

# Family-of-Origin Work—a Mini-Monograph

## Create a map for a healthier future

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*Know thyself . . .*  
*The unexamined life is not worth living.* —Socrates (via Plato)



Family-of-origin work can be described as the deliberate, conscious process of getting to know who you are against the backdrop of nature and nurture. In simplest terms it means identifying and recovering from your past, so you can move forward successfully in the present. No surprise, your early experiences have a major influence on how you perceive yourself and others, as well as the way in which you learned to cope in life.

Typically, your family of origin refers to the first social group you belonged to, which is usually your biological, adoptive, or foster family. The members of your family of origin and your relationships with them (along with your extended family, including ancestors) profoundly influenced who you have become. For good or bad, they provided the relational environment—i.e., culture, ethnicity, class, and a whole host of social relationships--from which you learned who you are.

Your family of origin influenced your beliefs, attitudes, expectations, behaviors, and the way in which you think. You learned how to communicate, how to manage your emotions and feelings, how to get your needs met in healthy ways—or not. Largely responsible for ingraining beliefs, perceptions, and values and setting your sense of self and self-worth, your family of origin provided a base-line for your ability to give and receive love, teaching you how to dream and become the person you were intended to be.

Although the term itself may be relatively new, family-of-origin work represents quite an old concept. It may go back as far as Socrates, who reportedly taught that examining one's life was paramount. In a much more

recent era, a college student who was reading up on Socrates later commented (perhaps less tongue-in-cheek than originally surmised): “If you are going to live the unexamined life, at least don't inflict it on others.”

Family-of-origin work is not a separate therapeutic method with specific rules and yards of rhetoric. Instead, it's a concept, a means for investigating your roots with the specific purpose of better understanding yourself, your own ways of thinking, your inherited perceptions and beliefs and triggers for your behaviors. Its focus is on discovery.

Family-of-origin work describes a journey of increased awareness. Yours. It can have hands in many of your pockets at the same time. Both simple and complex, this work can be useful and valuable at the same time. And sometimes it can be life changing.



*The further backward you look,  
the further forward you can see.* —Winston Churchill

## Listening In . . .

Roxanne was working busily and happily in the kitchen. It was Auntie Pearl's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, and Roxanne was making yet another of her famous dinners. “That girl can cook!” was a standard comment from extended family members and friends who had the good fortune to be invited to dinner.

Roxanne called Pearl “Auntie” because of the age difference. Pearl was really Roxanne's mother's first cousin. However, for as long as Roxanne could remember, it had always been Auntie Pearl and she still adored the older woman. Even at age 34, to Roxanne it was still “Auntie Pearl,” although the age gap seemed smaller. Roxanne wished they lived closer to each other so visits could be more frequent. *Every four or five years doesn't get it*, she thought.

Dinner was spectacular and, in the pleasant satisfied afterglow, the group began to reminisce. Someone asked Roxanne's mother if she had passed along culinary skills to her daughter. There were general chuckles all around. “Your mother hated cooking,” said one. “If your meals had depended on your mother, you'd have starved,” added another. “Why do

you think she fell in love with your father? He could COOK!" commented a third.

Roxanne listened, a puzzled expression on her face. "I don't know anyone else in our family who loves cooking," she mused. "I've loved it my entire life. I wonder where that came from." She hadn't long to wonder.

"Hey, that's no mystery," said Auntie Pearl, laughing. "Your father was a brilliant chef. You must know that. After he and your mother divorced, he went to Europe and became quite famous." Roxanne's eyes opened wide. She had no recollection of her father, his having left before she was born. There were no pictures; in fact, if her mother mentioned him at all, it was with obvious derision for having *abandoned the family*.

Roxanne looked at her mother questioningly. Her mother nodded. "Yes, he was a wonderful cook. That's probably the reason I fell in love with him. Of course, he couldn't do anything else right . . ."



"Sure he could," said Auntie Pearl. "You just kicked him out when you found out about his affair and Roxanne's half-sister, and you've stayed angry for nearly 34 years. That was a waste." Pause. "And since we're on the subject, it was unfair of you to prevent Roxanne from seeing her father and give her the impression he was a heartless cad. He was not."

Roxanne felt lightheaded. *Half-sister? Her mother had kicked her dad out? Her father had wanted to see her? A sought-after chef? What other family secrets do I not know about?* she wondered. Lightheaded nothing: Roxanne was quite sure she would faint.

Without her mother's blessing, Roxanne decided to undertake family-of-origin research. With the help of Auntie Pearl and a couple of close friends, Roxanne finally located her half-sister, Rosanne. At their first meeting, neither could get over how much their physical resemblance. Only eleven months apart in age, the two women were having a wonderful time getting to know each other. Having lived with their father in Europe until she was almost twelve, Rosanne had many pictures and stories to share with half-sister. Roxanne soaked up every new bit of information.

"Before our father died, he often wished I was more interested in cooking," said Roseanne. "He would be so jazzed that you are!" The more

Roxanne discovered about her father, the more confident she felt about pursuing her interests and making a career of her cooking.

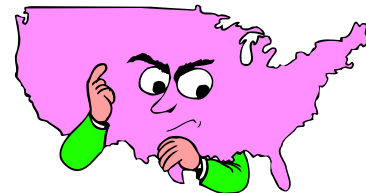
Recently Roxanne enrolled in Culinary College, with plans to be a chef. If you were to ask her whether or not family-of-origin work has been worth the effort, Roxanne would answer, "In spades."

*It always comes back to the same necessity; go deep enough and there is a bedrock of truth, however hard. —May Sarton*

### More Than a Joke

Picture a cartoon that shows a car stopped by the side of the highway in front of a giant road map. The driver is looking out the window at a large dot on the map. Beside the dot are the words: *You are here*. The driver's face is a study in stunned disbelief. Funny, but not very helpful.

It is difficult to develop a *map* for the rest of your life if you don't know where you've come from. Without that knowledge, you may spend much of your life metaphorically driving around in circles. This does not suggest that you are to live in the past any more than you are to live in the future. To effectively live in the present, you need to know where you've been and identify where you are heading.



Do you find yourself repeating behavioral patterns, reminiscent of the little pet rat running madly on its exercise wheel, never getting anywhere? While exercise can be beneficial to cardiovascular health for an estimated 90% of the population, experiencing your life as a repeating event--when the event is negative or has negative outcomes--is not enjoyable.

Your present reactions to life (especially a tendency to take things personally, jump to conclusions, or overreact) are usually related to your childhood and the learning that took place back then. Some learning was conscious; much was subconscious. Either way, it has an impact on your adult life.

Perhaps it's your second or third (tenth or twentieth) relationship or the tenth or twentieth time you've stopped just short of developing a relationship. Perhaps it's your second or third or tenth job and suddenly you

realize that the same mistakes are happening again. You are not nearly as successful as you envisioned. If you can't figure out what is really happening or how to avoid repeating the cycle yet again, think family-of-origin issues.

Most people can learn to thrive if they're given the right tools and are willing to invest personal time and energy. Family-of-origin work is one of those tools. Some pooh-pooh the importance of this, perhaps from fear of what they might discover or because they don't know how to go about the task. They tend to say, "Let sleeping dogs lie. I'll go on from here."

Be very clear that *sleeping dogs* can hold you back. If you are unwilling to risk engaging in family-of-origin work, you may do little more than mark time throughout life. Sure, avoidance may result in a temporary postponement of some emotional pain. It may also result in a failure to achieve the level of success and thriving possible for achieving your potential.

The prospect may be less daunting when you begin with the premise that all families are dysfunctional in some way, when defining *dysfunctional* as the exhibition of behaviors that result in negative outcomes.



