

ASK CONNIE— *Family Reunion Dynamics*

Connie Myslik-McFadden



Dear Connie—

My family had a reunion this summer, the first time we've all been together in seven years. It was wonderful except for one thing: when my younger sister was leaving, she angrily said "if you hadn't gone jogging every morning, you would have had time for me."

It's true that we didn't spend a lot of time alone together, but we stayed in the same hotel, and there were more than twenty other family members I wanted to connect with.

I know this is old stuff—our mother never had enough time for either of us, and at the reunion my sister was alone, while I was with my husband. But I recognize that I did avoid being with her some of the time, and I don't feel good about it. I wrote to her, but she won't answer my e-mails. What can I do to improve our relationship?

Sincerely, Margaret

Dear Margaret—

First, let me congratulate you on the level of consciousness you have achieved, and for your willingness to take responsibility for your part in the upset with your sister. Those qualities matter more than many people realize.

Family reunions can be wonderful, warm-hearted events, renewing important bonds and creating lasting, fun-filled memories. They can also be occasions in which old family patterns get re-enacted, which can be a source of amusement, pleasure, or sometimes pain. Very often siblings who related to one another in a particular way in childhood find themselves inadver-

tently slipping into their old roles at weddings, funerals, and family reunions. This can happen even though many years have passed and they don't consciously think of themselves or their siblings in the ways they did in childhood.

Unconsciously, though, an older brother will always be "my big brother"; a younger sister will always be "my little sister." Complicating this scenario is the kind of relationship each sibling had with the parents, and how each of those relationships affected the sibling relationships. Get the whole family together, and suddenly people may act out old hurts, grievances, and roles in surprising ways—and chaos rather than contentment may be created.

It sounds like your sister has not healed her childhood relationship with your mother or with you. My guess is that she is holding on to a false belief that she doesn't matter to you, nor did she to your mother. The problem with false beliefs is that they tend to create reality in the present; i.e., if she believes she is unimportant and not worthy of attention, and resents it, her attitude toward you at the reunion would subtly convey that belief. Unless you were very conscious while that was happening, understood its origins, and chose consciously not to buy into that false belief, you would have tended to avoid close contact with her, which you did. That, of course, reinforced her false belief and gave her permission to be angry and resentful. She didn't

get what she really wanted, a closer connection with you, but she did get to be right! It's a perverse but common feature of human behavior.

What can you do? You might write to her about your understanding of your, and her, childhood hurts, and let her know you want to change the patterns if possible. Convey your sadness and pain at having played into an old, unproductive role. Let her know you care; perhaps you can suggest a time when just the two of you could enjoy time together. Then be patient—the next step will be up to her, and she may or may not be able and willing to take it.

Good luck, Margaret



Connie Myslik-McFadden, MSS, LCSW, is a psychotherapist in Bozeman with 25 years of

experience working with individuals, couples and groups. She leads workshops, retreats and teaches Dream work and Pathwork. Connie devoted 9 years to Jungian analysis, training, and supervision, after graduating from the Bryn Mawr School of Social Work. She went on to graduate from the Barbara Brennan School of Healing, and Society of Souls, a kabbalistic school of healing. She is the author of "Gathering the Soul, a True Story of Spiritual Healing." Pathwork (Pathwork.org) and Imago Relationship Therapy (www.GettingTheLoveYouWant.org) are two easily accessible sources for the theories upon which much of this column is based.

Do you have a relationship question?

E-mail Connie at conniem@mcn.net, or call 406-582-7450 and ask!

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