

Brain Drains?

by BROCK WEIR

How often do you climb up to shake a few branches of your family tree?

Maybe I'm something of an outlier, but just who came before me, and whose ingredients, no matter how diluted, now flow through my veins has always fascinated me.

It's trivial, to be sure, but as far as trivia goes, it often does spark the imagination. Even if some people like to pre-emptively throw cold water on your findings!

Genealogists in the know, for instance, often say that if you have just a single ancestor of English descent, no matter far back, chances are more than likely you're descended from Edward III, who reigned between 1327 and 1377. If, by any chance, your branches somehow missed Edward, you can most likely claim regal descent, whatever your background, from either Charlemagne or Genghis Khan ? two very well-travelled and apparently busy men.

With that in mind, how can anyone not find the topic at least marginally interesting?

When I was a university student with a negligible social life, I took the opportunity to trace the branches of my family in earnest ? and, thanks to the work of people who were bitten by the bug far earlier than me, I could trace some of my relatives back to the 1400s.

Some of my favourite findings were of the regal variety, but others were just plain neat ? such as a 15th century female forebear on my paternal grandmother's side who was apparently imprisoned in a Swiss castle for alleged witchcraft? and subsequently made a daring escape, rappelling down the side of a turret at the stated age of 98? a claim that surely didn't lend any gravitas to those witchcraft accusations, but I digress? I was heartened that even back then sisters ? or, in this case, x-times great-grandmothers ? were doing it for themselves!

While my interest waned somewhat in the years since my university days, there was one nagging question about a matter on my paternal side I was never able to answer ? and rekindled a near-cold research ember last month.

It relates to a family story which was passed down strictly through oral tradition rather than with any written record. With no paper trail, I've often wondered whether it was a true tale, or a tall tale spun to cover for something that might have been ? well, socially less acceptable at the time.

This latest climb up my family tree revealed little in either direction, but it did yield another x-times-great grandmother with the unlikely name of ?Mary Christmas? back in the 1600s, so it wasn't an entirely fruitless mission.

Yet, despite no evidence, it's a story that endures, and it's really a testament to the power of oral tradition.

Last week, I happened upon an interesting podcast on how our language ? and our use of it ? has shifted over time. The first installment that caught my attention took a deep dive into Queen Elizabeth II's first televised Christmas Message in 1957 compared to her final broadcast in 2021. The focus was how her vowels, word selection, and general communication style evolved over time, and why certain inflections endured over 60-odd years while others did not.

In the first broadcast, one commenter pointed out, the monarch in this pre-teleprompter era had a copy of the speech close at hand, which she glanced at from time to time, but the vast majority of the script was clearly committed to memory.

?Just a totally different time,? they wrote. ?70 years ago, it was just a little more normal to speak to our history of oral storytelling and that's one of the many things we've lost for the most part with modernization. Reading, memorizing, reciting used to be a huge part of Western culture. When I think about it, I believe we're giving up something very tragic there to the convenience of modern technology. It's like language and proper grammar. To employ it requires a certain amount of respect and a standard of education. It means something, it promotes a higher culture, one that considers such things. And now, we just offload that [integral] part of our entire history to Grammarly and spellcheck.?

While I'd hate to ever be considered a luddite, here was one gem of wisdom found in the cesspool that is so often the comments section of YouTube.

Don't get me wrong, there's very little value in recitation and memorization within education just for memorization and recitation's sake; there has to be some sort of practical volume or demonstratable reason why this bit of knowledge needs to be permanently etched into our grey matter, but perhaps the simple act of doing so is the most basic brain exercise we have.

It's not even a matter of recitation and memorization of facts, figures, and poetry.

Not too long ago, my grandmother, who died in 2012, took exceptional pride in her ability to remember telephone numbers of friends and acquaintances going back decades, regardless of whether or not the person assigned to the number was still alive to pick up. Useless knowledge, particularly where the deceased are concerned, or so I thought.

Nowadays, with the ability to store numbers, handles, and email addresses in devices we always have ready, accessible wherever we happen to be or whatever we happen to be doing, the number of people who can spout off any number other than their own with complete confidence without looking at their screen are, in my experience, few and far between.

In the time since the Global Pandemic, people have said the passage of time feels just slightly different than it did in the ?before times.?

I can't say I disagree. It often feels like time is going by just a little bit faster than it did, with special occasions like Canada Day, creeping up with accelerating speed each year. But maybe it's a factor that we don't need to be as conscious of time in the ways we once were.

We're automatically reminded of the big stuff. We don't have to be clock conscious because we know there's one in our pocket ready at a moment's notice; we don't have to drum appointments into our heads before we forget because we'll get automatic reminders. Heck, we often don't even need to enter them into a calendar ourselves, all done automatically and with barely a thought.

Even reminiscences are something we don't really need to worry about. Instead of sharing some nostalgia with friends, family or other loved ones on a special anniversary, or even when something inconsequential triggers some unexpected recollections, we have the Memories feature on any number of platforms to do the heavy lifting for us.

But, how many memories, skills, and mental muscle flexes are we leaving behind us in the process, confident that all of our devices, apps and programs will have our backs? How do we safeguard them in the event of any number of glitches?

Rote memorization? Stories around a campfire? A good, old-fashioned diary or journal?

What are you doing?