This starting point can also help you avoid the typical polarization of "us versus them." Everyone is in the same boat, examining (or not examining) his or her life. The information you uncover may lead you to tweak your personal script and/or complete unfinished business. [Refer to mini-monographs (1) Scripts for Living and (2) Unfinished Business for additional information.] The good news is that if you step out courageously to become the person you were designed to be, step-by-step and bit-by-bit your life can improve.

*We can chart our future clearly and wisely only when  
we know the path that has led to the present.* —Adlai Stevenson

### ***Listening In . . .***

The twins had just celebrated their seventh birthday. Darling little kinesthetic girls, they loved climbing into their mother's lap for a cuddle or plastering themselves one on each side while she read them a favorite story.

The mother, Nannette, made an appointment with a counselor because she “felt like some switch has been activated in my brain and it scares me.” Nanette reported that rather suddenly she had become extremely uncomfortable with touch. When it came to her twin girls, Nanette no longer wanted to touch them or be touched by them.

No surprise, the twins did not understand their mother’s change in behavior and tried even harder to get close to her. When they continued to be rebuffed, the little girls were understandably confused and felt rejected. They became listless, cried easily, slept intermittently at night, and began to exhibit symptoms of depression.

The counselor’s first question was, “Tell me your age you when you were sexually abused.” Nannette sat frozen in her chair and as she later described it, “Felt like I was suffocating.”



“How did you know I was abused?” Nanette whispered, when she could get her breath. “I have never told a living soul.” The counselor had not known. She had taken an educated shot-in-the-dark guess.

The ugly story tumbled out. Nannette had indeed been sexually abused and not just once. Her abuse had been at the hands of three male relatives and it had gone on for a period of several years. Although she had shoved the memory from conscious awareness, the abuse had begun when Nannette was about age seven. When her twin daughters turned the same age, Nannette’s brain had evidently pushed her to avoid all contact with her daughters.

The counselor thought this change in behavior might have been an attempt to avoid any possibility of Nanette touching her daughters inappropriately, although this had never happened and was not likely to occur. Nevertheless, once Nannette brought these memories to conscious awareness, she was able to make an informed choice, able to again give her twin daughters the appropriate and loving touch that is so vital for all human beings.

*Family scripts are revealed when repeating patterns of family interactions are either observed or described. —John Byng-Hall*

## Examples of Family-of-Origin Issues

In his book, *Generation to Generation*, author Friedman provides examples of generationally-transmitted patterns of behavior that have been uncovered during family-of-origin work.

This list may serve to stimulate your own recollections and identification processes:

- A tendency for individuals to live together versus marrying or not to partner at all.
- Beliefs about how to expend resources (e.g., time, money) on the pregnant mother and, later on, for the children. This can include the availability of medical care and at what point it was sought during the pregnancy.
- Differing expectations related to education and career opportunities based on gender, including societal reinforcers tied to gender.
- The presence of different types of sexual orientation and preferences and whether or not these were accepted and openly discussed.
- Cultural expectations, cross-cultural implications, and sub-culture beliefs related to self-esteem.
- An emphasis on having or not having a family and the age at which females typically became pregnant; also, whether or not the pregnancy occurred within a committed marriage/partnership.
- The relative emphasis on affiliation with established religion and a lack of clarity about affiliation versus spirituality.
- A tendency to do whatever feels good at the moment whether or not it is healthy or positive (e.g., unable to delay gratification).
- The role of politics in the family system and whether or not members perceive politics as a game with rules and somewhat predictable outcomes.



- The level of functionality of the family system including the presence of isolation, denial, pretending, rigidity, boundary violations, and addictive behaviors.
- The level of respect exhibited for an individual family member versus the family as a whole (which may differ based on age and gender).
- The presence of childhood trauma including any type of abuse and/or critical, harsh, dismissing, or rejecting parenting styles.
- Living in a chaotic, fear-based environment with a sense of fear being the over-riding emotion.
- Letting emotions and feelings all hang out (or keeping them stuffed and repressed) instead of identifying the emotion, getting the information it was designed to provide, and taking appropriate action.
- Living with and witnessing a volatile, high-conflict relationship between parents, regardless of the face they showed to the outside world.
- A lack of information about other family members, especially those who were estranged for some reason. Sometimes a refusal on the part of parents to answer questions about these estranged individuals, if not outright lying (e.g., the individual you thought was your oldest sister turns out, in fact, to be your biological mother).
- A family tendency to paint members either black or white (all good or all bad), instead of acknowledging that everyone is a mix of desirable and undesirable behaviors. That's who humans are.

*In my beginning is my end.* —T. S. Eliot

### **Three Main Areas of Exploration**

Have you ever seen a set of Russian nesting dolls? As you, in effect, peel away each outer doll, another is revealed. That's a good metaphor for this process: Keep uncovering another doll (i.e., layer) until you eventually reach the core.





How do you start? There are many avenues to pursue. Talk with family members and close family friends. Use non-threatening personal chats and make it clear this is not about blame. Individuals are often more than willing to reminisce once they understand that the purpose of your search is to help you better understand where you have come from and to learn how to exhibit behaviors that result in positive outcomes.

Avoid asking “why” questions. Rather, ask what they remember about you and your family members. If talking with them in person or by telephone isn't an option, ask for information through writing letters or sending e-mail. Look through old photo albums, revisit childhood homes, schools, and cities, and read newspapers in your hometown library. These can often jog one's memories of childhood events.

While it can be important to identify specific events and incidents, what can be even more helpful is an increased awareness of behavioral patterns, both in your life as well as in your generational history. Think of yourself as a detective, uncovering puzzle pieces, one by one. Together they create the big picture as you put it together piece by piece.

Family-of-origin work involves three major areas of exploration. Become your own personal detective, your own Sherlock Holmes, if you will. You can invent a healthier future for yourself—by design—when you can identify and put into context these areas:

- Innate giftedness - Who you are innately and what type of activities energize or drain you
- Personal history - What has happened to you thus far in life including key events, losses, successes, experiences and patterns of behavior
- Generational inheritance – The legacy that has been passed down to you from the previous three-to-four generations



*Partnering gives you the opportunity to inherit an additional dysfunctional family just in case the one you already had didn't contain sufficient dysfunction to keep you occupied. —Unknown*

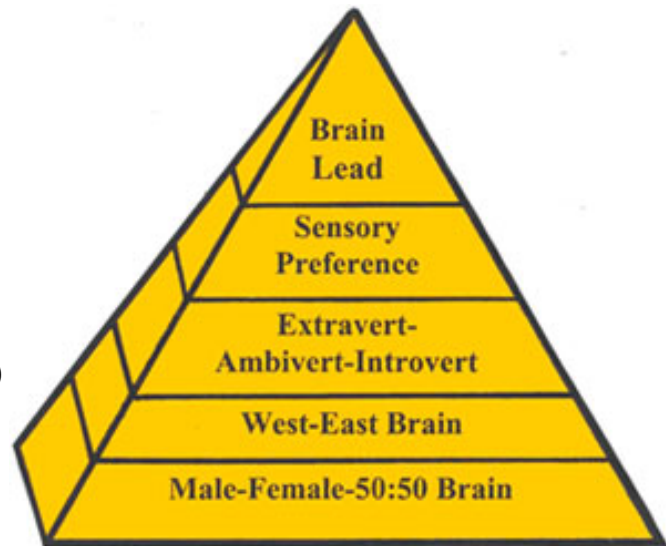
## **1** Innate giftedness

One place to begin is by identifying who you are innately, and then creating a collage of contributing factors that either pushed you toward or

away from living authentically. There are a variety of assessments available to receive and interpret information about yourself. Almost any assessment can give you some additional information as long as you know what the assessment is designed to assess. (Taylor uses The Benziger Thinking Styles Assessment [BTSA] to help individuals identify their innate giftedness.)

