

Sense and Psychotherapy

Dear Reader,

Recently, I took a trip back to North Carolina with my husband and son to visit my family. It was the first time in many years that all of my siblings and I were in the same place at the same time. I enjoyed myself a great deal, and it led me to reflect on how a group of individuals who are in some ways so different from one another could still share a common bond and thoroughly enjoy each other's company.

I come from a large family; my husband grew up in a much smaller one. I continue to discover the many ways my experience differed from his. Our son is an only child, and I wonder what he is missing by not having any siblings.

As I talk with clients and friends about their families, I am struck by the complexity of the relationships. It saddens me that more than a couple have cut off all, or almost all, contact with their siblings because of old wounds. On the other hand, I am heartened by those who describe a brother or sister as their "best friend".

Either way, I believe it is fruitful to examine the role our siblings had in making us who we are today, and what we want for tomorrow.

Just the facts...

- The average adult has contact with a sibling once or twice a month for decades after leaving home.
- Research shows that sisters tend to have closer relationships than brothers, or brothers and sisters.

Brothers and Sisters

I find amazing the variety of emotions my clients experience as they talk about their siblings. Even the most loving and supportive relationships are complex, multilayered affairs, built upon years of interaction, with subtle, and not-so-subtle effects lasting a lifetime. With child clients, for instance, I often take note of how they express their feelings and perceptions in the sand tray and in their art. With adult clients, we'll talk about the many ways they re-enact their sibling roles. There is no key to unlock the mysteries of our sibling relationships, but we can achieve a greater measure of peace with our sisters and brothers simply by consciously examining the dynamics involved.

Many of us struggle with the intense complexity of our feelings for our siblings well into middle age and beyond. We can love, hate, fear and adore them, all at the same time. Just hearing that tone in a brother's or sister's voice on the telephone can make us feel ten years old again. For many of my clients, holidays are an extremely anxiety-provoking time, and we spend many sessions after family gatherings processing all the interactions. There's so much history between siblings that a word or two, even the smallest gesture, can trigger waves of memory and emotion buried for years.

One way to appreciate the impact of sibling relationships is to consider how strongly entrenched are the roles that we played as children in our families. My clients regularly describe family gatherings that seemingly could have occurred ten, twenty, even thirty years ago: the oldest child taking charge and ordering everyone around, the youngest clowning and playing with the kids. Often, we replay our sibling roles in completely different settings as well, with spouses, friends and even our co-workers. Our childhood interaction patterns are "normal", and we gravitate toward situations where we can recreate them.

Through middle age, we tend to have less contact with our brothers and sisters. We form our own families, develop careers, get absorbed in our own lives. As we grow older and glimpse our own mortality, many of us begin to re-establish our relationships with our siblings. Illness or death of a parent often brings long-separated siblings together. Long-buried resentments between siblings can resurface and manifest themselves in bitter quarrels over possessions and money (though these are rarely the real issues). With effort and good will though, this can also be a time when reconnection and grief can bring new insights and heal old wounds.

When I talk with clients about sibling relationships, we discuss past and present interactions, explore patterns of behavior, and examine specific memories. For many clients, this process evokes deep emotions, and we have to work through these before they can begin to see both their siblings, and themselves, in a more realistic light. There's no denying that our siblings exert a powerful influence over our lives. A greater awareness of, and sense of control over, our interactions with them leaves us better able to experience the joys, and avoid the pain, that siblings can bring to us every day, whether they're with us or not.

Get out the cards!

On long rainy afternoons when I was a kid, my siblings and I would often grab our decks of cards and sit down together at our big round kitchen table and play some mean games of group solitaire. Sometimes we'd have as many as 7 people crowded around the table, all attempting to get the most cards on the piles in the center. Of course the older ones were always faster, and we younger ones would get frustrated, making us that much more competitive on the next round. We were determined to be as fast as the older ones someday.

On a recent trip back east to visit the family, I was delighted to see the cards being pulled out again as we sat down at my brother's table to play several fast, furious games of cutthroat solitaire. The cards were flying and we roared at the thought of explaining to an emergency room doctor how we broke a finger playing *solitaire*.

Even though it was the first time in over 10 years that our entire sibling set was all together, I smiled at how we so easily slipped right back into all our old roles. We teased each other about things that happened 35 years ago, bringing the past into the present, reaffirming our multilayered connections.

When my son groaned and grimaced as we posed for the

umpteenth time in all the various permutations of family portraits, it was impossible for me to explain that he'd look at these pictures decades from now and remember that memorable summer week in steamy North Carolina.

Now, as I look over the pictures at our smiling faces, I get a pang of sadness that my little boy will grow up without a pack of brothers and sisters to immerse himself in. Thirty years from now he won't be able to chide a sister about dragging him across the cement driveway for being in her place, or reminisce about the secrets they kept from their parents. Of course, he won't ever have to worry about being dragged across the driveway in the first place, and he'll be able to continue to be the slowest eater in town because he won't have to eat fast enough to get seconds.

We drew stares our last morning together as we stood outside the IHOP. The laughter and tears mingled as we hugged our good-byes, not wanting to let go, the separation made even more painful by not knowing when we'd all be together again.

I take solace in the knowledge that whenever and wherever I do get to be with my siblings again, little will be changed, other than we'll all be even older. We'll still joke and tease each other, someone will rip open a bag of chips, and we'll grab our cards for another fast-paced, boisterous game of solitaire.

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Her laughter echoes softly in the back of my mind, lingering there now, and probably 60 years from now too - always bringing me the happiness of yesterday, as only a sister can.

Chelsea Duffin