

# On Beyond Genealogy

By Brian "Fox" Ellis

Who we are is more than a bag of bones. Who we are is more than a skin-encased ego. We are the stories of our ancestors. Our great-great grandma made decisions that brought us here today. More than eye color and curly hair, our parents and grandparents made decisions that continue to shape us, inspire us, and motivate us.

What are the stories of your ancestors? Where did they come from? How did they get here? What are they famous for doing? What do you like about them?

In this three-step lesson you will explore your family tree in a series of lessons I call "On Beyond Genealogy."

## Lesson One:

Begin by mapping out your family tree on the chalkboard or overhead projector. Start with a box for you. Go sideways with your siblings and down the page with your parents, grandparents, and great-great-grandparents. Go sideways with your aunts, uncles and cousins. Your rough draft should look like the one below, my family tree. Afterthoughts and add-ons are not only allowed but encouraged; ramble up the family tree.

After you make your rough draft of a family tree, ask students to make a rough draft of theirs. Ask them to start with a box, top and center, with their full name. Beside their name they should draw boxes for their brothers and sisters. Two lines descend to their parents. Lateral lines from each parent are for aunts and uncles. With students today, emphasize that all relations count: Half sisters, step-brothers, if there is divorce or adoption in your family tree they are still family. ***If they are family to you, they are family to me.*** I challenge students to come up with as many boxes as possible. The more boxes with names in them, the more points they get. The further back they go the more points they get. I offer five points per box with extra points for each generation beyond grandma: 6 points for great-grandma, 7 points for great-great-grandpa, etc. Generally I give students five minutes to make this rough draft. At the end of this time I encourage them to ask parents or relatives to help them fill in their family tree. Do they have a relative who has already done their homework? Encourage them to call or visit this person to collect a copy of their genealogy. It is not cheating to call your second cousin Makali or Aunt Martha who made a family tree and ask him or her to send you one.

At the end of this lesson, pass out the handout, "Our Family Roots Are Deep." Ask students to use this chart as a model for cleaning up their family tree. They should be given a few days to make a final draft.

## Lesson Two:

Using the rough draft of your family tree as a story map, begin to tell stories about these people. With my rough draft of my family tree on chart paper I just meander around, swinging from branch to branch and telling stories about who they are, what kind of job they have, and what sort of fun we have had together. The focus should be on happy times, things we like about these people. What have we learned from them? I often say, "We all have skeletons in the closet. Leave them there. We do not want to smell your gym socks. This is not a time to air your dirty laundry. This is a celebration. Yeah, my brother picked on me, too. But he was also always there to protect me if someone else wanted to pick on me."

I then ask students to turn to a partner and take turns giving each other a tour of their family tree. One student talks while the other listens. Take turns. Give each student about five minutes to share. Remind them that we are looking for stories about who these people are or were.

Next, I read my poem "Love Song to Our Ancestors." Please do not read my poem to your class. Write one for your family tree and read it to your class! (Alright, you could read mine as a second example, but only after you read yours first!)



I then direct students to write their own “Love Song to My Ancestors.” If they follow directions this could be the easiest poem they have ever written. Simple write two or three sentences about five or ten people in their family tree. That’s it.

At this point we sometimes have a discussion about poetry. What makes a good poem? Not all poems rhyme, but there is a playfulness in the language: rhythm, alliteration, parallel construction, vivid multi-sensory images, and a snapshot-like quality that gives a good picture of this person. I discourage their whole life story and encourage them to focus on one characteristic moment. We sometimes dissect a few stanzas from my poem looking for poetic qualities. I allow them to lead the discussion telling me what stanzas they like and why.

I then write sentence starters on the board to help them get started:

I am the son/daughter of a man/woman who \_\_\_\_\_.  
I am the cousin of a person who \_\_\_\_\_.  
I am the great-great grandson/daughter of \_\_\_\_\_.

