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## **Finding What's Lost: Lessons Learned While Looking for My Grandmother**

by Judy Brodkey, M.S.W.

My family has a tendency to lose things. Hats. Keys. Important papers. Backpacks. Gift cards. Coats. You name it, we've probably lost it. Our family singlehandedly has kept Anthony, patron saint of lost things, in business for at least the past fifty years.

Granted, sometimes there is a logical explanation for losing things. For example, there was the time Cammy, my brother's Tibetan Terrier, snatched his wallet off a coffee table and buried it in their back yard. It's in Cammy's canine genetic makeup to take things that don't belong to her, so we forgave her.

Most the time, though, our family loses things because we just aren't paying attention. Today's euphemism would be "somewhat unmindful."

The good thing about our family is that, most of the time, we eventually find what is lost. Months after Cammy swiped my brother's wallet and he had long since replaced his credit cards, it showed up in the back yard, soaked, worn and tattered. With a few exceptions like the instant camera I accidentally forgot while hiking in the Badlands, many things eventually turn up. Sometimes, though, it takes a lot of effort. And sometimes it takes a long time.

One of the most important things our family lost was my grandmother, Anna Hechtenthal Schwartz. Well, we really didn't lose her per se. We just misplaced or missed out on any information about her and her family roots. Anna, my mother's mother, came from Eastern Europe but, as was true of many people in her generation, never talked about her past. She lived in Chicago, a thousand miles away from where I grew up in Iowa, and died a few weeks before I celebrated my first birthday. I never met her.

Who was my grandmother Anna? Where did she come from? Who were *her* parents? How did she get to Chicago? What kind of person was she?

I became slightly obsessed with answering these questions. I learned some basic genealogy skills and started my search. With few clues, progress was slow. However, after two years of sleuthing, I finally began to put together little puzzle pieces and get a better sense of my grandmother. I eventually figured out where she was born, her actual name at birth, the names of her parents and siblings, even the name of the ship that brought her to the United States. Still, some mysteries persist and the journey to find my grandma continues.

Along the way, I've learned some life lessons that go well beyond genealogy and might apply to other situations when we've lost something important.

### **#1 - It helps to know when something important is lost.**

For a long time, I didn't know my grandmother was lost or missing. She wasn't part of my life growing up so I didn't care about the fact that I knew nothing about her. It was only after I realized and acknowledged that I missed out on something – *someone* – that I could begin the process of looking for her.

We've all lost something important, even if you don't have my family's propensity for losing things on a regular basis. Some of us lose tangible "things" – a book, keys, a letter, a check we thought we put in the mail, an address, an old friend, a song you used to love. Some of us lose something intangible, perhaps a passion, a belief in yourself, a promise made, a quality like compassion or hope, an idea, an interest, a feeling you used to have.

It's helpful to begin with the awareness that you have indeed lost something important. Without that awareness, you may not realize you have the option to start looking for what's missing.

- Is there anything important lost or misplaced that you would like to find?

### **#2 - You decide when something lost is worth finding.**

Buddhist wisdom speaks a lot about the idea of non-attachment, not being so identified with an object, idea or condition that we lose perspective and make ourselves miserable. When my favorite tea kettle exploded on the stove, it was a good moment to practice non-attachment. When I accidentally left a favorite blazer at a bus stop, that was another opportunity for non-attachment. There are definitely times when we can't get something back that we've lost and that perspective of non-attachment is the healthiest choice.

Still, there are times when we've lost something very important, and it *is* worth finding. It might be a material object, an idea, a dream, a person, even an emotion that's lost. Once you decide it's worth finding what's missing, you increase the odds that you will retrieve it.

- What is worth finding in your life?

### **#3 - If you care about what's lost, that's enough.**

As I met others who were looking for their own lost relatives, several people told me, "No one else in my family cares about this research I'm doing." The reality is, when you're trying to recover something that is lost, you indeed may be the *only* person who cares – the only one with a passion to find that old friend, the book you loved, the old photograph, the 2<sup>nd</sup> cousin twice removed, that Tinker Toy set you loved as a child, that sense of wonder you misplaced along life's journey. Fortunately, it only takes *one* person to recover a whole missing family tree and it only takes one person – *you* – to care about what you want to rediscover.

- If there's something you've lost and want to find, why is that important to you?

#### **#4 - It just might be possible.**

Once I started looking for my grandmother's family roots, I seldom said, "This is impossible. I'll never find the answer." Although I don't recall speaking those words, I often thought them. I'd look on a genealogy website. I'd check a census record. I'd follow a lead. Nothing. Nada. No results. Over and over again, part of me was pretty convinced I would not succeed.

In retrospect, I probably wasted a lot of energy trying to overcome my own discouragement. A stronger, healthier, more useful perspective, for example, "It just might be possible," would have given me more fuel and energy along the way.

