10 Bits of Advice for New Genealogy Researchers

This is going to be a different kind list of items for new (and newish) genealogy researchers and family historians. I am not going to try to suggest how or what to research. There are tons of places for you to find information about researching.

But hopefully this list will help you in a different way, because there is so much out there for you to learn from: books, podcasts, blogs, webinars, conferences, etc. And it is really easy to get lost, or at least confused. There also is pressure to "do it right" either from others or self-imposed.

At some time in my genealogy learning experience I have dealt with all of these "do's and don'ts":

Do not try to learn "above your head" – I watched a webinar the other day from a well known genealogist about what should have been a reasonably easy subject to present. In a word – the webinar "sucked." The audience was a mix of mostly beginners and some intermediates. It was presented as if the audience had fairly significant prior knowledge. The presentation was quite confusing – at least to me. I am not a professional expert but have been around for over 15 years and can tell a good education piece from a lousy one. So don't try to learn something that you aren't ready for or that is confusing the heck out of you. Turn it off or stop reading and go back to basics.

Do not be intimidated by those who seem to be smarter than you – not many are smarter than you; they just have more experience and every single one of them started with no knowledge at all – just like you. And since many experts in any field are lousy presenters, it may appear that they are "smarter". A good presenter or writer will care more about the audience than they will about their own ego and will write and speak in a way that is understandable – to you – the viewer/reader. So gravitate to the educational materials that help you learn – and not confuse you. And find presenters and writers that you truly feel that you can learn from. Ignore the rest at first.

Do analyze the heck out of every record or piece of evidence that you have – sometimes we get so excited for example, to find a marriage certificate, that we neglect to look at the witnesses mentioned. They may provide an important clue. The same is true of obituaries – I always tell people to carefully analyze every single word in the obit. Believe me, there is stuff hidden in these newspaper articles that could help you fill out the branch of the tree that the deceased belongs to.

Do not be intimidated by the "cite your source rules" – writing down where you found stuff is very important, for no other reason than you will want to know where you found it when you are analyzing the information later. There are guidelines that have been written that are excellent, but may seem a bit intimidating. Try your best to follow them and give yourself time to apply them. You will get it eventually. Be patient with yourself.

Do take a genealogy "break" once in a while – sometimes we get stuck on one branch of our tree, or a so called "brick wall". Take a break and work on photos or stories or some other branch that might be a little easier. Or better yet – take a week or so where you don't touch your genealogy project. That might refresh your mind for when you get back to it.

Do make realistic goals – and don't get caught up in the "numbers game". Some people like to brag that they have 15,000 people in their family tee – or that they can trace back to the 12th century. I mean – Really? I frankly don't care about these sometimes ego driven statements. In my opinion, having a well-evidenced tree where you also know something about the inhabitants of the tree, as well as being pretty darn sure that the tree is "correct" should be the goal.

Do get out of the house – all records that you are seeking are not available online. That is a fact and will be a fact (in my opinion) likely almost forever. Remember it costs money to digitize all of this stuff. Subscription sites have a financial incentive to digitize records. Libraries and historical societies who own record collections on paper have to obtain funding and donations to get the money to microfilm and/or digitize their records. And as terrific as FamilySearch is to do the digitization that they do – they are not going to be able to digitize everything either. With this in mind, you need to get out and visit libraries, genealogy societies, courthouses, and archives to get access to these non-digitized records. Besides it's fun. A few years ago I had a great time finding out about my great great grandfather in a very small library in California. They had records from a lodge that he belonged to in the 1850's. Trust me – those handwritten records would be near the bottom of a list of items to be digitized.

Don't just focus on dates – Yes, birth, marriage and death date information is important to make sure you have the correct people in your family tree. But also focus on their life stories by searching newspapers for interesting articles and anecdotes about their lives. And spend some time with photograph identification with your known relatives and those new "cousins" that you find via your research. That is great fun.

Don't let anyone or any challenge diminish your enthusiasm; and don't lose your curiosity

Do have fun – for 99% of the people in the world who are searching for their ancestors and their stories – it is a hobby. Hobbies are supposed to be fun. Remember that.