

INHERITANCE CONFLICT AMONG SIBLINGS

By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

Logic suggests that adult siblings, who are dealing with the death of a parent, would support and help comfort each other through such a painful process. Logic aside, surviving adult siblings frequently begin to behave at their worse when confronted with the significant loss of a parent. This is especially true in families with no surviving parent or where a surviving parent is somewhat passive and doesn't take on a leadership role to help monitor the adult children's behavior prior, during, and after the funeral.

Having to handle the unfamiliar issues of resolving an estate is complicated and confusing. Add to this process, the fact that when money and possessions are up for grabs, tensions heighten as emotional and financial stakes rise. While it is not uncommon for any of us to deal with stressful situations with less tolerance, more irritation, and more frustration than we would normally feel, there is more to this complicated picture than meets the eye.

Childhood conflicts re-emerge

The most important psychological dynamic played out during a family inheritance is this: siblings will re-play early, unresolved conflicts in dealing with each other. Not only will each sibling tend to bring out in others whatever is unresolved over the course of their lives, but also, whatever surfaces will be both exaggerated and magnified. Again, it will be exaggerated due to the emotional stress associated with the process of death and dying. Together, these conditions combine to open up the psychological wounds of earlier childhood in a way that becomes vicious and painful.

While attempting to remain rational and behave maturely, adult children typically revert to their childhood emotional states and interact with each other from these earlier, immature mindsets. Since the strength of unresolved resentments, jealousies, etc. have simmered for decades, they frequently overwhelm one's attempt to maintain self-control. These unresolved childhood issues and conflicts are displayed in several arenas: 1) how siblings deal with the parent's death 2) estate management tasks and 3) the division of personal and household possessions. The tension may also spill over into relationships with other relatives and friends, especially if they get involved in the process. Even when large sums of money or real property are not at stake, the typical arguments around possessions can always be interpreted as an attempt to resolve earlier conflicts. As a result, the history of inheritance in families is fraught with bitter disputes, leading to blood wars between siblings that both surprise and shock outside observers.

Objects Trigger Emotional Feelings

Oftentimes, the monetary value of family objects is rarely the real issue. Rather, it is the feelings associated with the objects that are revived from childhood and young adulthood that flood back into conscious awareness. When certain objects possess a family history and are closely associated to the parent, the objects themselves may evoke early feelings that will contribute to regressive, childish behavior.

One of my clients described a colorful old ceramic rooster that sat in a niche above his mother's kitchen sink. He associated this particular object with several things: very happy, warm mother-son talks, nurturing meals being prepared, and strong connected family ties. The rooster also elicited a sense of stability and permanence; especially sense it was older than my adult client. He had spent thousands of hours over the years talking with his mother in her kitchen,

occasionally glancing at the colorful rooster. Every time he returned to his parent's house, this object was always sitting in the same place. When his mother died, my client naturally asked for the rooster when her personal possessions were being distributed. Soon, he found himself entangled in an unexpected and bitter battle with his older sister who claimed mom wanted her to have the rooster. Prior to his announcing his desire for the rooster, the same sister had announced that she wanted nothing from the kitchen, since she hated cooking and didn't want to be reminded of mom's attempts to teach her to cook. Later in family therapy, it became clear that she was acting out secret jealous feelings toward her brother's close relationship with their mother. She had always felt like a disappointment to her mother who was a wonderful homemaker, cook, and mother.

Self-awareness aids the process

Because many of the dynamics among siblings are barely or totally unconscious, the power of unresolved wounds can catch siblings off guard during the estate settlement. They'll find themselves reacting abnormally to small things said or done by a sibling and have no clue where the strength of their response is coming from. With the help of a therapist, one can become aware of and accepted the power of the psychological dynamics that are causing such unrealistic reactions and begin to understand themselves and their siblings' reactions in a new light.

In short, while dealing with the process of grieving and settling estate issues, almost all interactions between family members will represent a repetition, in some form, of what has occurred earlier in the relationship that has never been satisfactorily resolved. This instant replay is triggered by the stress of a strong emotional loss of a parental figure. Once this awareness is acknowledged, the next step is to figure out what is unfinished with this particular family member.

The key to preventing and resolving inheritance disputes is to understand how this past is being played out in the present and to bring it out into the open. With this insight, you can consciously choose not to allow the past to predominate. Freud said that we are doomed to repeat history if we do not learn from our past. That is a simple definition of why insight is so helpful. For instance, you can stop playing out the past by not "taking the bait" when provoked by a sibling. You can also choose to resolve whatever the issues are, if your siblings are willing. But without the awareness that this drama is even occurring, these old patterns will simply be repeated with a strength that will continue to baffle everyone involved.

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