before I was having a minor surgical procedure, I found myself anxious about all the 'what ifs' that go along with being administered anesthesia. Of course, it was improbable that 'something might happen,' but then we live in a world where it does all the time. As I sat comfortably on the sectional sofa with the TV on

softly in our family room, my anxiety began to take my thoughts one step further. I looked out the windows to the pergola-covered patio. In the garden beyond, a bounty was blooming in the bright orange canna flowers. It was late summer in suburban Dallas, and I wondered, “What if I die?”

To drive out that thought, I glanced back inside and scanned the TV. A commercial for a DNA testing company was featuring a stunning multi-cultural young woman. She was traveling around the world to experience the places and people linked to her ancestry. In the background, a new-age synthesized melody played. She smiled in a montage of countries, and the phrase “We are all connected” glossed over the scenes. Then a smooth voice of the narrator said, “Know how your DNA connects you to the world.” It was a heartwarming and calculated sales pitch.

What if I could tell an enchanting story of my family's origins to my kids? Surely my Sicilian maternal side could be engaging and fun to know more about because of the island's history of diverse conquerors through the ages. My paternal side came from a small town in Slovenia for many generations before immigrating to the US. I was confident in the research a cousin of mine had done years earlier and expected to add very little to that side of my story. However, the promise of maternal genealogical infotainment and a potential new legacy proved to be a powerful motivator. So, I picked up my laptop and ordered a kit.

Six weeks had passed, and my surgery had been an absolute success without any complications. But, then ‘the something that might happen’ did.

I was at work in the back office of an acoustically perfect performance hall in downtown Dallas when the silent bomb dropped. I had received the email from the DNA testing company that

understatedly said, “We are excited to let you know the reports for you are now available. Click on View Reports.” And like Pandora opening the box, I did.

The home page of my ancestry was before me. It showed ‘Southern Italian – Southern European.’ “OK,” I thought. Then a brief smile came, “Ooh, look at this 1.5% North African – Western Asian/Egyptian. My love for old school R&B music *is* in my DNA.”

My eyes started to scan faster as I began to wonder, “Where’s my Slovenia side?” “What armies marched through there?” “Why is English – Scottish – French listed?”

I began clicking on tabs I didn’t understand. “Why am I in Marie Antoinette’s haplogroup?” “What the heck is a haplogroup?” “*Something is wrong,*” echoed like a frightening earworm in my head.

By now, I had drifted out of the office area to a quiet corridor. I kept searching the report despite feeling panicked. Like a child, I sensed a punishment was coming because I had done something wrong, but I didn’t know what I had done. Then I saw the subheading for ‘DNA Relatives’ under the ‘Ancestry’ tab. I clicked on it.

The staccato thoughts banging in my head came to a dead stop. I saw a man’s name I recognized at the top of the list – the oldest son of my mentor from decades ago was listed as my “half-brother.” Then I heard the clattering of my cell phone as it hit the white marble floor.

The physical reaction was so unsettling that I lost my balance. A worn velvet-covered bench caught my fall. The vast glass ceiling above pouring in a stream of light held the puff of dust that bloomed in my wake. Particles danced in silence while my shock dispersed like unseen waves moving out and then tossed a new reality in and over me.

My body felt a moment of hollowness as a metamorphosis reconfigured my life’s history.

I left work early. When I got home, I moved like a sleepwalker through the house my husband and I shared. I ended up in the bedroom closet and put on my softest sweat pants and a cotton t-shirt. Then I went and sat in my comfortable spot on the sectional sofa, gathering a small fleece throw blanket around me like a hug. I fell into the ease of mindless inaction. I sat and looked out the windows to the patio and the garden beyond, but I have no memory of anything in it. The evening came.

In the darkness, I wondered out loud this time, “Who am I?”

The lamp on a timer simultaneously clicked on as my husband, Gary, arrived home from work, breaking a long silence. Coming through the backdoor, he stopped just past the doorway. He looked at me and said, “What’s going on?” I told him to change into something comfortable and come back so we could talk. I added, “The kids are fine; I’m fine.” He took several steps towards our bedroom, stopped again, and turned around. Looking at me, he said, “Right, something’s up. Give me ten minutes.”

