

We Each Have a Story

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Please come find your family, all your generations, and bring them home.

Friends, brothers and sisters, we each have a story. As we discover our story, we connect, we belong, we become.

My name is Gerrit Walter Gong. Gerrit is a Dutch name, Walter (my father's name) is an American name, and Gong of course is a Chinese name.

Experts estimate some 70–110 billion people have lived on the earth. Perhaps only one has been named Gerrit Walter Gong.

We each have a story. I love “the rain on my face [and] the wind as it rushes by.”¹ I wobble-waddle with penguins in Antarctica. I give orphans in Guatemala, street kids in Cambodia, Maasai women in the African Mara their first very own photo of themselves.

I wait at the hospital as each of our children is born—once the doctor has me help.

I trust God. I believe “[we] are, that [we] might have joy,”² that there are times and seasons to everything under heaven.³

Do you know your story? What your name means? World population grew from 1.1 billion people in 1820 to nearly 7.8 billion in 2020.⁴ The year 1820 seems to be an inflection point in history. Many born after 1820 have living memory and records to identify several family generations. Can you think of a special, sweet memory with a grandparent or other family member?

Whatever the total number of individuals who have lived on the earth, it is finite, countable, one person at a time. You and I, we each matter.

And please consider this: whether or not we know them, we are each born of a mother and father. And each mother and father is born of a mother and father.⁵ By birth or adoptive lineage, we are ultimately all connected in the family of God and in the human family.

Born AD 837, my 30th great-grandfather, First Dragon Gong, started our family village in southern China. The first time I visited Gong village, the people said, “*Wenhan huilaili*” (“Gerrit has returned”).

On my mother's side, our living family tree includes thousands of family names, with more to discover.⁶ We each have more family with whom to connect. If you think your great-aunt has completed all your family genealogy, please find your cousins and cousins' cousins. Connect your living memory family names with the 10 billion searchable names FamilySearch now has in its online collection and the 1.3 billion individuals in its Family Tree.⁷

Ask friends or family to draw a living tree. As President Russell M. Nelson teaches, living trees have roots *and* branches.⁸ Whether you are your first or tenth known generation, connect yesterday for tomorrow. Connect the roots and branches in your living family tree.⁹

The question "Where are you from?" asks lineage, birthplace, and home country or homeland. Globally, 25 percent of us trace our homeland to China, 23 percent to India, 17 percent to other parts of Asia and the Pacific, 18 percent to Europe, 10 percent to Africa, 7 percent to the Americas.¹⁰

The question "Where are you from?" also invites us to discover our divine identity and spiritual purpose in life.

We each have a story.

A family I know connected five family generations when they visited their old home in Winnipeg, Canada. There the grandfather told his grandsons about the day two missionaries (he called them angels from heaven) brought the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, changing their family forever.

A mother I know invited her children and their cousins to ask their great-grandmother about her childhood experiences. Great-Grandma's adventures and life lessons are now a treasured family book uniting generations.

A young man I know is compiling a "Dad journal." Years ago, a car hit and killed his father. Now, to know his father, this courageous young man is preserving childhood memories and stories from family and friends.

When asked where meaning comes in life, most people rank *family* first.¹¹ This includes family living and gone before. Of course, when we die, we don't cease to exist. We continue to live on the other side of the veil.

Still very much alive, our ancestors deserve to be remembered.¹² We remember our heritage through oral histories, clan records and family stories, memorials or places of remembrance, and celebrations with photos, foods, or items which remind us of loved ones.

Think of where you live—isn't it wonderful how your country and community remember and honor ancestors, family, others who served and sacrificed? For example, at the autumn harvest remembrance in South Molton, Devonshire, England, Sister Gong and I loved finding the little church and community where generations of our Bawden family lived. We honor our ancestors by opening the

heavens through temple and family history work¹³ and by becoming a welding link¹⁴ in the chain of our generations.¹⁵

In this age of “I choose me,” societies benefit when generations connect in meaningful ways. We need roots to have wings—real relationships, meaningful service, life beyond fleeting social media veneers.