Who you are is a combination of nature and nurture components. Systematically endeavor to identify at least the following:

- Your unique combination of components as listed on the ***“Who Am I?” Pyramid***
- Your IQ (intelligence quotient) as well as your EQ (emotional intelligence quotient).
- Your typical lifestyle patterns, health status (including addictive behaviors), and personal body image, e.g., Does your appearance please you and meet your general expectations?
- Your history of adaption, (i.e., the types of activities that are energy-efficient for your brain versus those that are energy-intensive), and the important activities that fall into each category along with relative amounts of time spent on each.
- Your needs, wants, likes, dislikes, and wishes. Were you taught to be quiet about your preferences and to conform regardless? Do you know the difference between needs and wants? Do you know how to define your personal needs versus your wants? What are your clear likes, and dislikes? Have you learned how to state them calmly and matter-of-factly?
- Your personal vision--including goals that can help you achieve your personal vision. You may have grown up knowing and following another family member’s vision or none at all.



“Who Am I?” Pyramid Model  
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- Your level of self-esteem Do you have minimal problems in this area? Do you struggle with an abysmally low sense of self-worth, an inflated sense of self-esteem, or a circling combination of both?
- The presence or absence of personal boundaries and whether they are balanced, too tight, or too loose. Are you enmeshed with or estranged from specific family members? Were you allowed to make decisions growing up. or were you expected to simply do what you were told and do it quickly and were not encouraged (or perhaps even permitted) to make decisions for yourself?

## Personality Facets

During childhood and adolescence, most individuals develop three facets of personality. Be very clear that this has nothing to do with a diagnosis of multiple personality disorder. Rather, it describes facets of who you are that help you deal successfully with a variety of types of events, other people, and environments.

- Core personality – This represents your authentic self, the part that represents who you are innately. On the basis of the way in which you learned to choose the best path of action you could think of at the particular time, you also create an attention personality and a protection personality.
- Attention personality – This represents the fundamental role you learned to play on the stage of life as you attempted to fulfill a legitimate need to be noticed, recognized, understood, taken seriously, and respected by others. It's the way you learned to survive.
- Protection personality – This represents the shields you developed you protect against pain and injury. When one of your shields is on display you are usually so busy defending yourself from real or imagined slights that you have little energy to spend on personal growth, to say nothing of family-of-origin exploration.



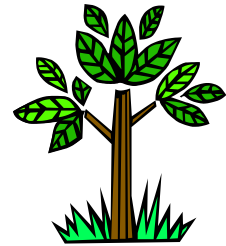
If your three personalities have developed in balance, you are more likely to own and exhibit a balanced and optimum level of self-esteem. It is worth evaluating these three personalities because you are likely to be attracted to others based on the way they act out their attention personality (e.g., how they get their attention needs met).

On the other hand, you are more likely to struggle with personal relationships based on your protection personality (e.g., the way in which you try to keep yourself safe). Integrating and balancing your personality facets makes for an interesting and complicated dance.

## Personal history

Your personal history is unique to you. Even if you were a twin or triplet (or more), one was slightly older and that fact alone can change environmental dynamics.

Metaphorically, think of yourself as a plant. Your mission (*should you choose to accept it*) is to learn as much as possible about the *garden* in which you were planted from conception and onward, and whether it was a good match with your type of plant. If yes, wonderful! If not, you have information to make an informed choice about the way in which you want to live the rest of your life.



Remember that each person's *truth* is unique because each brain is unique, reacting in its own way to environments, events, and people. This can be disconcerting at times, especially when your recollections or perceptions don't match those of others. Sibling perceptions (to say nothing of care providers) may differ dramatically because one person's reward may be another's punishment based on the person's innate giftedness. Avoid allowing this to derail your investigations in any way.

Think of your family of origin in terms of a mobile. Each piece on the mobile represents a family member and each has its place (role). Move one piece and everything on the mobile moves. That can be uncomfortable. Consequently, many families are heavily invested in each person knowing his/her role and playing it out. That provides a type of stability, false though it may be, whether or not the assigned role works for individual.

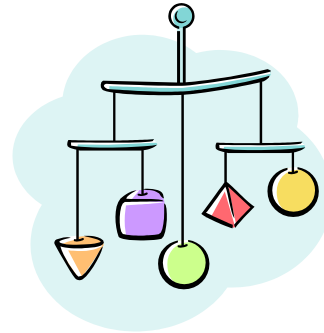
You play a role in your family system.

What was it during childhood? What is it now?

Here are examples of roles to help you identify yours:

- The good child or perfect angel?

- The hero?
- The peacemaker?
- The scapegoat?
- The lost child?
- The savior or rescuer?
- The mascot/clown?
- The pseudo-parent (role reversal)?
- The identified patient?
- The caretaker?
- The dumb child?
- The judge?
- The bad child?
- The sports nut?
- The enabler?
- The placater?
- The smart child or the misunderstood genius?
- And so on.



Make no mistake. The roles you adopt in childhood are often similar to the ones you exhibit in adulthood. Identifying them can help you make informed choices about which roles you will give up, alter, or maintain in the future.

Each person's *truth* is unique to his/her brain because each brain is unique and reacts differently to environments, events, and people. This can be disconcerting when your recollections or perceptions don't match those of others. The perceptions of either siblings or care providers may differ dramatically, because one person's reward may be another's punishment based on the person's innate giftedness.

Once you've identified your role from your perspective, continue answering other questions. Here are some to consider:

- Were you affirmed for who you were innately or for conforming to expectations, for complying, or for not making any waves?

- Were you the gender that your family wanted and did you have the preferred sexual orientation?
- Was your innate giftedness encouraged, nurtured, and rewarded, or were you ignored, shamed, or even punished for being different?
- Were appropriate tools, accessories, and learning opportunities available to assist you in developing competencies within your innate giftedness?
- Did your environment acknowledge and provide for your level of Extraversion-Ambiversion-Introversion?
- Was your nuclear family intact, or did you lose a parent (e.g., divorce, accidental or military death, suicide, abandoned)?
- Were you a foster child or adopted or raised with step-family/step-parent issues?
- Was your sensory-system preference acknowledged? Was it similar to (or different from) others in your family? Did you receive nurturing in your sensory system preference?
- What were you taught versus what you actually learned? Since actions speak louder than words, you likely learned what you saw role-modeled rather than what you were taught in words.
- What type of environment surrounded you in childhood? How did others treat you? What did you hear others say about you?
- What was the atmosphere in your home? Was there a sense of happiness, acceptance, and safety, or one of gloom, unease, anxiety, fear, suspicion, or anger? What did you fear (or hate, or love, or resent, or envy)? Did you feel like you needed to *walk on eggs* much of the time?
- What resources did you (and your family) possess and in what amounts? What is your financial history?
- What losses did you experience? Such can include death, certainly. They can also include hopes that were not fulfilled, ambitions that were thwarted, giftedness for which you were shamed, and the loss of



developing into who you are innately due to dysfunction or stressors/traumas/expectations in the systems with which you were associated.