I sat for a few seconds more and then abruptly bolted from my spot with the thought, “I have nothing to remember *him*.”

I ran to the old wooden chest used as a buffet in the dining room. The lower three drawers were the storehouses of every photograph and childhood memento from birth in Philadelphia through my college graduation at Villanova University. This small collection was all that I had deemed ‘important’ until now. My mind that had been empty of all thoughts, started cranking out a rapid conversation with myself as I flung open each drawer and laid waste to its contents.

“Are there any photos of him?”

“There was one from high school graduation, but I think I tossed it. He was photo-bombing the shot with my parents.”

“That’s hilarious. A photo-bomb before it existed.”

“It was *all* of my parents.”

“I think I threw it out!”

“Maybe in my parents’ old photo boxes?” Nothing. “I have no photo to remember him or us together.”

“There must be something, somewhere... anything.”

“Wait! The letter.”

“The letter is in my scrapbook.”

“Here’s the letter.”

“Why did I keep the letter?”

“Who writes a letter like this to an 11-year-old?”

The last time I had read the letter, I was a teenage girl making the scrapbook I now held in my hands, decades later. I doubt if I understood its contents then, and only God knows how it survived all these years. What I was sure of was that I had loved this man who had been kind to me. I had called him “Uncle,” a term of respect in my mother’s family culture.

He wrote to me about my sixth-grade musical, *Peter Pan*. I had a lead role as ‘Wendy.’ I recalled receiving the letter by mail, and upon reading it, learned that he had been to the performance. I have a vague memory of being surprised that he had gone to see me in the play. I would continue to be surprised when he would show up unexpectedly at my life events through my twentieth birthday.

Now, I reread the letter as a married woman with grown children of my own — a message from my biological father, Uncle Tom.

May first, 1970

Dear Leeanne,

Congratulations on your delightful portrayal of the role of Wendy. Your stage presence was good, your speaking voice was clear and distinct, and your singing was done beautifully and with expression. Also, your sense of rhythm and the confidence and evident enjoyment you exuded in doing the role were outstanding and made the play so much more enjoyable for the audience.

I had an extra little laugh to myself as I watched you, through no fault of your own, trying to keep your head below the “clouds” when you and the others were “flying,” because it reminded me of a jingle I learned when I was a boy –

*I asked my mother for fifty cents
to see the elephant jump the fence
He jumped so high
He never got back 'til the fourth of July.*

As you journey along the pathways of life, you may decide to make a career of music, or singing, or acting, or instead become a scientist, a mathematician, a teacher, a mother, or to follow some other vocation. But right now the important thing is not what you will

ultimately decide to make your life's principal objective, but how well you prepare for making your whole life fuller and richer in every way.

Do you remember the parable of the talents in the Bible and how the careless servant who had one talent hid it in the ground? And, of course, was rightfully scolded by his master? Talents, as we all know, are many things besides money. So, if we have these God-given talents,

we should cherish them and be willing to work hard to develop them so that they will multiply just as the other two servants in the parable did.

Regular practice on an instrument of one's choice, extra study on some particularly difficult subject or problem and sacrificing a little pleasure here and there all can make your life more wonderful in later years, and not only that it will enrich the lives of others who will love and respect you for it.

As I watched you perform, I was certain the Lord has endowed you with many talents. It is my hope that He will also endow you with the wisdom to make the most of them.

Sincerely and affectionately,

Uncle Tom

Uncle Tom had been a lawyer who practiced family and real estate law. He was the senior partner of his firm. He had been 52 when I was born; my mother was 30. She worked for him as his secretary for over 20 years.

Gary convinced me to get off the dining room floor and leave behind the mess of tossed photo albums and memorabilia I had flung out of the drawers. We walked back to the family room sofa and settled in. I told him about the DNA results and read Uncle Tom's letter, again, out loud to him.