Connecting with our ancestors can change our lives in surprising ways. From their trials and accomplishments, we gain faith and strength.¹⁶ From their love and sacrifices, we learn to forgive and move forward. Our children become resilient. We gain protection and power. Ties with ancestors increase family closeness, gratitude, miracles. Such ties can bring help from the other side of the veil.

Just as joys come in families, so can sorrows. No individual is perfect, nor is any family. When those who should love, nurture, and protect us fail to do so, we feel abandoned, embarrassed, hurt. Family can become a hollow shell. Yet, with heaven’s help, we can come to understand our family and make peace with each other.¹⁷

Sometimes unwavering commitment to abiding family relationships helps us accomplish hard things. In some cases, community becomes family. A remarkable young woman whose troubled family moved frequently found a loving Church family wherever she was to nurture and give her place. Genetics and family patterns influence but do not determine us.

God wants our families to be happy and forever. Forever is too long if we make each other unhappy. Happy is too short if cherished relationships stop with this life. Through sacred covenants, Jesus Christ offers His love, power, and grace to change us¹⁸ and heal our relationships. Selfless temple service for dear ones makes our Savior’s Atonement real for them and us. Sanctified, we can return home to God’s presence as families united eternally.¹⁹

Each of our stories is a journey still in progress, as we discover, create, and become with possibilities beyond imagination.

The Prophet Joseph Smith said, “It may seem to some to be a very bold doctrine that we talk of—a power which records or binds on earth and binds in heaven.”²⁰ The sociality we create here can exist with eternal glory there.²¹ Indeed, “we without [our family members] cannot be made perfect; neither can they without us be made perfect,” that is, in “a whole and complete and perfect union.”²²

What can we do now?

First, imagine your image reflected back and forth between two mirrors of eternity. In one direction, picture yourself as daughter, granddaughter, great-granddaughter; in the other direction, smile at yourself as aunt, mother, grandmother. How quickly time passes! In each time and role, notice who is with you. Gather their photos and stories; make their memories real. Record their

names, experiences, key dates. They are your family—the family you have and the family you want.

As you perform temple ordinances for family members, the spirit of Elijah, “a manifestation of the Holy Ghost bearing witness of the divine nature of the family,”²³ will knit the hearts of your fathers, mothers, and children together in love.²⁴

Second, let the adventure of family history be intentional and spontaneous. Call your grandmother. Look deeply into the eyes of that new baby. Make time—discover eternity—at each stage of your journey. Learn and acknowledge with gratitude and honesty your family heritage. Celebrate and become the positive and, where needed, humbly do everything possible not to pass on the negative. Let good things begin with you.

Third, visit FamilySearch.org. Download the available mobile apps. They’re free and fun. Discover, connect, belong. See how you are related to people in a room, how easy and rewarding it is to add names to your living family tree, to find and bless your roots and branches.

Fourth, help unite families eternally. Remember the demographics of heaven. There are many more on the other side of the veil than on this side. As more temples come closer to us, please offer those waiting for temple ordinances opportunity to receive them.

The promise at Easter and always is that, in and through Jesus Christ, we can become our best story and our families can become happy and forever. In all our generations, Jesus Christ heals the brokenhearted, delivers the captives, sets at liberty them that are bruised.²⁵ Covenant belonging with God and each other²⁶ includes knowing our spirit and body will be reunited in resurrection and our most precious relationships can continue beyond death with a fulness of joy.²⁷

We each have a story. Come discover yours. Come find your voice, your song, your harmony in Him. This is the very purpose for which God created the heavens and the earth and saw that they were good.²⁸

Praise God’s plan of happiness, Jesus Christ’s Atonement, continuing restoration in His gospel and Church. Please come find your family, all your generations, and bring them home. In the sacred and holy name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. “My Heavenly Father Loves Me,” *Children’s Songbook*, 228.
2. 2 Nephi 2:25.
3. See Ecclesiastes 3:1.
4. Based on United Nations Secretariat, *The World at Six Billion* (1999), 5, table 1; “World Population by Year,” Worldometer, worldometers.info.
5. Many are blessed to have parents who did not physically bear them, yet

they are joined as family through bonds of affection and adoption and sacred sealing covenants.