- What joys did you experience? What important events occurred? What were your educational opportunities and experiences? What advantages have you had so far in life? What disadvantages?
- Was there an elderly family member (perhaps bedridden) in the home or a seriously ill or handicapped sibling who took up a great deal of your parents' time? Or was there an adopted or foster child or other sibling whose behaviors held center stage and got all the attention? Although that wasn't your fault, you might have gotten only leftovers in terms of parenting due to lack of time and energy.
- Did you grow up in a home that role-modeled abuse? If so, (e.g., your father abused your mother), you may have learned that your father did not have to take responsibility for his behaviors or pay consequences; or that it was your mother's fault somehow because she accepted the blame. Did you learn healthy bona fide boundaries, or have you ended up being either a victim or abuser in your own adulthood relationships?
- Did you experience any type of abuse? Some were abused and know it; some mislabeled the behaviors and don't know it and some forgot or repressed the abuse. And some denied any abuse ever happened. In terms of damage, there may be very little difference between being the recipient of abusive behaviors and experiencing it vicariously. That is witnessing (seeing, hearing, sensing) the abuse of others.
- Did your family get to do much traveling and see how other people live and work and behave, or did you primarily stick close to home with a relatively small group of family/friends? Were you isolated from others with strict guidelines to not tell anyone anything about what happened at home? Family-of-origin work can help you put the puzzle pieces together.
- Did you compare your family with others and realize that your caregivers fell seriously short in terms of providing you with the basic essentials in life? If so, you may have tried to become the perfect child in order to compensate or to earn love. Needless to say, as one therapist put it, because it is virtually impossible to be good or perfect



all the time and, because the child's behavior is not at all the cause of the parent's failure or inability to love and nurture, this approach does not work. What it can do is shape (or skew) the child's personality and view of him or herself.

- What stress-response patterns were role modeled by your care providers (e.g., fight/flight, conserve/withdraw, tend/befriend)? Do you find yourself experiencing stress responses for no specific identifiable reason? Do you have strange and recurring dreams? Think cellular memory.



### Generational inheritance

Discovering your generational inheritance involves learning about yourself against the backdrop of your progenitors and their history. Different family systems have different giftedness, different strengths, different weaknesses, different risks, and on and on. Good people sometimes exhibit dysfunctional behaviors because the individuals are enmeshed in a dysfunctional system.

You need to identify the system that spawned you. It will usually have some desirable characteristics. Just as likely, it will contain some system-problems that have influenced your beliefs and expectations negatively, to say nothing of the behavior patterns you typically exhibit.

You cannot begin to deal with your own dysfunction efficaciously until you pinpoint the dysfunction exhibited in your *line*. Recognizing the patterns and characteristics frequently exhibited in your lineage can provide you with baseline information as well as some objectivity.



Specific behavioral patterns influenced you and may still be operational in your life today. Some therapists estimate that 70% of all dysfunctional patterns in a family system are behaviors that can be explained in terms of unfinished generational issues, problems that were hidden, denied, or ignored for generations and that have an uncanny way of reappearing regularly in the lives of descendants.

*We all grow up with the weight of history on us. Our ancestors dwell in the attics of our brains as they do in the spiraling chains of knowledge hidden in every cell of our bodies. —Shirley Jean Abbott Tomkiewicz*



## ***Listening In...***

A knock at the door was immediately followed by the door being opened. A male student, momentarily suspended in space, stumbled into the school nurse' office. "He's yours!" said an adult voice that dripped with irritation and disgust. The door slammed.

Angela sized up the young man as the quintessential tall, dark, and handsome. Right now his chiseled features reflected a brooding expression that wavered somewhere between fear and defiance.

As school nurse, Angela knew many of the 1700 high school students by sight, far fewer by name. Introducing herself, she asked, "What reason did your teacher have for bringing you to my office?" Of course the eleventh grader had "*no idea.*"

Ten minutes later Angela tried a different tack. "Describe what you were doing when the P.E. teacher collared you." Eventually the story unraveled. It turned out that Brad had exposed himself to some girls in the gym who were under-whelmed by what they saw, when the P.E. teacher suddenly "went ballistic." (Brad's words.)

After a few more questions, forthcoming information revealed that Brad had an identical twin, currently enrolled at a high school across town. Angela telephoned the school nurse and discovered that Brad's twin was currently in trouble for making inappropriate sexual comments to female students.

Later that same day, Brad and his parents found themselves in Angela's office. The school nurse explained the situation and addressing the father, asked, matter-of-factly, "Do you have a history of inappropriate sexual activity?" Red-faced and almost stuttering, Brad's father admitting to an addiction to pornography, a rather serious addiction it turned out as he was caught on company time using a company computer to view internet sites. He was also on probation in another state for alleged "Peeping Tom" activities.



*At last we're getting somewhere,* thought Angela. *Two generations exhibiting dysfunctional behaviors in the area of sexuality.* Aloud, she asked the father, "Is your dad still alive?" He was. In fact, he had recently retired and moved to town to be closer to his twin grandsons.

Soon three generations of males were sitting in Angela's office. She described the situation and asked the grandfather, "Do you have any history of inappropriate sexual behaviors?"

The elderly man hung his head, discomfort and embarrassment etching his still-handsome face. Angela was not surprised to hear him say, his voice breaking with emotion, "I hoped my family would never have to know . . ."

Turns out the grandfather had been arrested in his late teens on a charge of attempted date rape. Although the case had eventually been settled out of court, there had been a few other instances over the years of alleged "misunderstandings" related to cross-gender interactions.

More questions revealed a secret related to the great-grandfather's behaviors that had never been discussed openly in the family but that likely involved some type of aberrant sexual activity. Each generation consecutively was acting out dysfunctional behaviors related to a similar underlying issue, even though each professed no conscious knowledge of the events that occurred in the lives of other family members, including behaviors that had been exhibited in previous generations.

Each generation had thought they were keeping secret the information from other family members. Unfortunately, there really are no *secrets* in families. The details may never have been verbalized but the body knows—the subconscious knows—whether or not the specific details have come to conscious awareness. Typically other family members have some dis-ease (a sense that something is not right), even if they don't know details. If the great-grandfather had talked with his son about the *secret* and had obtained appropriate help (or the father with his twins), perhaps this cycle could have been broken in a more timely manner.

*Family trees are always trees of knowledge and often they are also trees of life. —Rabbi Edwin Friedman*



## **A Baker's Dozen Tips to Consider**

1. Avoid denial. (It's more than a river in Egypt!) Mislabeling, pretending, minimizing, and getting caught up in inappropriate or false loyalty are not helpful. Be honest and tell yourself the truth as your brain perceives it. If

you cannot be honest with yourself, how can you hope to be honest in your relationships with others?

Eric Hoffer, a U.S. sociologist, put it this way: *We lie loudest when we lie to ourselves.*

It will really do you little (if any) good to uncover family-of-origin issues unless you are willing to face the truth honestly and be courageous enough to take appropriate action. Not everyone is. You can be.

2. It is never about blame. Period. There is no blame directed toward anyone in family-of-origin work: not toward yourself and certainly not toward others. Most people do about the best they can at the time with the knowledge and tools they possess—you included. If they could have done any better, they likely would have done so. Even if care providers/others were evil—you can't go back and redo it.

Many of the present-day problems that people face are heavily influenced by family-of-origin issues. If estimates are correct and 50% of your problems are of your own making and are derived from the way you think, then this process can help you alter the way you think. In turn, this can reduce the number of problems you have to deal with.

Just because you may not like the way your parents raised you, a choice to do the exact opposite may not be much better. As John Bradshaw once commented: "180 degrees from dysfunctional is still dysfunctional" Just because it is different doesn't make it healthy, desirable, or functional.

