

Sense and Psychotherapy

Dear Reader,

The holidays are a family-filled time for me. Although we tend to spend the holidays here in California with my in-laws, a lot of my psychic energy is taken up with thoughts of my original "home" in Michigan, particularly memories of childhood celebrations. These are the times I become the most homesick. Even though I have lived several states away for over 15 years, I still miss my family most deeply during the holidays.

Now that all the fuss and excitement of the holidays is over, I find myself reflecting on what it means to be a part of a family. Family isn't just a group of people sharing the same ancestors. Its members, whether related by blood or not, share a level of common experience that deeply influences not only their relations with each other but their basic interpersonal interaction styles, their reactions to stress, even the very core of their personalities.

For the most part, my family provided me with a sense of comfort and belonging that I carry with me to this day. I know this isn't true for everyone, but I believe that each of us, regardless of our past, can develop the skills, and have a chance, to create such a family.

Just the facts...

- The U.S. Census Bureau's definition of "family" is limited to two or more people living together, related by birth, marriage or adoption.
- 69% of U.S. households are Census-defined "family households."

It's A Family Affair

As you may have read recently, the 2000 Census is now underway. One of its results, to the chagrin of some so-called "pro-family" groups, will almost certainly be that the "typical" family, Mom, Dad and kids, is less common than a decade ago. If we're willing to think about what a family does though, rather than getting stuck on how it ought to look, we quickly discover that families are as common as ever, filling the same roles, struggling with the same issues. Families, in all their various incarnations, are one of the most challenging, yet rewarding, parts of my practice. I try to focus on what families can do rather than how they ought to look, working with members, whoever they may be, to explore the roles they fill, helping them examine how they can support each other and make their family the safe, comfortable place it ought to be.

Mary Pipher calls a family "a collection of people who pool resources and help each other over the long haul". That's a pretty broad definition, one that fits a lot of groupings that certainly aren't "family", but I like it because it describes, on a basic level, what most of us expect from family. A family, however it looks, should provide its members with a sense of unconditional acceptance and "belongingness", a feeling of comfortable predictability and a refuge in times of stress or danger. Families differ from other groups mainly in the degree to which we expect them to meet these needs. Family is the place where we go for our most basic comforts, and thus it is the place we stand most psychologically exposed. This is the attraction of family, and the root of its power.

The "dysfunctional" family is one of those hot-button topics that always seems to be making its way on to talk shows and into the news, but what often gets lost in the discussion is the fact that all families have issues, even "functional" ones. We need to get away from the idea that all families with problems are "dysfunctional" and think instead about how families deal with problems that undermine their ability to provide comfort and security. Somehow, resilient families have a way of coping with stress, rather than disintegrating under it. In the face of adversity, they seem to maintain that feeling of acceptance and refuge that families lacking resiliency seldom seem to generate. In other words, resilient families function in spite of problems, not because they have none.

As family is such a powerful influence, it's not surprising that we carry its lessons with us every time we join or form a new family. We tend to be drawn to form families that match our experience and expectations; hence, patterns of interaction, both good and bad, that appear generation after generation. As I work with families, I often find myself asking about, and looking for parallels in, childhood family experiences. This provides adults with a sense of perspective and gives parents and kids a way of connecting. It also provides an entry into talking about family roles and how they work, or don't, to meet family members' expectations. Ultimately, Family is about love and security. Families need to find roles for their members, whoever they may be, that work to collectively create and maintain the safe, loving environment they all need.

Where Do I Belong?

One Saturday many years ago, home from college for the weekend, I was down in the basement doing laundry when one of my brothers came in and asked me what I was doing. "You don't belong here anymore" he said, with a bite that only another family member can put in such words. Actually though, he was right. At the time, I felt as though my family and I didn't even know each other, and it wasn't long before I moved not just out of state, but to the other side of the country.

Looking back now across 20 years and 3000 miles, though I once again feel a strong connection with my family, I occasionally still wonder where, and how, I belong. As we all are, I'm deeply influenced by my experiences within my family, and again like most of us, I'm still not exactly sure how, or how deeply. Every morning I make my bed and have my son make his, in some part because as a kid my mother would strip the sheets if I didn't make mine, but I wonder... in what more subtle ways am I raising my son as my parents raised me?

I'm fortunate that my family experience holds much more good than bad. I'm a happy, proud member of my clan and I look forward to the all too few opportunities to return to Michigan for visits. Yet there's a value in the physical and emotional distance I finally achieved. I feel now as though

I can stand back and look at my family in a way that I couldn't when I was immersed in it. There have been times, as a result of that distance, when I've made a conscious choice to shed psychic baggage that once weighed me down. We cannot change the past, nor entirely erase any negative effects, but we can learn from it and thus give ourselves the gift of our own present and future.

I know plenty of people, both friends and clients, who haven't been as fortunate as I in the families they were dealt. I often wonder, as a therapist, what I can bring to the families I work with when the positive feeling I get from my family is sometimes as strong as the negative feeling many people get from theirs. Still, when I stop and recall how long it's taken me to get to this point, I realize that what all of us can bring to our family experience is the strength and courage to step back and look at it, examining both the good and the bad, consciously choosing what to keep and what to discard.

I have come to realize that I can never truly "go back", and this brings a certain sadness. Yet, it also frees me to explore new ways of going forward, discovering who I am and forging even deeper relationships with my parents and siblings. I have spent a long time doing my mental laundry and it's still not spotless. I doubt I'll ever remove all the stains, but that's ok. My oldest clothes still tend to be the most comfortable anyhow and, wherever I am, I feel now that I belong in them.

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In the effort to give good and comforting answers to the young questioners whom we love, we very often arrive at good and comforting answers for ourselves.

Ruth Goode