- What healthy perspectives might help you find something that's lost?

#### **#5 - Dead ends may be illusions.**

After months of research, I felt I was no closer to finding key information about my grandmother's family roots. Just when I felt ready to give up, I came across a great article. The title was something along the lines of "*Fifteen Ways to Bust through A Genealogical Dead End.*" Perfect! Someone finally understood my sad plight and knew it wasn't hopeless. I worked my way through each of the 15 recommendations for finding elusive ancestors when all else has failed. When I crossed off #15 on the list, lo and behold! *Nothing* had shed any more light on my grandmother. I was *still* at the proverbial dead end. Or so I thought.

I was tempted to quit but instead I kept exploring, perhaps because I have a very stubborn, tenacious streak. Within just a few more months, I began to uncover new information that would eventually allow me to piece together a picture of my grandma's family and some of the key milestones of her life.

Over and over again, I have learned that dead ends may mean I just need to turn around and go in a different direction.

- When you think about finding something that's lost, what dead ends might be a figment of your imagination?

#### **#6 - People are generous and eager to help.**

When I first starting my research, I was mainly working in isolation on my home computer. However, as my project continued, my search brought me in contact with an amazing network of people all over the world, total strangers who were willing to answer questions, give advice, suggest alternatives, translate records, share a theory, and encourage me. I was very fortunate to meet so many good-hearted people willing to help in various ways. What's more astounding is that. at the very same time, most of those people were themselves trying to find something or someone whom *they* had lost. Nevertheless, they took the time to help me. They deserve my gratitude and thanks.

- What are some ways in which others might help you find what's lost? Or ways you can help others find what *they* have lost?

### **#7 - I don't know it all.**

I taught myself genealogy on the fly. With each new discovery, I learned more and more about databases, tricks of the trade, how to find records without knowing the correct spelling of a name, how to piece together clues and come to plausible theories. At some point, I remember thinking, "Well, that about does it, there's nothing more to learn that will help me." My arrogance or cockiness was definitely misplaced.

It took me a while to realize that I probably knew only the tiniest fraction about how to best find my grandmother's family roots. There are people all over the world, both amateur and professional genealogists among them, who know so much more than I do about resources, strategies, and getting around so called dead-ends. Thinking "I knew it all" made me start to give up way too soon.

- In what ways might it be helpful to acknowledge you don't know it all?

### **# 8 - It's easy to make mistakes.**

While researching my grandmother's roots, I was also looking for information about a man named Charles whom my grandmother knew. One day I was so excited because I was absolutely sure I had found Charles' birth record in Austria. I couldn't wait to share this news with his descendants. Several months later, one of those descendants dropped a proverbial bombshell that put a damper on my excitement. He remembered his dad telling him that Charles was not born in Austria but in Prussia and that he was later adopted by a Hechtenthal family. This information, if true, would obliterate the so-called "fact" that I had found Charles' birth certificate. I remember my heart sank after reading that email. My desire to be "right" trumped my desire for the truth, at least in that moment.

We actually don't have enough information to know what the truth is about Charles' birth, but this experience humbled me. After that, I realized that hunches and even "evidence" can be wrong when you're looking for something that's lost. No matter how desperately I wanted to find answers, I couldn't necessarily make it so. Humility is a good companion when trying to find something that's lost.

- If you're looking for something that has been lost, is there anything you need to rethink?

### **# 9 - The person I discount may be the one who can help me most.**

Last September, I headed to Salt Lake to visit the LDS Family History Library, the largest repository of genealogy records in the world. I'd been sick the week before and was not feeling great when I arrived. That Friday, my cousin, his wife and I headed to the library for the better part of the day.

We began by talking with one of the library volunteers who mentioned various resources I could check for clues about my grandma. I was tired and overwhelmed. It was hard for me to pay attention. I scribbled down a few things he said in my notebook. Maybe I was just under the weather, but I remember feeling skeptical that anything he would say would help me. This isn't the first time I've made such judgments about people. Indeed, at the end of the library visit, I knew no more about my grandma than when I had arrived.

A few weeks later back in Portland, I looked at my notes from that conversation with the library volunteer. On one page, I'd written down, "Steve Morse – good website." So, still skeptical, I googled and found the website. At first, I found nothing. However, over the next three months, his website single-handedly led me to key immigration and naturalization records for both of my grandmothers, my great grandparents on both sides of my family, and several other Hechtenthals. Those records led to solving multiple mysteries.

On many previous occasions, I'd looked for these same records elsewhere and never found them. Now, one tip from a volunteer I'd discounted and voilà! I'd found genealogical gold. I owed it all to Steve Morse, a total stranger, and to that library volunteer I'd tuned out because I wasn't feeling well at the time.

- In your search for what's lost, is there anything or anyone who deserves your full attention?