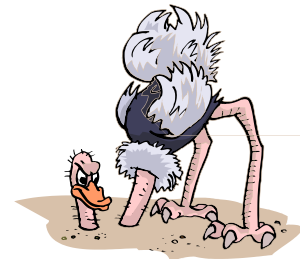
Regardless of contributors, the basic premise in adulthood is that you are the problem, the solution, and the necessary resources (or you are responsible for finding help). Identifying and addressing family of origin issues is about taking an honest look with adult eyes at what happened, facing it, and learning from it.

*Take your life in your own hands and what happens?  
A terrible thing. There's no one to blame!* —Erica Jong

3. Uncover the core beliefs you learned in childhood. These may be so subtle, pervasive, and ingrained that you hardly even think of them as beliefs. Many people operate in adulthood based on core beliefs that were

subconsciously absorbed prior to the age of five. You can only get out of a trap (Untrue, unhelpful core beliefs are traps!) once you recognize you are in one. Metaphorically get your head out of the sand and make a list of your core beliefs. Some you will want to keep; some you may not. Here are a few examples of core beliefs to get you started:

- One gender is more valuable than the other.
- The world is unsafe, so I can't trust anyone.
- Money is the root of all evil.
- My church is the only true religion.
- Domestic violence is normal.
- I can't be successful.
- If someone mistreats me, I provoked it and deserve it.
- I'm not smart enough or \_\_\_\_\_ enough.
- No one will ever love me because I'm unlovable.
- It's okay for males to get angry; that's just how they are.



*The best years in your life are the ones in which you decide your problems are your own. You don't blame them on your mother, the ecology, or the president. You realize that you control your own destiny. —Albert Ellis*

4. Your issues may differ based on your sibling position, unless you are an only child. (Then tag, you're it.) Based on your position in the sibling lineup, you may struggle with issues that differ from any potential brother(s) or sister(s). An only child may have a variety of issues to explore. An adopted child has two families to explore, where possible: a biological family and an adoptive family.

Some have a sibling position unrelated to biology but rooted in the way the individual learned to function within his/her family of origin. In other words, at times the literal and biological sibling position may differ from the actual role or position a specific sibling is filling. For instance, the mother dies and the second child (a female) takes on the role of eldest child to keep the household running efficiently. Or the second child (a male) takes on the role of eldest child because his gender is more rewarded in that family system or because no father is physically present.

If there is a gap of five or more years between siblings, the younger of the two may be functioning as an eldest child along with as his/her older sibling (e.g., two “eldest” children in that family in terms of roles).

Having reviewed sibling position, it may be helpful to explore issues using a basic formula. It may not apply to everyone all the time, but it can be a helpful starting point.

- Eldest child – explore your father’s unfinished issues
- 2<sup>nd</sup> child – explore your mother’s unfinished issues
- 3<sup>rd</sup> child – explore unfinished issues related to your parents’ marriage (or lack of marriage)
- 4<sup>th</sup> child – explore unfinished issues from previous generations



*We were a strange little band of characters (our family) trudging through life sharing diseases and toothpaste, coveting one another's desserts, hiding shampoo, borrowing money, locking each other out of our rooms, inflicting pain and kissing to heal it in the same instant, loving, laughing, defending, and trying to figure out the common thread that bound us all together. —Erma Bombeck*

5. Uncover the entire *iceberg*. As you know, the largest portion of the average iceberg tends to be hidden. The lower the water line, the more of the iceberg can be seen. The more you can see, the more you can discover.

Think of the tip of the iceberg as the events that happened to you personally. The next level down represents the patterns of behaviors that are exhibited in your immediate family. Farther down, you look for the generational issues in your ancestral tree, issues or key behaviors that have been passed down through your family line. This is where you can really hit pay dirt and pinpoint root problems (e.g., issues related to finances, sexuality, education, partnering, marriage, careers, offspring, addictive behaviors, codependency, family secrets).

Watch for patterns you may uncover related to:

- Culture
- Religious, agnostic, atheist, or none
- Educational levels
- Gender differences
- Career choices
- Marriage or living together
- Unwed pregnancies
- Presence or absence of children
- Addictive behaviors or abusive behaviors
- Excessive competition
- Service history
- Finances
- Health challenges, illness, disease, weight issues
- Preferred sports
- Sexual orientation and preferences
- Addictive behaviors
- Presence or absence of characteristics common to dysfunctional family systems (e.g., denial, silence, isolation, rigidity)



6. Be careful about confidentiality issues. Many are concerned about confidentiality and rightly so. That's smart. Bona fide boundaries—appropriate guides, or self-identified limits that enhance our health and safety—can help you to be politically smart in this arena. You need to be judicious about what you share, with whom, and under what circumstances. Silence is a characteristic of dysfunctional systems. The opposite stance is motor mouthing. Neither position is healthy.

Here are three important confidentiality guidelines:

- Remember the 11th commandment: *You shall not explain.* You do not owe explanations to everyone about everything. Personal information should be disclosed judiciously (by your choice) and only to individuals you trust.

- Share information about yourself only and nothing about anyone else. It's safer and more functional to avoid any temptation to gossip. As the old axiom says, *Tend to your own rat killing!*
- Avoid triangling, i.e., talking to someone about a third person or carrying messages from a third person. Anything you might be tempted to share about someone else will be only your perception anyway.

*You can live a lifetime and, at the end of it, know more about other people than you know about yourself.* —Beryl Markham

7. If you are partnered, know that you will also be impacted by your partner's family of origin and the patterns that were common to that family line. And it won't matter a great deal whether or not you even know other members of that family line. The same thing often occurs with close friends, especially if you spend much time with them. Challenges and opportunities will pop up that are connected with family-of-origin issues one way or another, even if those issues have not been identified and labeled.

According to Rabbi Edwin Friedman, author of *Generation to Generation*, the typical premarital counseling has not been very effective. The failure of premarital counseling to reduce the divorce rates may be due primarily to the fact that the traditional approach is usually directed toward the couple and their relationship. It is Friedman's belief that if the focus is switched to the bride's and groom's families of origin, not only could this increase the effectiveness of premarital counseling but also the experience could become an opportunity to impact more than one couple and more than one generation.



8. Watch for the homeostasis phenomenon, so called. As already mentioned, each person plays a role in the family and the purpose of each role is to keep the family in balance. Metaphorically, think of homeostasis in terms of a mobile. When one person changes their role (or position), the other family members often try to push that person back into their role to maintain the position of all the other pieces in the mobile. This can be seen in families that organize themselves around an identified patient (e.g., the person with an addiction). When/If that individual changes, the

family may actually sabotage the individual's recovery and enable the person to relapse into old habits. Unhealthy, but at least it puts the family back in the old familiar homeostasis.

In childhood you may not have chosen your *role*. Nevertheless, unless you identify your role, it may continue into adulthood. You may even be attracted to others that are a perceived homeostatic fit to your role. These can be friends, friends with benefits, or a partner or spouse. The euphemism "falling in love" is often a label for finding someone with whom you can work out family-of-origin issues, someone with whom you can find the old familiar dynamic.

When it comes to marriage, the tendency is either to choose someone who is like or unlike your family of origin as a marriage partner. What many typically attempt to do with the partner is recreate the role you played in your family of origin. The problem is that your spouse came from a different family system and may not understand the reason for the behaviors you exhibit.



To be successful long term, marriage requires a relationship between two mature adults. Mature in the sense of really being able to leave one's family of origin and the role you played in it and choose to create a new and healthy role with another person. You can only do this when you are conscious of your role in your family of origin. Many problems in marriage likely result from spouses expecting each other to play different roles. Most of this occurs at a subconscious level. Therefore, a helpful goal may be to bring as much information as possible to conscious awareness.

