

FAMILY QUARRELS

For the first time ever, someone in my family isn't speaking to me. For the first time, someone is angry enough with me to depart from the rules of conventional family behavior—and to suffer the consequences of such a departure. Those consequences affect not only the two of us, but others whom we both love. Such is the nature of family quarrels.

The details of our controversy—its particular combination of misunderstandings, personalities and long-standing grudges—are unimportant, a variation on the relatively petty nature of most family quarrels. Its outcome, however, is neither petty nor unimportant: a family breach in which four cousins no longer see one another, a brother and sister don't speak, and a set of parents feel both impotence and despair over their children's estrangement.

The quarrel that precipitated this breach occurred over a year ago and produced great indignation and fury in me at the time. I felt I'd been wronged and was due my righteous anger. But as the months passed, and I saw the indiscriminate pain the family disruption caused, my rage began to seem as pointless as my adversary's. Anger pales before the sight of a four-year-old wondering why he's not, as usual, going to his aunt's house for the holidays. Who is right and who isn't becomes a moot point when a kind, elderly woman is so anguished over her family's problems that she can't sleep at night. My fury has long since turned to sorrow, and to a sense of the utter wastefulness of our disconnection.

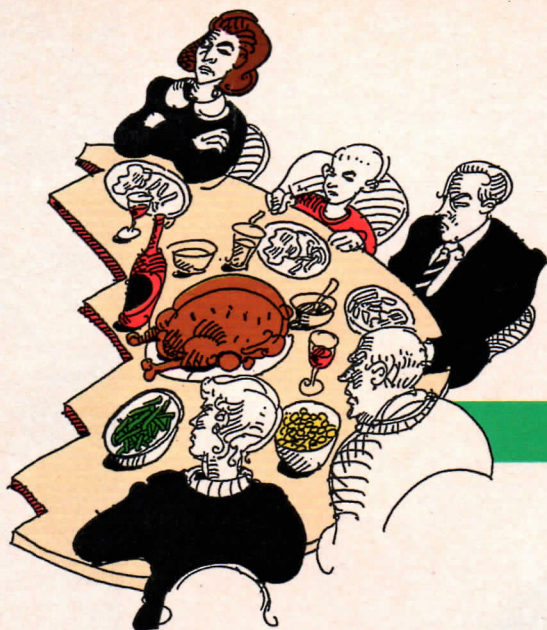
When I hear stories of other family quarrels, the devastation always seems out of proportion to the cause. Perhaps this is because trivial events that precipitate these estrangements are not the real issues of contention. Family quarrels tend to have long, involved histories. Small events—imagined or real slights, instances of insensitivity or ill will—build up over the years. What sets them off is as irrelevant as is the weather to volcanos that erupt without warning when the pressure inside becomes too great to contain. Family quarrels have an element of natural calamity to them, as if we all lived at the base of Mauna

Loa. It's that quality, along with the number of people they affect and the time we're given to indulge them (families are around forever, after all, or so it seems until we lose them) that makes family quarrels different from quarrels among friends.

While we choose our friends, our families are chosen for us. They come with no guarantees of compatibility. In fact, certain givens of the family seem perversely geared to cause friction. The close, even claustrophobic quality of the family situation makes the avoidance of irritating situations nearly impossible. We can't simply keep our distance from our close relatives, sending telegrams on birthdays or stand-ins to Christmas dinners.

If she had known what was going to happen, that's just what my friend Jane might have done a few months ago when she and her husband and child were invited to spend the day at her aunt's house. Her mother and father were also invited, but only her mother accepted the invitation, her father being something of a sociopath where family gatherings are concerned. When they got up to say their good-byes at the end of the afternoon, Jane's aunt suddenly exploded, spewing forth a litany of complaints that ranged from weighty to petty, from reasonable to insane: Jane had not brought a hostess gift—for that matter, she had never shown enough care in her gifts; she was just like her "selfish" father; she treated the aunt like a younger sister, just the way her mother always had; she hadn't given her cousin (the aunt's daughter) a lift out to the house in her car that afternoon; she had invited her aunt to her apartment only once, and that one time she hadn't served the right refreshments; etc., etc., and so forth. Jane was on the receiving end of an anger that had taken years to build up. Having found a convenient, plausible, and probably less threatening target than that presented by either Jane's mother or father, this anger dumped itself whole—the appropriate and the inappropriate parts alike—in Jane's lap. It left her stunned.

Later, chewing over the accusations, Jane was able to acquit herself of some: She and her husband hadn't



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given her cousin a lift because there was absolutely no room in the car; they were planning to send a gift to her aunt immediately after the visit; she probably hadn't been a consummate hostess when her aunt visited, since at the time she had a four-day-old baby to attend to.

Other of her aunt's accusations were tougher to refute, because they had less to do with herself and her actions than with the dynamics of her family. She wasn't aware that she treated her aunt the way her mother treated her, but maybe she did. Maybe she didn't give as much thought to bread-and-butter gifts as she did to other matters she considered more important. But did this qualify as a major human failing? She didn't think so. She wasn't *just* like her father, but she was probably a little like him. (This particular accusation, "You're just like your father... mother... sister..." is a staple in the family quarrel, and is bound to have elements of truth to it. Family traits, like the measles, do tend to be contagious, and add to the combustibility of family life.)