### **# 10 - Sometimes the indirect path works best.**

When I began my genealogy research, I didn't actually start focusing on finding my grandmother. Instead, I began researching her maiden name, Hechtenthal. I decided to learn everything I could about anyone in the world, living or not, with the last name "Hechtenthal." Ancestry.com led me to descendants of several Hechtenthals – an exciting beginning! From them, I learned that most Hechtenthals came from a little town in Galicia called Jezierzany.

I was able to compile a 40 page list of various Hechtenthal families and start finding pieces of information that might help several other Hechtenthal descendants learn more about their own lineages. It was only after I had done this, that pieces started falling into place in terms of finding my own grandma. Had I not worked on the bigger picture first, I'm not sure I would ever have succeeded in learning more about my own grandma.

- Is there an indirect path – an "out of the box" path – that might help you find something you've lost?

### **# 11 -The process is as important as the result.**

After I found my grandma's Ellis Island records, her real birth name and her father's naturalization records, I told someone I felt great. "Why?," he asked. I said, "Because I succeeded in finding what I set out to find." To my surprise, he said, "I don't think that's it. I think it's so much more than that. What are some of the inner resources you had to draw on along the way?" I thought for a moment. "Resilience," I answered. "Not giving up." We talked more and I realized he was right. I had drawn on a lot of inner resources on this journey – patience, curiosity, determination, to name a few.

When you're trying to find what's lost, it's not just a question of finding "it," regardless of whether the "it" is an ancestor, a favorite trinket, an old buddy, a dream, a passion you'd put on the back burner. What you do – the process you use to find it, recover it, and reclaim it – can be every bit as important and certainly part of the adventure. Our culture is "results oriented" and tends to minimize anything that isn't flashy, anything that doesn't scream "SUCCESS!"

Sometimes the real successes are much subtler. Sometimes the process is every bit as important as the end result. In the beginning, if someone had just handed me a scrapbook with all the information I've uncovered about my grandmother, my journey would not have been nearly so satisfying.

- Is there something you are *in the process* of finding? What can you appreciate about yourself along the way?

### # 12 - "One in a million" may be just the right odds.

A year after I started looking for my grandmother's roots, my mother consented to take a genealogy DNA test that might give us clues about her ancestry. Close to a million people have been tested and are included in the database for the DNA company we selected. Six weeks after my mom mailed her saliva swab, the test results came back: 3900 people in the database might be her 2<sup>nd</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> cousins. Unbelievable! Excited at first by the results, I quickly sobered up when I realized it would be extremely difficult to figure out how my mother was related to any of the matches.

Except for one man, Thomas. He turned up in the #2 spot on the Excel spreadsheet and had the longest matching strand of DNA in common with my mother. A few clicks later I learned that Thomas' great-grandmother had the same surname - Buchhalter – as the woman I thought was my great-grandmother. What's more, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas' great-grandmother and my great-grandmother lived just 5 minutes away from each other in Austria. We have not yet found the paper trail to show exactly how our great-grandmothers are related, but the DNA results helped confirm my suspicions about my grandma's Buchhalter lineage. Thomas was just one person out of close to a million in the database, but he's the *one* I needed.

- When have you overcome daunting odds or seen someone else overcome what looked like impossible odds?

### # 13 - Celebrate along the way.

I feel very fortunate. I learned enough details about my grandma Anna to piece together a fuller picture of who she was and the struggles she endured in her life. Still, there is much more I don't know and will probably never know about her.

Over the past two years, I've heard many families' stories about searching for and finding their family roots. At times, I've been envious of people who have found old family diaries, letters, and newspaper clippings that gave them precious information about their ancestors, in some cases enough to write a whole book.

My single most intense experience of *genealogical envy* was learning that famed cellist Yo Yo Ma's Chinese family lineage has been traced back around 30 generations. So far, my own family tree on one side goes back only 3 generations with absolute certainty. It seems paltry in comparison.

At times, it's been easy to feel I haven't uncovered enough, figured out enough, learned enough to consider my journey a success. Still, the truth is, compared to where I started, I have learned a lot that is worth celebrating. And even if I'd uncovered far less than I have, the journey of discovery has been a rich one, beyond my wildest imagination. That, too, is worth celebrating.

Even when you don't necessarily find what has been lost, it's worth appreciating yourself – even celebrating yourself– for having made the effort and for the skills, strengths, and inner resources you've used in the process.

As I've pursued my research, I've been focused on finding my grandmother, but the truth is, it's myself whom I've found along the way. In your own quest to find what has been lost, I suspect this also may be true for you.

- What can you celebrate about your journey to find what has been lost or misplaced?

### **Feedback welcome!**

Have a comment about this article? Please email [Judy@LiveFullyCoaching.com](mailto:Judy@LiveFullyCoaching.com). I'd love to hear from you.

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