As I finished, he softly assured me, "You are the same person right now that you have always been – smart, loving, a woman of faith, and a great wife and mother. I love you. This news does not change you."

I said, "I know," but I didn't believe it because I felt a void in my existence. One email had produced a seismic shift in the history and foundation of my life. I felt like I was at the entrance of going through

the looking glass to understand my past. Unknown to me then, I would set into motion frantic searches for people who could give me answers or insight. Painful memories would rise again to the surface like a fresh hell.

As Gary and I continued to talk, there was an ebb and flow in me of shame, helplessness, and anger that agitated old scars that had never quite healed deeper than the surface. This emotional concoction was like an internal beating. I started screaming.

“I have five siblings!”

“They denied me a relationship with my siblings!”

“Their self-absorbed lives were more important than me.”

“I was just the collateral damage of their affair.”

“I am furious at them for being dead. I sat for weeks with my mother on her deathbed, and *she said nothing to me.*”

“I can’t tell them how much I hate them! I *hate* them!”

I sounded like a broken-hearted child. Then I cried harder than I have in a long time.

Gary held me until the relief of sleep came and lasted until early the following day. When I woke, my husband had already left for work. I was alone and inundated again with overwhelming feelings. First was the anger at my mother and Uncle Tom enveloped in the hate for both being long dead. I would have given almost anything to been able to confront them. The futility of it all made me even angrier.

The second was the shame of knowing my mother and cherished mentor were long-term adulterers. Mixed in with this state of mind, I realized other lies told to me. For example, an accurate familial medical history had eluded me. “Oh my God,” I thought, “and my children’s medical history is a lie, too.”

I wandered into the kitchen to get a giant mug of coffee. As I mindlessly bumped around for the milk and sweetener, each new realization of another falsehood circled me back to resentment. I felt stuck at the beginning of the division in my life of before-and-after. Is this what shock felt like, I wondered? “Maybe,” I said out loud to no one.

With a shot of caffeine came my first coherent thought. I recognized that I would have to eradicate these caustic feelings for my own sake. Right now, I didn't know where to start or how long it might take (*like the rest of my natural life?*). Yet, I had to find a way to cope with this because I wouldn't let myself be the victim of their bad behavior.

I also accepted that I would have to take the initiative to engage others with this unsettling and painful fact to get the answers I needed. The vulnerability I felt was almost paralyzing. I had taken a hard shot at my identity. I didn't want any more rejection, and it was impossible to know what someone's response would be.

I feared silence the most. How could I even approach my mother's only living friend back in Philadelphia, who was in her 80's? What could I possibly say? “*Hey, Aunt Madeline, did you know about Mom's affair with my biological father?*” It was too bizarre and filled me with apprehension just thinking about it.

Finally, I thought about those “talents” I had. I was resilient. I was smart and would find a way to adapt to the unimaginable turn of events. I was not going to allow this discovery to define me as ‘less than’ anyone else. I was strong, and no matter how long or uncomfortable the road I had to travel would prove to be, I would survive it.

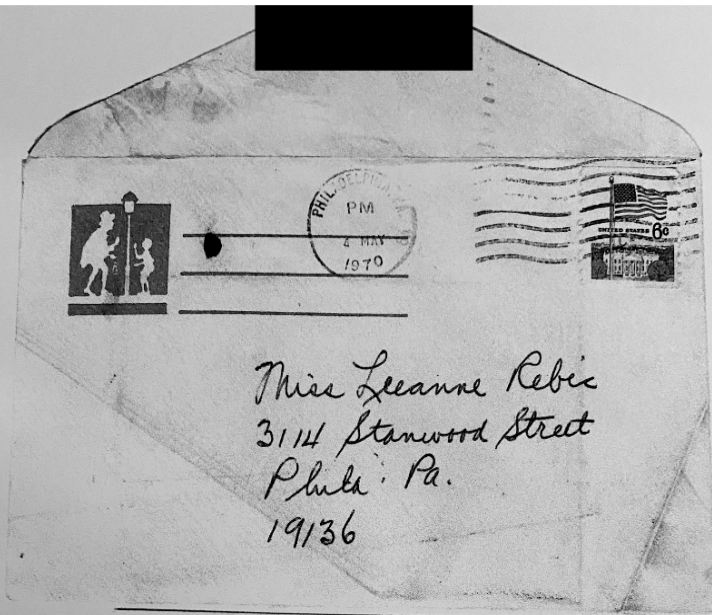
There was a perverse irony in my next thought, too.