9. Feel the fear and do it anyway. At the very least, examining how you were raised and how you were parented can be anxiety-producing. After all, it may be all you know. Nevertheless, it is critically important because you tend to replay and reproduce family dynamics. The familiar issues tend to get played out repeatedly. They can crop up in friendships and romantic relationships; at work, school, or church; in parent-child relationships.

Uncovering and understanding these issues and patterns can enable you to see your role in perpetuating them in your adulthood. It also gives you the option of interrupting the patterns and behaviors by consciously changing the way in which you respond. When you choose to not face and



deal with your family of origin issues, you simply perpetuate the cycle. Either you deal with your issues--or they'll deal with you.

It can be rewarding and empowering to realize that you've simply been acting out a script that is at least as old as you are (and perhaps a great deal older), and that in adulthood you can now make a different choice.

*Ninety percent of the world's woe comes from people not knowing themselves, their abilities, their frailties, and even their real virtues. Most of us go almost all the way through life as complete strangers to ourselves. —Sydney J. Harris*

10. Be open to considering a negotiated set of counseling or therapy sessions to jump-start your exploration. Many modalities are available including individualized counseling, group therapy, psychodrama, workshops, and expressive therapy work. All of these forms share a common goal: to assist you in looking at your generational inheritance for the purpose of identifying family messages and scripts, communication styles, traditions, relationship choices, and ways of dealing with emotions and feelings.



The various therapies work in unique ways, depending on the person. Select with care, realizing that you still have to do the work. The counselor's or therapist's role is to ask questions that will make you think, give you feedback about potential connections between the past and the present, and offer you suggestions for altering your behaviors as needed.

11. Consider the use of *tools* to help you process, visualize, categorize, and utilize what you learn. For example, in this era of the internet there are many computer programs (a type of *tool*) to help one create family-tree diagrams and spreadsheets to make it easier to analyze patterns. Some people still prefer to draw time lines and make notations on plain paper or a ruled tablet.

Some find it helpful to draw genograms, i.e., visual diagrams of important events and relationships over at least three generations. Think of genograms as jigsaw puzzles in which you are one of the pieces, or as road maps that tell you where you have been and where you might be heading unless you course-correct. Emily Marlin's book, *Genograms*, contains useful tips for drawing genograms. Do whatever works for you.

More recently, another potentially helpful *tool* as become available: DNA testing. For this, this may help you connect with potential relatives anywhere in the world.

12. Be prepared to experience with emotions and feelings in relation to your family of origin, both past and present. Unless understood and managed, the power of emotions and feelings could sabotage your purpose to live authentically. Long-standing patterns of behavior and expectations can be extremely difficult to alter, especially if you have not yet developed requisite skills to manage emotions and feelings effectively. If you don't already possess them, develop the skills you need to deal with your emotions and feelings appropriately, which may involve spending some time and energy learning about them.



Learn the difference between emotions and feelings. Identify what you learned about them growing up. There may be a difference between what you were taught and what you actually learned. All things being equal, you may not be responsible for every emotion that arises in your brain and body. In general, you *are* responsible for the feelings you choose to hang on to because your brain created them.

Feelings follow thoughts. Wayne Dyer has been teaching this for decades. If you want to change the way you feel, you need to change the way you think. Simple and profound.

13. Be willing to include selected individuals in at least some part of your exploration. Do family-of-origin work with your partner, best friend, and/or children. Exploring your generational inheritance can help everyone view patterns of interaction from a larger perspective. It can help you better understand and manage innate tendencies. By openly discussing identified issues, you can often assist the next generation in preventing some of the problems that were experienced by previous family members. In fact, this may be the greatest gift you can ever give them.

Be careful about getting caught up in rehearsing specific details, especially with younger family members. It is so easy to get sidetracked when sharing with others, easy to get caught up in sensationalizing the exploration, tempting to present information in a manner that arouses very strong interest, especially by including lurid or even exaggerated

details. Avoid this. Keep in mind that the details are not the issue. Identifying patterns of behavior that resulted in negative outcomes is.

When discussing what you are learning with others, once you have labeled a behavior with a broad brush, concentrate your time and energy on developing strategies that can help all of you make better choices in the future. Stay clear and focused about the purpose of family-of-origin work. Do this in an endeavor to:

- Increase your awareness and gain new perspectives on old dysfunctional patterns of behavior that you tend to re-enact in adulthood.
- Identify and come to terms with undesirable past experiences.
- Break the cycle of undesirable generational patterns of behavior.
- Learn how to relate more effectively with family-of-origin members today.
- Transmit healthier levels of awareness and options for choices to succeeding generations.

*To be what we are, and to become what we are capable of becoming, is the only end in life. —Robert Louis Stevenson*



## Listening In . . .

First story:

Maggie and her fourteen-year-old son Neilson sat in the doctor's office. Neilson had tried to hang himself once again, an almost annual occurrence. Maggie was terrified that next year he might succeed. The boy could never provide any reason for his continue urge toward this behavior. Neilson just knew that each year as Memorial Day rolled around he had an uncontrollable urge or do himself in.

The three had met several times. Neilson had tried a variety of medications, but nothing seemed to dampen his drive to toward suicide around Memorial Day.

Today, the physician, who had been reading up on Epigenetics

(cellular memory) took a different tack and asked Maggie to tell him about her pregnancy with Neilson. She began relating events that had occurred until she reached the fifth month. “And what happened during the fifth month?” asked the physician.

Maggie stirred in her chair, obviously uncomfortable. Glancing at Nielson, she said, “We’ve never talked about what happened. Nielson knows nothing.”

“Maybe it is relevant,” persisted the physician.

Taking a deep breath Maggie said, “My father had suffered with repeated bouts of depression most of his life. He came to stay with us for a few weeks: R-and-R as he called it. The Friday before Memorial Day, I came home from work at the usual time, hit the garage door opener, and discovered my father hanging from a rafter. He had finally committed suicide.”

That’s as far as Maggie got. Leaping to his feet Neilson shouted, “That’s it! That’s it! In my dreams I’ve seen someone hanging from the ceiling for as far back as I can remember. It just seemed like something I had to do.”



“You never said anything about this!” Maggie exclaimed.

“I thought I was going crazy,” said Neilson, shrugging, “and didn’t want to talk about it.” That was nearly a decade ago and Neilson has never again had the urge to hang himself. Maggie remains amazed that something she saw while pregnant could find its way into her son’s dreams.

## Second story

Imelda had never seen her biological father in person, her parents having separated before her birth. She often asked her mother questions about him, but the answers were brief or nonexistent. One night Imelda had a crystal-clear dream. She saw the figure of a man yelling at another figure whom she knew to be her father. Although Imelda was not frightened and could not make out the words, somehow she knew them to be very unkind racial slurs.

The dream then switched to the scene of a traffic accident, a horrific traffic accident. A car and run into a tree, and it was obvious that the driver was dead. To her surprise, the driver was the man who had been screaming obscenities and slurs at her father. Imelda woke up puzzled. She remained puzzled for several days because the same dream keep occurring. Finally, in desperation, she called her mother and described the dream. Her mother's reaction was immediate and dramatic. "How could you know this?" she shouted. "That incident occurred before you were born, before I was even pregnant with you. What is going on here? I'm frightened!"

Once her mother had confirmed that the dream represented events that had actually happened, Imelda never had the dream again. It was as if once her brain discerned that she now knew the story; it was a done deal. That was then; this is now.

### Third Story

It had been four months since Morris had gotten a new heart. Well, new to him. The transplant surgery had gone very well and the *Rev*, as he was affectionately known to his parishioners, was delighted to be back in harness, as he called it. Morris was also enjoying driving himself around town. It had taken every bit of his clerical patience to be waited on and chauffeured.