I then give them ten or fifteen minutes to write as many sentences as they can. When the allotted time is up, allow them time to re-read their sentences/stanzas and put a star next to their favorite one. Ask them to do a little re-writing, add to it, change the words around, add color, play with the words. Make it better. Make it more like a poem. I then ask two to five students to stand and read their favorite one as an example for other students to emulate.

Students are to finish the project as homework with the help of their parent, grandparent, or relative who has collected some family history. Again, I encourage them to ask parents or relatives to help them fill in their family tree poem. This is not cheating, but a chance for the family to bond. Do they have a relative who has already done their homework? Encourage them to call or visit this person. When they collect a copy of their family tree they should ask who these people are and what they are known for doing.

Give them a few days to collect the information and then have a follow-up writing/rewriting session where they can polish their poems.

### Lesson Three:

I ask them to choose one character in their family tree and to write a story about a day in the life of this person. I do not want a complete biography, though some of this general listing of facts can add to the story. I want a story, a pivotal moment, an exciting adventure, a calamity or celebration. Because of the nature of this play I challenge them to choose one of their oldest ancestors that they can write a story about, with bonus points if it is an honest to goodness “Coming to America” or immigrant’s tale.

As an example I tell a story about my grandma, great grandpa or a cousin. We discuss what makes a good story: Beginning, Middle, End, Plot, Suspense, Irony, Characters, Setting, Detail, Detail, Detail, etc.

I ask them to turn to a partner and tell the story before they write it.

Tell it, then write it; Tell It, Then Write It; TELL IT, THEN WRITE IT.

Telling the story first allows them to work out the sequence of events, the flow of the story, and the vocabulary. This makes writing easier and more fluid. After telling the story, give students 20-30 minutes to write their rough draft.

At this point they may need to do some more research. Go back and talk to the person who told you this story and ask more questions. Look at maps of the “old country.” Imagine the route taken. Research the time period, clothing, forms of transportation and communication. Go to the library and read old papers or surf the Internet for old family records. If this research is focused around the story it is more productive and useful in writing a better story because there are specific questions to be answered.

Ask students to choose a new partner and retell the story adding more detail, adding more historical information, more humor or drama. Allow the re-telling to inform the re-writing of the story.

Give students time to rewrite and edit their stories. These can then be published in a classroom collection, posted on the school’s Web site or genealogy Web sites.



## LOVE SONG TO OUR ANCESTORS

I am the great-great-great-great-great grand son of a man who went bear hunting with Davey Crockett.

I am the great-great grandson of a Cherokee woman named Red Bird. She married a Scotch-Irish farmer and moved to Western Tennessee narrowly avoiding the tragedy of the Trail of Tears.

I am the great-great grand son of a shepherd who fled Poland under the rule of the German Kaiser to create a better life for his family in the land of dreams fulfilled, America. He worked hard and within three months had saved enough money to send for his wife and daughter, my great-grandma, who traveled to America on a cattle boat.

I am the great grandson of a woman so hot, Johnny Appleseed took one look at her and felt that he had to sleep in the snow to cool off.

I am the great grandson of a man who was such a great marksman he could shoot a squirrel out of a tree without hitting it. His aim was so good he would shoot right next to the squirrel and literally scare the squirrel to death.

I am the grandson of a woman who raised twelve children, raised most of the vegetables her family ate, raised half of the neighborhood kids, raised enough vegetables to feed half of those neighborhood kids and still had time to raise the most beautiful roses you ever stopped and smelled.

I am the son of a man who could look at blue lines on blue paper and see great ships sailing on a blue sea.

I am the son of a woman who taught me to love all people regardless of whether or not you actually liked them. She never said no to someone in need.

I am the husband of a woman who believes in great miracles and works tirelessly to help others find those miracles within the tragedies of their lives, she daily gives the gift of hope.

I am the father of twin flowers,  
gems who bring great joy to their parents  
by simply being wonderful little girls.

By Brian "Fox" Ellis  
(Adapted from a poem by Reeves Collins.)