I had already survived a personal upheaval many years ago when I divorced and annulled my first marriage to an adulterer. Then like now, I initially felt the same sensations of betrayal, shame, and helplessness. Like a child who blames herself for the destructive behaviors of the adults in her life, my circumstances now seemed eerily similar.

When I thought about my mother and Uncle Tom's two-decade relationship, the concept of being predisposed to subconsciously trying to fix something in my abusive first marriage occurred to me. I had learned exercises in counseling then that could help me in practice right now. I felt comforted to realize I had some control at this moment. I took deep, counted slow breaths and exhalations. I repeated the exercise multiple times until I felt at ease. A small window of respite opened, and clear thinking came following moments of concentrated breathing.

With blind faith, I reached out and grabbed my laptop off the coffee table to write an email to the first name on the DNA Relatives list. It was to Tommy, Uncle Tom's oldest son, and my half-brother. His DNA profile showed "open to being contacted" by those who shared DNA with him. My hands sat on the edge of the keyboard and said a silent prayer for divine guidance.

Then I started typing.



May first, 1970
Dear Leeanne,
Congratulations on your delightful
portrayal of the role of Wendy.
Your stage presence was good,
your speaking voice was clear
and distinct, and your singing
was done beautifully and with
expression. Also, your sense of
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and evident enjoyment you
exuded in doing the role
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own, trying to keep your head below the "clouds" when you and the others were "flying," because it reminded me of a fable I learned when I was a boy —

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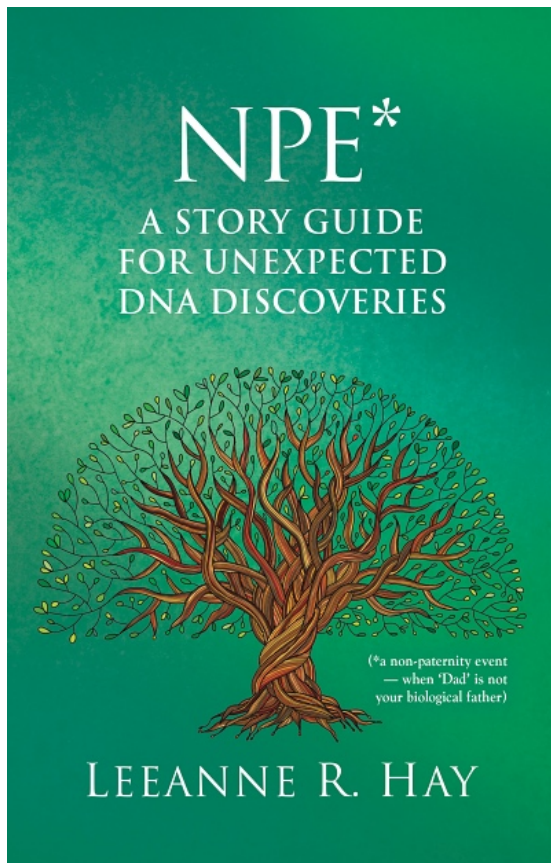
other two servants in the parable did. Regular practice on an instrument of one's choice, extra study on some particularly difficult subject or problem and sacrificing a little pleasure here and there all can make your life more wonderful in later years, and not only that it will enrich the lives of others who will love and respect you for it.

As I watched you perform, I was certain the Lord had endowed you with many talents. It is my hope that He will also endow you with the wisdom to make the most of them.

Sincerely and affectionately
Uncle Tom

There is a great difference between knowing and understanding.

- Charles F. Kettering
American inventor, engineer and businessman



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