Turning the corner, Morris had an almost overwhelming urge to stop, park the car, and go into the little Green Lantern Pub for a drink. Morris stopped and parked the car. He did not go into the little Green Lantern Pub. Morris was *not* a drinker. It puzzled him to the point that he discussed this with his wife over dinner.

"You know I have never been a drinker," he said. "Maybe a sip of wine to toast a bride and groom, but never anything else. And if I had not taken myself in hand I would have found myself in the pub ordering a . . . a . . ."

"Yes, what would you have ordered," asked his wife.

"A gin and tonic," Morris promptly replied. "But I'm not even sure what a gin and tonic is." They both laughed. Every time Morris found himself in the vicinity of the little Green Lantern Pub, however, the same urge

came over him. He became so distraught his wife made an appointment with the surgeon.

"Where did his heart come from?" she asked, after they were seated in the doctor's office. "I know we're not supposed to receive any patient identifiable information, but isn't there something we could be told? Not to put too fine a point on it, but Morris here is going a little nuts worrying about this."

A few confidential phone calls later, the doctor returned with the news that the heart donor was a young man who was killed in a DUI and, yes, he had had a problem with alcohol.

From time to time, Morris still gets the urge to stop in at the little Green Lantern Pub for a gin and tonic. "Now that I know where that urge is coming from," he told his wife, "I just chuckle and tell my heart that we are creating new cellular memory, so just get used to it."

#### Fourth story

What do you mean, "How do you eat spaghetti?" Arial said into her cell phone. "Are you losing your mind? You know how you eat spaghetti. You take your knife and fork, cut your spaghetti into half-inch lengths, and then shovel them into your mouth."



"How do *you* eat spaghetti?" asked her brother, Leland.

"I don't have time for this nonsense," Arial said, a firm note of irritation in her voice. "I was just on my way out to a meeting. Are you crazy?"

"I don't think I'm crazy," said her brother, "but I need your help to validate that. How do you eat spaghetti?"

"Oh for crying out loud!" said Arial with a huge sigh. "I take a spoon, wind spaghetti around my fork that is centered in the middle of the spoon. When it's all wound, I pop it into my mouth. Are you satisfied? Can I hang up now?"

"As soon as I tell you this story," said Leland. It turned out that Leland's wife had fixed him spaghetti for the first time since his surgery. Leland had sat down at the table, looked at the plate of

spaghetti with a knife and fork beside, and told his wife something was missing. His wife replied that nothing was missing. This was how she always fixed spaghetti and had for twenty years.

Restless, Leland had gotten up from the table and started wandering around the kitchen looking for he knew-not-what. Opening drawers at random, he saw a spoon. Picking up the spoon he went back to the table, told his wife he had known something was missing, and proceeded to wind spaghetti around the fork centered in the middle of the spoon.

“OH, MY, GOODNESS,” said Arial. “You’ve never wound spaghetti around a fork in your entire life, not and gotten it to your mouth still on the fork, that is!”

“I know, Sis. That’s what I’m telling you,” said Arial. “That’s the reason I called you. The doctor said I might have some different preferences or urges after surgery but this is . . . well, I don’t know what this is!”

Three months previously, Arial had donated a kidney to her brother Leland. “I guess I’m part of you now,” she said laughing. “I’m on my way over to watch you eat spaghetti. We should put a picture of this on *YouTube*! And when I get there tell me if you’ve noticed any other changes.”

## Fifth Story

For as long as she could remember, Cindy had been claustrophobic. Any confined space, to say nothing of tunnels, could trigger an all-out panic attack. It was beginning to get in the way of her life. On the flight to Egypt, it had taken her a couple of hours to work up the courage to use the tiny airplane toilet. And she had honestly tried to go down to the burial chamber in King Tut’s tomb, but part way down the 45 degree sloping tunnel, head bent, perspiring with the heat, the panic hit with a vengeance. Cindy turned around and almost ran out of the tunnel. She settled for viewing a replica in the Cairo museum.



Back home, she consulted a healthcare professional. “I need to get to the bottom of this terror,” she explained. As far as I know, there’s nothing in my life that can account for this. The counselor thought for a moment and then described the somewhat controversial work of Dr. Alfred Tomatis, a French otolaryngologist, who believed that at least for some individuals, sounds related to a traumatic birth experience

might be at the root of panic attacks. The counselor suggested this new field of audio-psycho-phonology might possibly shed light on Cindy's claustrophobia. She decided listening to music couldn't hurt although she had little hope of it helping in any way.

The counselor explained that according to studies, the auditory sense is one of the first to develop during gestation. The ear starts forming a few days after conception and is fully developed by the fourth month of pregnancy. Cindy donned a set of headphones and began to listen to recorded sounds similar to those a fetus would hear during pregnancy. Within seconds Cindy said that she felt nauseated. Her head was pounding, her vision had blurred, and she felt like she was going to pass out. The counselor immediately removed the headphones and gave Cindy an assignment: Talk to your mother's older sister (Cindy's mother had died several years before) and find out what she knows about your birth experience, if anything.

Aunt Pamela did know something. Quite a lot of something, as it turned out. Aunt Pamela explained that when it was time for Cindy's mother to go to the hospital, the car wouldn't start. It was 56 degrees F. below zero outside and the engine block had frozen. By the time the coal-oil stove had heated up the garage sufficiently to thaw the engine, several hours had passed. Once at the hospital, the doctor was notified. Unfortunately, the engine block on the doctor's car was also frozen. It was policy that the baby was to wait for the doctor.



Cindy's mother had had her legs tied together with sheets and Cindy had banged her tiny head against her mother's pubic bone for several hours before the doctor managed to get to the hospital and orchestrate the delivery. Cindy was born with a huge hematoma on her forehead. She was also born, apparently, with a built-in phobia against tunnels and small spaces. Armed with this new information, Cindy took another look at her claustrophobia. Whenever she felt panicky, Cindy would calmly tell her brain, "Thank you for reminding me how traumatic my birth experience was and for trying to prevent anything similar from happening again. I've got the information. You can stop telling me about it."

Although Cindy did not go out of her way to be in claustrophobic spaces, over time she was able to ride in very small elevators and drive through two-lane tunnels without hyperventilating. She even managed to crawl through some very small places at Mesa Verde



National Park. Back in Egypt for another visit, Cindy decided not to try King Tut's tomb again. However, with her new knowledge she was reasonably certain that if had been necessary to do so, she would be able to survive the walk down and back.

"It's amazing," Cindy told her counselor, "how differently I view things now; things that used to put me into a complete panic. And to think that my brain remembered my traumatic birth experience all these decades! Maybe the panic attacks were its way of trying to help me recall that." Putting two and two together resulted in Cindy's being able to prevent most episodes of claustrophobia and deal effectively with those that did occur.



*I will never know the complete impact of my heritage, but I can come closer to knowing if I look rather than turn away. —Stephen Arterburn*

## **Epigenetics, or Cellular Memory**

Do these stories sound a bit like science fiction? Think again. They do raise fascinating questions regarding the contribution of cellular memory to family-of-origin work. All memory is believed to be encoded at the cellular level, certainly due to genetics, but apparently also through epigenetics.

- Genetics refers to the transmission of information via genes and chromosomes to the next generation. Epigenetics refers to the transmission of information encoded on strands of proteins in the nucleus of cells (those with a nucleus), separate from genes and chromosomes.
- Epigenetics is a relatively new area of exploration. In the 21st century it has been defined as "the study of inheritable changes in genome function that occur without a change in DNA sequence." The science of Epigenetics is a rapidly growing research field that investigates heritable alterations in gene expression caused by mechanisms other than changes in DNA sequence. It has been established that a variety of environmental influences (e.g., nutrition, stress, emotions) can modify genes without changing their basic blueprint or DNA, and this modification can be passed on to future generations.

