

My New Sister Ricki

By Linda Weiss

My mother, whose maiden name was Eileen Hayman, died in 1996. In a surreal moment, after my mother had died, my aunt told me that my mother had become pregnant at age sixteen, and that she had a daughter in 1947, whom she had named “Hope.” It was a big family secret. My grandparents told everyone that my mother had gone to South Carolina to visit her Aunt Elsie, when actually they sent her from Wilmington, Delaware, to the Florence Crittendon Home for Unwed Mothers in Philadelphia. The home arranged for the baby’s adoption. I have searched on and off since 1996 for my half-sister, unsuccessfully.

About a year ago, my DNA was analyzed through Ancestry.com. I had been working on my genealogy for about four years.

Unbeknownst to me, my half-sister (her name is Ricki) was also raised Jewish. Ricki wanted to know how much of her ancestry was actually Jewish. She learned about her Jewish genetic heritage from her Ancestry DNA results. At the time, she did not know that Ancestry also matched for blood relatives. Ricki had been looking for her birth family her entire life. She was seventy-years-old and thought there was little hope.

Then, one day in March 2017, I was at my computer, and an email came from Ancestry with the note “Ancestry says our DNA is a close match, probably first cousins, and I was born ‘Hope Hayman.’” Her name was Ricki Henry, and she gave me her phone number. A shudder went through my body. I thought, “This cannot be a hoax. Who else would know that?” I called the number, introduced myself, and said, “I’m sorry. We are not first cousins.” Then a long pause. “We are half-sisters.” Ricki screamed, and we both cried.

My husband and I went to Las Vegas to meet her in August. I could not believe it—she looked similar both to my mother and to my grandmother. I kept staring at her and apologized for doing that. She treated us to a hotel, a show, and a wonderful dinner. I brought memorabilia for her that had been my (our) mother’s. As I took each item out of the bag and described our mother to Ricki, her eyes welled with tears. It was emotional for both of us. The waiter gave us a free dessert.

Then I organized a family reunion in Pennsylvania in September so that Ricki could meet her family. Some knew the big family secret, and some did not. All agreed that her family resemblance is uncanny. We found out that baby Hope Hayman had been adopted by a Jewish family, and she was named Rochelle Rosenbaum. They lived in Wilmington, Delaware. Ricki had attended P.S. DuPont High School, which was my parents’ alma mater. For about six years, Ricki had lived one block from my grandmother. So close and yet so far. My cousin’s best friend was Ricki’s next-door neighbor!

Ricki came to Albuquerque in October. It was our grandmother’s Yahrzeit at Congregation Albert. Ricki and I both stood to remember our grandmother. What a wonderful feeling for me! My friends said we look a lot alike.

Another coincidence—in the first phone conversation, Ricki told me that she was still working. I asked her what she did, and she said she was a project manager for Clark County in Las Vegas, Nevada, although she thought that I probably wouldn’t know what a project manager was. I told her that project management was my husband’s profession. She asked me if he had attended the Project Management Institute conference the prior week in Yosemite. I responded that yes, he had attended, but she didn’t recognize his name. When we hung up, I called my husband at work and asked him if the name “Ricki Henry” meant anything to him. He said that he had attended her presentation at the conference the week before. In fact, he had brought home a pen and a tape measure with her name and email on them.

They were sitting on my desk, next to my computer, when I received that first Ancestry email.

Can We Change Before It's Too Late?



Red-tailed hawk photo copyright by Diane Joy Schmidt

By Diane Joy Schmidt

When I woke up, the dream faded. I was giving a perfect speech about change, neatly outlined on notecards. It was the middle of winter and that evening a bright full moon had risen, marking the New Year of the Trees. Before dawn a lunar eclipse turned the moon red and made dreams voluble. In the morning, I couldn’t remember a word of my elegantly structured speech, but instead I could hear a clear stream of words, about coincidences. Change, coincidence, and the honoring of trees, was there a connection?

There are three things I know about coincidences, I wrote. One, you can describe them as selective attention, two, as the human need for making meaning out of seemingly unconnected events, and three, as evidence of the spiritual connectedness of everything.

Later I thought about how in many cases the coincidences will fall into categories one or two, but there are coincidences that are so profound that they cannot be explained away that easily. Those are the ones I try to nurture along, by paying attention when even small coincidences happen, in order to hone my intuition. And the more I acknowledge them, the more often they happen.

They come unexpectedly, like small miracles. And these little gifts help me to feel whole and healed and connected to spirit, really for the first time in my life. I find that it’s the part of me that feels best, they lift my spirits and make me feel good like nothing else. It’s a part that was always pushed aside, minimized, told was not important, was my imagination, was just impossible dreams. But now I must explore this uncharted land.

I also know that, for us to change, before we destroy ourselves, we need to open our eyes to our essential religious nature, that is, our essential spiritual nature, our unbreakable connection to the spiritual nature of our trees, plants, animals, water, forces of nature, life, stars above and earth below.

It seems odd to me when I encounter those who, even in the face of overwhelming evidence of a coincidence, have such a rational, logical, strictly Westernized mind that they cannot even allow for such a thing to exist. I find this even among many of those who call themselves religious leaders.

On the other hand, I have a dear friend who helps many people, who is most compassionate and also a great lover of animals, yet is himself a devout atheist, a die-hard, died-in-the-wool non-believer, a scientist of the most rigorous kind. Regularly, for years, when I

have served up a precious coincidence to him, he would say with the greatest sincerity, “It’s so amazing to me how you are able to find meaning in the world.”

To me this was so frustrating—his words left me feeling like a trained monkey trying to impress an audience that it really was actually intelligent—he only saw an artful creativeness, that I was supplying meanings to a meaningless universe.

Finally, I showed him a series of photographs I had taken this week of uncommon events of nature in Albuquerque: a coyote that walked by just when I went outside to get in the car and who turned to look back directly at me from a football-field length away, a red-tailed hawk flying overhead just when I drove down the road who conveniently landed in a tree and posed for me before flying off again, and twice, different cars with the license plate ending in SLF that waited in front of me at the red light at the corner, just when I was telling myself to believe in myself—or was that my Self—in spite of discouragements.

I commented, “The animals know what’s coming. Are we listening? Can we understand them yet? Can we change before it’s too late?”

Finally, this time, he allowed as how, “We can define coincidence as the meaning around us that we were not previously aware that we are connected to.” That was actually quite a big step for him. It straddled selective attention and the suggestion that the world is a mysterious place.

I said, “Wow, you finally got it.” In words that he could articulate, I didn’t add.

And then he suddenly did seem to understand. He said, “We have been brainwashed to reject things that we weren’t taught to understand and make fun of the people who have that spiritual connection.” He also was anxious to tell me about an article he’d just read about how when Native Americans in Alaska reconnected with their culture they were able to shake off addictions and alcoholism. “We make fun of a lot of people; Native Americans, people who have religious beliefs different from ours, who have different values about how they live and what they hold important.”

And, he said, “When I saw the photo of the hawk you showed me just now, I thought, he is saying to you, to us, ‘It’s important to be tuned in to things around you before it’s too late.’”

And I knew, all this time, he hadn’t really had to change all that much, because of his essentially compassionate nature, to appreciate the interconnectedness of all things, and, simply, to know that, as Chief Dan George said, “And if you destroy the animals, you will destroy yourself.”

Read more at www.dianejoyschmidt.com.