6. I express appreciation to those who are piloting ways to organize large numbers of family names into family trees.
7. In 2021, some 99 million names were added to public family trees. And recently, digitization was completed of 2.4 million rolls of microfilm containing approximately 37 billion names (with some duplications). These individual name records can now be prepared to be searched, found, and added to the family tree of humanity.
8. See Russell M. Nelson, “Roots and Branches,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2004, 27–29.
9. Of course, as we discover and build our living family tree, please maintain 100 percent respect for the privacy and volunteer participation of family members, living and deceased.
10. David Quimette extrapolated these numbers, based on Angus Maddison, *The World Economy: A Millennial Perspective* (2001), 241, table B-10.
11. See Laura Silver and others, “What Makes Life Meaningful? Views from 17 Advanced Economies,” Pew Research Center, Nov. 18, 2021, [pewresearch.org](https://www.pewresearch.org).
12. 1 Nephi 9:5; 1 Nephi 19:3; Words of Mormon 1:6–7; and Alma 37:2 speak of keeping records and remembering “for a wise purpose,” including to bless future generations.
13. See Russell M. Nelson and Wendy W. Nelson, “Open the Heavens through Temple and Family History Work,” *Ensign*, Oct. 2017, 34–39; *Liahona*, Oct. 2017, 14–19; see also “RootsTech Family Discovery Day—Opening Session 2017” (video), [ChurchofJesusChrist.org](https://www.ChurchofJesusChrist.org).
14. See Doctrine and Covenants 128:18.
15. See Gordon B. Hinckley, “Keep the Chain Unbroken” (Brigham Young University devotional, Nov. 30, 1999), speeches.byu.edu. President Hinckley is also quoted in David A. Bednar, “A Welding Link” (worldwide devotional for young adults, Sept. 10, 2017), [broadcasts.ChurchofJesusChrist.org](https://www.broadcasts.ChurchofJesusChrist.org).
16. For example, in our family, Henry Bawden, from Devonshire, England, married Sarah Howard, who emigrated with her family after they joined the Church. While Sarah was in St. Louis as a young teenager, her father, mother, and five siblings died. Henry and Sarah had 10 children. Sarah also raised six children of Henry’s first wife, Ann Ireland, after she died. Sarah was also mother to two young granddaughters after her (Sarah’s) daughter-in-law passed away. Despite life’s many challenges,

Sarah was warm, loving, compassionate, and of course very hardworking. She was affectionately known as “Little Grandma.”

17. Hard as it may be, as we forgive ourselves and each other with Christ’s help, we become “the children of God” (Matthew 5:9).
18. See, for example, Mosiah 3:19.
19. See “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” ChurchofJesusChrist.org.
20. Doctrine and Covenants 128:9.
21. See Doctrine and Covenants 130:2.
22. Doctrine and Covenants 128:18.
23. Russell M. Nelson, “A New Harvest Time,” *Ensign*, May 1998, 34; see also Russell M. Nelson and Wendy W. Nelson, “Open the Heavens through Temple and Family History Work,” 16–18.
24. See Mosiah 18:21.
25. See Luke 4:18.
26. I am told the Hebrew word for family—*mishpachah*—comes from a Hebrew root word (*shaphahh*) meaning “to join or bind together.” Every role within the family is designed to strengthen family bonds.
27. See Doctrine and Covenants 88:15–16, 34; 93:33; 138:17.
28. See Genesis 1:4, 31.