According to some researchers, the field of epigenetics bridges the gap between nature and nurture. The human brain is basically under genetic control, with refinements being made by epigenetic factors (non-genetic factors that cause the organisms' genes to behave differently) along with instances of activity-dependent learning.

Along with anecdotal examples (such as the stories related above), more are surfacing. For example:

- A 7-year old child had nightmares about being killed after receiving the heart of a child who was murdered.
- A lawyer began craving Snickers after he received the heart of a 14-year-old boy who loved Snickers bars.
- A kindergarten teacher kept thinking about jumping up on her desk and dancing suggestively in front of her kindergarten students after receiving a lung transplant from a pole dancer.

As you are doing family-or-origin work, if something doesn't make sense, if you see behaviors you don't understand, or you recognize you're having or have had unusual thoughts or dreams, ask questions. Dig to get to the bottom of it. You may be surprised what you learn.



For additional information, refer to Brain References, Learning, Cellular Memory on Taylor's website: [www.arlenetaylor.org](http://www.arlenetaylor.org)

## Potential Benefits

There may be as many reasons to explore one's family of origin as individuals on this planet. Certainly huge benefits can accrue from engaging in the exploration. Some get started because they're trying to recover or uncover generational secrets, clues that may offer an explanation for problem behaviors or reactions out of proportion to the situation at hand. Others, because they're puzzling over the contribution of past events to present choices. A few may be interested primarily in creating a history of their family line.

Engaging in this process won't prevent you from making mistakes. Mistakes are part and parcel of being human. There are some potential benefits, however, including these:

- Recovery from past injuries. This includes abuse (e.g., physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, financial, social, and sexual). Unhealed injury can block relational and spiritual connectedness and place you at increased risk for addictive behaviors. Identifying and healing the woundedness that resulted from the injury (real or perceived) can enable you to move more easily and smoothly through life.
- Learning from your mistakes. Through such learning, you can identify new options and make informed choices. Instead of continuing to struggle--sometimes successfully, sometimes despairingly--you can learn to re-parent yourself in areas where you are not achieving desired outcomes. When you take responsibility for who you are and where you are going from a position of knowledge, you become empowered. Think of it this way: It's the difference between living by design or living by default.
- Inventing a more successful future. This includes identifying the script you are following. Metaphorically, you are a player on the stage of life, acting out the script you were handed at birth. Estimates are that perhaps 90% of one's adult personality is in place by the age of six or seven. Unfortunately many people act out their childhood scripts well into adulthood, whether or not they are a good match.
- Breaking the cycle of dysfunction. This process can help you identify and break the cycle of repetitive generational mistakes. Breaking the cycle of dysfunction and role-modeling more functional behaviors, may be your greatest gift to the next generation.
- Improving your relationships. Human beings cannot be truly intimate (with the self or with others) unless they are living authentically. Learning how to live authentically is not only for your own benefit but also for the benefit of others. They can learn, through observing your life, how to achieve improved outcomes for their lives.
- Cleaning up unfinished business. (For additional information, refer to Unfinished Business—a Mini-Monograph.)
- Rewriting your script. (Refer to Scripts for Living—a Mini-Monograph.)



- Releasing additional energy. It requires a great deal of energy to keep memories repressed, stuff one's emotions and feelings, and pretend everything is going well when, in fact, it is not.
- Reducing addictive behaviors. When life is not working well, the human tendency is to find something that will help him or her feel better. Often this ends up becoming a serious addictive behavior that can have very negative long-term consequences.
- Decreasing the number of problems you have to deal with in your life. Some researchers estimate that 50% of a person's problems are of his/her own making, based on the way he/she thinks. If you knock off half your problems just by changing the way you think about the past, the present, or the future, imagine how much more time and energy you can have to work on those that remain!

*Family-of-origin work involves healing from our past to be able to move forward in the present. —Lisa Brookes Kift*

## Listening In . . .

Myra was born into a family that wanted a boy. She was the second girl in a family system that valued boys more than girls. When a son finally arrived, followed by a younger brother in rapid succession, both Myra and her sister felt like they stopped existing in a sense, except to function as caretakers for the two adored sons. No surprise, the girls interpreted this as *boys are better*. A variety of life experiences reinforced this perception so, naturally, when they married, both girls wanted boys from their pregnancies.



Myra's first child was a little girl. In retrospect, the disappointment probably helped trigger months of prolonged post-partum depression, to say nothing of the lack of bonding with her baby girl, Alice.

When Myra finally got pregnant again several years later and had the desperately desired son, Alice's perception was that for all practical purposes she stopped existing. She became the caregiver for both her mother and brother and was often exhausted from the tension between

her love for them and the anger she experienced from a sense of being undervalued in her family of origin.

Year after year, the disparity in the treatment of the siblings set them up for a lifetime of unfortunate interactions in their own rocky sibling relationship--and also with others. It was only after Alice did some serious family-of-origin work and realized how she actually had learned to devalued herself as a female that she was able to revise her perceptions. Eventually she developed much healthier behaviors with the opposite gender. Unfortunately, her brother continued to maintain the family perspective that "males are more valuable."

*The truth will set you free.*—Writings by the Apostle John



## **A Word about Forgiving**

Some say, "You need to forgive," or "Why can't you forgive and let go?" In response I've sometimes heard comments such as, "I can't forgive so and so. What was done to me was unconscionable!" Unfortunately, confusion often surrounds the controversial topic of "forgiveness," to say nothing of misunderstandings related to definitions. There may be as many definitions of "forgiveness" as brains that consider the topic.

A definition of *forgiveness* that I've found to be most helpful is "*giving up my right to have another person pay (beyond what the law requires) because of his/her actions toward me.*"

To refrain from forgiving increases the likelihood that you may create a virtual enemy outpost inside your head. An enemy outpost requires a great deal of energy to maintain. It also nearly guarantees that the "enemy" is within, and the memory of the hurt is readily available for rehearsing.

That doesn't mean you should avoid constructive action. As appropriate, cooperate with your culture/society/legal system, which may require that the perpetrator be punished for his/her actions. You will also need to develop and implement appropriate personal boundaries. This could mean that your contact with a specific individual is infrequent and prescribed. Or it could mean a cessation of any contact for a specified time period, if not forever.

(Refer to "Forgiveness - Forgiving" under Brain References, Brain Emotions, on Taylor's website for additional information.)

*To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the  
prisoner is you. —Unknown*



## **In Conclusion**

Identifying who you are innately is a life-long process. Every little bit of knowledge, every additional puzzle piece (however tiny) adds to the collage.

In the process it's amazing how the pieces begin to fit together and how the information can assist you in moving steadily toward owning, honoring, valuing, and utilizing your innate giftedness.

As you engage in family-of-origin work, picture yourself on life's stage. . .  
following your well-planned script,  
being the real you,  
achieving success beyond your wildest dreams, and  
giving the performance of a lifetime!

*Remember, we reproduce what we do not resolve. —Stephen Arterburn*



NOTE: Some have written to ask if there is any scriptural evidence of Family-of-origin work. If your passion is religious or biblical research, you've probably already uncovered examples of behavioral patterns that followed down generational lines. Unfortunately, many of those behaviors did not result in positive outcomes for succeeding generations. One would surmise that becoming aware of the behaviors in past generations and the outcomes of those behaviors would at least give one the opportunity to choose whether or not to repeat those behaviors. Apparently not necessarily, because written records include statements such as, "And they followed in the way of their fathers," and so on.