

23 & Memaw

Nancy, who is in her late 50s, and two of her maternal cousins gave each other gene testing kits for Christmas this year, so that they could discover their ancestral genetic profiles. They fully expected to learn the same information about their maternal family members, as their three mothers are sisters. They were interested to learn how their three different fathers impacted their genetic profiles. However, when they received their results, they uncovered something surprising. Nancy's maternal information is slightly different from her two cousins'.

It turns out that Nancy's mother and her aunts most likely have different fathers. So, this means that Nancy's grandmother Barbara most likely committed infidelity in her marriage with Nancy's grandfather. Nancy and her cousins are faced with the question of whether or not to tell Nancy's mother, who is in her late 80s. Her cousins' mothers, Nancy's aunts, have already passed away, as have both of her grandparents. She has asked her cousins not to say anything to her mother or to anyone else in their family, while she decides what to do.

Nancy never met her grandfather, as he died just before she was born. But Nancy knows that her grandmother Barbara and her grandfather had a very fraught marriage. Her grandfather was an alcoholic and was known to be verbally abusive and financially controlling to her grandmother Barbara. Nancy has always avoided alcohol, assuming that she might have inherited a genetic predisposition to alcoholism from her grandfather, as several of her cousins have struggled with excessive drinking as well. She feels drawn to the idea that her grandmother Barbara found some happiness outside of an abusive marriage, and she doesn't mind thinking of her mother and herself as the results of her grandmother Barbara finding some independence. She is curious to talk with her mother about the possibility that they aren't descended from the man they have always assumed was their father and grandfather. She would be interested in learning more information about her grandparents' close friends, community and church members, or colleagues, on the off chance that she might be able to discover information that would lead her to her biological grandfather and potentially to other biological family members.

However, Nancy's family is religious and they have strong beliefs about the importance of marriage and of being faithful to a spouse. Nancy feels like her mother has a right to know this information about her own parents and ancestry. And, her mother has only ever talked bitterly about her relationship with her father. Yet, she knows that this information might be deeply distressing to her mother. Though Nancy's mother never seemed to express love for her father, she always talked with deep love and respect for her mother Barbara and held her up to Nancy as a role model of virtue and of religious faith. Nancy worries that revealing this information to her mother might cause her to question her relationship with her mother Barbara and to endure pain and sadness upon realizing that her mother Barbara kept secrets from her. Also, Nancy's mother suffers from health problems and receives a twice-weekly home visit from a nurse. The nurse has advised Nancy that protecting her mother from stress is important for keeping her health stable.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Should Nancy tell her mother about her suspicions? Is it at all significant that there is some degree of uncertainty about the conclusion she is drawing?
2. How do her mother's health concerns factor into this decision?
3. Do we owe others, especially those near and dear, the hard truth? What if they would be "better off" not knowing?
4. How, if at all, do the facts about Nancy's grandmother Barbara's fraught relationship with her grandfather change the moral dimensions of Nancy's decision?

