

A REFLECTION ON THE SIBLING AS GRAND-CHILD WHERE THERE IS A 10-YEAR OR GREATER AGE GAP BETWEEN SIBLINGS

By James E. Hughes, Jr., Esq.

In my work with families, I am increasingly discovering how different the messages are that each sibling receives from his or her parents. As a Buddhist, this illumination is less startling than it might be to the Western spirit. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition we are taught that each child's spirit, as it reincarnates, chooses the particular parents who can provide it with its next learning. The parents of each child have the duty of determining what the child's spirit chose them to learn and to offer that child that wisdom. A wonderful concept of this beautiful, harmonious idea is that parents and child bear no genetic guilt towards each other. Rather, parents and child recognize that they are equal partners in the process of evolving each others' spirits. I have often thought how much pain and suffering Western families could avoid if they could adopt this deep spiritual truth.

In appreciating this truth it is easy to understand why, in a family where there are two or more siblings, each sibling receives different messages from his or her parents. After all, each chose these parents to learn something specific for his or her growth. All too often, however, siblings and their parents are unaware of this reality. In fact, it is my experience that when parents are confronted with the reality that they imparted many different messages to their children, they deny it. They prefer to live with the illusion that they offered the same wisdom to each child. Equally, when I work with siblings they assume that the messages they received from their parents were exactly the same. This illusion has often caused large discrepancies in sibling reality, which, until dispelled, makes their communication very difficult. Once siblings understand that each chose these parents to learn something specific to their unique spiritual evolution, communication moves rapidly to dispel the illusion. Once such communication is opened, siblings quickly delight in exchanging with each other the actual nature of the messages they received. Parents witnessing this process then dispel their own myths and are able to discern why the behavior of their child in dealing with a common issue is frequently so different.

For those of you with Western minds who find what I have said so far difficult to understand, I suggest you read Frank Sulloway's book, *Born to Rebel: Birth Order, Family Dynamics, and Creative Lives*¹¹, which will bring you to the same place as any Eastern metaphor.

The recognition by siblings and their parents of the differences in the messages they received will profoundly change the ability of the two generations to make decisions together. In turn, an improved decision making process will strengthen the family governance system and ultimately the whole family fabric.

I want to turn now to one particular area of the parent/child/sibling relationship. In my practice I have found one aspect of parent/child message giving to be particularly complicated. It is that of the child/grand-child sibling. In my experience where there is more than a 10 year span in the ages of siblings, and particularly where there is such a gap between the youngest sibling and the next oldest, I discover that the messages received by this younger sibling from his or her parents are frequently those more like the messages grand-parents impart to their grand-children than like those parents impart to their children. Had I not seen this in at least ten of the families I work with, I probably would have ignored it. I have been equally confounded by why the siblings in these families seemed to have so much more trouble communicating. Having encountered this situation with such frequency, I have begun to appreciate that this is a real and recurring issue for families and one which needs to be illuminated. What are some examples of the fundamental differences in messages received by children from those received by grand-children?

In my experience, first and second born children frequently receive messages from their parents dealing with duty and responsibility and suggesting that replication of the parents' values, and even life paths, are working objectives. This fact is borne out by Sulloway. Equally, third and fourth children receive messages that provide opportunity for greater freedom and flexibility in life choices, again a fact borne out by Sulloway. As we ponder these differences, it is easy to imagine these young striving parents giving messages directly out of that experience to their first and second children. Then often a more prosperous time, and with greater old age, giving different messages to third and fourth children. Now quickly let your mind move to the child born ten years after the first and second child, or even in some cases twenty years or a full

generation later. Here these third children had the same parents but parents who in that twenty-year span had not only moved from young adulthood to middle age. Biologically they are ready to be grand-parents. It is simple to comprehend that these parents are ready to offer to this child the pure love and affection grand-parents lavish on their grand-children. In many cases they have moved past the stern lessons of duty and responsibility young parents offer their earlier born children. It is easy to see how these third children, while apparently the same generation of the family (biologically the children of the same parents), and are in no real way the children of the same parents, if messages from parents are how we measure.

When siblings elect to form a system of family governance to provide a form for joint decision making, it is my experience that they have rarely appreciated these differences in relation to their parents. Normally, the decision to begin a process of family governance grows out of a financial event in the family, such as the deaths of grandparents, the death or mental incapacity of parents, a divorce, the sale of a family business, or some other significant event in the life of the family. In the face of such an event the siblings gather, and often for the first time in their adult lives, are called on to work together. Rarely do they have any experience of doing so, other than planning for major holiday get-togethers. Equally, what previous experience they may have had as children was just that; as children, not as the adults they have become. When they first sit down together, they are often truly meeting strangers. They believe, however, that with the common shared messages they have from their parents they will easily make the needed decisions. To their surprise, they often find very little common ground. As soon as they start saying what message mom and dad would give on this subject, they discover that they have no common message. Unless they know the truth shared in this meditation, they can waste valuable time, or worse, create animosity that may cause future decision making to be extremely difficult. In my experience, this problem of mixed messages is particularly difficult for families with the child/grand-child sibling group. For the grand-child/child whose experience of his or her parents was unfettered love and often extreme freedom of action, the apparent family meetings that help provide needed current information about each family member will, as a result, enhance the opportunity for successful communication. One of these practices is to ask each participant at the beginning of the meeting to write a short resume stating what he or she is passionate about and what friends know about him or her which the family does not. I suggest this practice to

illicit from each participant a view into his or her life's journey and into a second of the three to five personalities each of us has. With this information in hand the participants in the meeting will have an understanding about who is in the room today rather than a distorted vision of who a sibling was twenty years ago. I strongly recommend that families begin all significant meetings with this exercise.

I also strongly recommend that siblings discuss openly and with true humor the messages they each received from their parents. An ability to understand how different those messages were will help enormously in overcoming the misunderstanding between siblings that the different parental messages all too often foster. In families with the significant age differential that creates grand-child/children, I cannot stress how important it is that the siblings discuss the parental messages they received. If such a discussion does not occur the opportunity for misunderstanding and faulty family communication is extremely grave. Acknowledgment of our differences is the first step to appreciation of our individual uniqueness and the true first step to creating a successful family decision making system.

Narrow rigidity of views on issues of siblings often equivalent in age to the normal age of the parents of the grand-child/child is very hard to understand. For the older siblings the behavior exhibited by their younger sibling of laissez-faire and "let it all hang out" appears naive, at best, and, at worst, juvenile. Both sets of siblings are not wrong about what they are observing, but when they place motive in behavior they are coming to radically wrong conclusions about the motivation of each other to find common ground. Once the siblings as a group start discovering who each other is as an individual, rather than as a child of the same parents, their wrong assumption regarding motivation quality disappears. In my book, *Family Wealth: Keeping It in the Family*, I discuss practices families can act out.

For siblings, paradoxically more than for strangers, the ability to work toward a common goal is often more difficult. The secret is to understand that while we are biologically siblings, we are in fact each extraordinary individuals who happened to chose the same two people to learn very different things from. When, as siblings, our age differences are extreme, it is not surprising that the lessons we choose to learn will be very different when the true people we happen to learn from are themselves of very different ages at the time we choose to learn from them.

To all siblings, including mine; Peter, Betsy and Barbie, NAMASTE!

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[1] Sulloway, Frank J., *Born to Rebel: Birth Order, Family Dynamics and Creative Lives*, Vintage Books, 1997.