For Jane, the bottom line regarding all these charges was that her aunt was impossible and she wasn't going to have anything to do with her. Primary result: They're not talking. Secondary result: a disruption, partial at the very least, in relations between her mother and her aunt, Jane and her cousin, her son and his great aunt and second cousin... In other words, a short circuit in the network of family connections that shows every indication of being long-lived.

The prevalence of such familial episodes makes them appear to be business as usual—family business, anyway. And if from the outset the odds are against family tranquility, they become even less favorable after we choose our life partners, who inevitably come trailing family, often less than agreeable family, behind them. At this point, after twenty or thirty years of trying to come to terms with our own intimate relatives, we've got to learn to cope with a whole new set of personalities, some of which we may find inimical to our own.

Particularly painful problems arise when partners and

in-laws find themselves at odds, and old and new loyalties are pitted against one another. I'm reminded of the friend whose sister would visit her only if the friend's husband was away from home. She could never forgive him for advising his wife not to lend her money. Then there's my friend Susan's grievous difficulty with her father-in-law. "For a long time we couldn't get along," Susan recalls. "He was a demanding, controlling man, and during the first years of my marriage he wouldn't acknowledge the fact that, as Peter's wife, I had taken a place closer than his own to Peter. At one point he accused me of paying attention to him and his wife only if they did things for us. I was so angry that I didn't speak to him for six months. It was very hard because Peter had to take my side against his father, and he had never stood up to him before. Everybody was unhappy about the situation."

Such was the stubbornness of the two protagonists that things didn't change until Susan's husband became gravely ill, and they were forced to come together as a family. It was then that she felt her father-in-law finally accepted her as his son's partner, acknowledging that it was her place, as Peter's wife, to make the final decisions on his medical treatment.

Fortunately, Susan recognized her father-in-law's efforts to accept her and show her respect, and she responded in kind, suggesting they have dinner together after their hospital visits, calling to report Peter's condition on those days his parents couldn't visit. As happens in a lot of family quarrels, there was no grand scene of reconciliation, just a quiet mutual recognition of the end of hostilities—and mutual relief. As Peter recovered, so did the relationship between his father and his wife. "We gradually reconciled and even became friends," Susan says. "He died two years later, and I feel very thankful for the time we had together. I sometimes think, what if he had died while we weren't speaking to each other? How terrible it would have been! Even so, I grieve a little for the time we lost with each other."

A family member shouldn't have to suffer a close brush with death in order to end a feud. There are less drastic ways to end quarrels. Limiting their scope, for instance, divesting them of all the excess baggage usually attached to family squabbles, is one way to heighten their chances for a shorter duration and a brighter outcome. This is something we naturally do with our *friends*. Since our friends' actions aren't burdened with a family history, we tend to focus our complaints on the actions themselves. "I don't like it when you forget dates with me," I might say to a friend, without dragging in the fact that her mother never keeps dates either or that she's resented me from the time we were toddlers and I walked two months earlier than she did. This makes (Continued on page 244)

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the quarrel with the friend manageable, limited to real issues that can be dealt with.

Sometimes potentially longer-term family estrangements can be nipped in the bud with well-chosen expressions of affection. For the most part, people who are angry with loved ones are looking for a reason *not* to be angry, and we can easily give them that reason if we want to. A woman I know told me of how she had had to demand that her father stop teasing her small daughter, and how her father had been hurt enough by her chastising to refrain from speaking to her when she called to talk to him and her mother. "Daddy is hurt and feels that you don't like him anymore," her mother told her. My friend felt her father was acting like a child, but because she didn't want their estrangement to become long-term, she made it a point to make up with him. Without apologizing for having asked him to change his behavior with his granddaughter, she sent him a card when Father's Day arrived shortly afterward, and called to say that she loved him. "She said she loves me," her father reported happily to her mother afterward, as if he had really doubted the fact. Those potent words did the trick.

Unfortunately, we *don't* always love the people with whom we are quarreling, and we can't use those particular words as balm. But if ending a family estrangement is our primary objective—as in most cases it *should* be—then we can find other words that heal rather than shred emotions. And we don't have to lose our self-respect in order to utter them. Instead of saying to an adversary, "You've behaved abominably," which might be true, we can choose to say, "I hate the fact that our quarrel is separating the family," which would be equally true, but more to the point.

Or we could use no words at all. We can choose to shape events for ourselves to bring us into contact with a family enemy. If we don't want to meet alone, we can extend a general invitation to a family dinner that includes our adversary. We don't even have to meet our antagonist face to face in order to end hostilities. One woman I know called a truce by sending a picture of her brother, taken when he was a baby, to the brother's wife, with whom she had been estranged for nearly a year. The shared sight of someone

they both loved, sitting in a high chair and covered with oatmeal, was enough to put things in perspective.

Not every family quarrel can be resolved, of course. Some quarrels that are apparently patched up go on festering beneath the surface. And sometimes, for reasons of their own, people don't *want* to be placated. So the cousin who wasn't invited to the very small wedding of a friend refuses to accept any of the innumerable invitations that have since been given her.

And there are some acts that even the saintliest among us can't find it in our hearts to excuse. So I don't expect the woman whose brother cheated her out of her share of their father's inheritance to let bygones be bygones.

But considering the price family quarrels exact from innocent and guilty alike, one should do one's damndest to see that they are settled, or at least resolved to the point where family life can go on. I know I'm determined to resolve the division in my own life. No quarrel seems worth the utter wrongness of our disjointed family relations.

My mother used to tell me I should take good care of my eyes, because they were the only set I'd ever get. I guess that's the way I feel about family.



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