



Family Reunions

Don't waste an opportunity by insisting your family reunion be a happy social affair.

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“Family are like underpants. Some crawl up your ass, some get a little sideways, and some are just plain nasty. And some actually cover your ass when you need them.”

— **Anonymous**

No person escapes childhood unscathed. Either you grow up with parents who don't know how to parent or you're brought up by someone who does know how to be a parent and you struggle with an attachment disorder.

We are cabinets of misfiled information. Family reunions are disagreements of intractable misunderstandings. Most people keep their eyes to the sky and count the days.

Family reunions are an opportunity for you to dump the old files, discard memories, and change yourself. They are some of your last opportunities to make clarity.

“A dysfunctional family is any family with more than one person in it.”

— **Mary Karr**, writer

Legacy

Each of our personalities are built as towers buttressed by defensiveness. Our childhood is the tower's foundation and the piers are spaced too close together. Our personalities gain height with time to become unstable, as they're too narrow on the bottom.

The tower is not pretty to look at, it's sort of a bramble. It's full of sharp corners and few flowers. However humble it might be, we don't want anyone to touch it. We look for support. Much of our lives beyond middle age focuses on protecting the structure of our personality, terrified that it will fall over.

Think about your grandparents and think about your parents. How well informed are they, how flexible are they? Think about yourself and the children you may have. Imagine grandchildren. See in your mind's eye how increasingly uninformed each generation becomes, and how resistant each generation is to change. This is natural and it starts happening in childhood.

You never knew your parents as children. You could never participate in the formation of their personalities. Your personality formed in the context of your parents' static attitudes, and to this day, if you're lucky, your parents will not understand the struggles in which you're engaged.

Real intimacy is extremely rare. Real intimacy is honest, emotional, and vulnerable. It's unstable by nature because real intimacy is a kind of joint navigation through unpredictable waters. When you allow real intimacy you admit new forces and your life becomes flexible and responsive.



Quitting the Contest

If you want to be allowed into the personalities of your parents or grandparents, then you'll have to respect their oddly distorted structure. If you are extremely deferential, more than usual, you'll find your parents and grandparents will open up.

It is a rare elder who will actually join you on the battlefield of the present. These rare people are called "wise" and chances are you'll only meet a handful in your lifetime.

Don't expect your parents to be wise. Don't presume they have the insight to realize that you have anything to offer them. They're too busy patching up the wobbling tower of their personalities. The most you can do is ask for entry and let them give you the tour.

Most of us spend our lives trying to get our parents to understand, or trying to understand exactly how our parents failed us. We do this because we don't appreciate how static and vulnerable our parents are. If you have grown older yourself, consider how static and vulnerable you have become, some of us more than others. Only a few of us are as flexible and untethered as when we were young.

Think back to when you were eight years old. At that time, you had a sense of self but little social personality. Who you were would not change much, but how you presented yourself was completely undetermined. Once you get behind social presentation, each generation's people have much in common. The conflicts lie in our social personalities.

Making Clarity

Most elders, unless they're wise, can only show you the frozen architecture of their existing personalities. You won't realize how frozen that structure is because you grew up bouncing off the walls of it and not fully understanding how fixed it was. Now that you're older, and your parents are older still, you can realize how frozen people's thinking becomes.

There are stories of happy family gatherings where the elders tell stories and the youngsters listen. That's because that's all the elders can do. They can rarely engage the chaos of the present with open minds because their minds are not open.

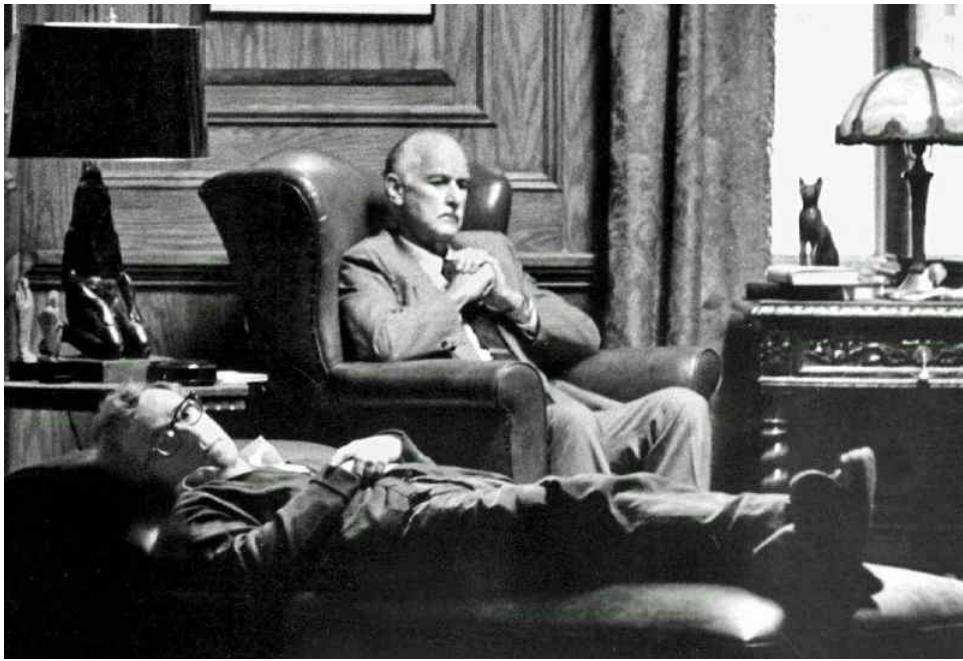
To some extent, parents of adult children might shift slightly in order to understand their children, but in most cases their view of their children's lives and their attitudes toward their children's choices are biased, fixed, lacking in insight, and lacking in interest.

All that you can do—the best that you can do—is bring pictures of your life into the crowded and structurally unstable living room of their personalities. They will only look at certain pictures, and you must swallow your pride and accept that they may refuse to consider what you find to be your life's most important chapters.

It is likely that all your life you have tried to bend your parents and other relatives to see things your way. You'll have much more success if you ask others how they see you, rather than trying to get them to understand how you see yourself.

Of course they won't appreciate what you've really accomplished, if you've accomplished anything. Or they won't appreciate how little you've accomplished if they need to think that you've accomplished more. You will be most well received if you accept yourself to be what others want, and not what you are.

Ironically, this is your key to clarity. Rather than trying to clarify yourself as different and unique, accept that to your parents and relatives you are pieces in their own puzzles. You are probably a minor piece, and be thankful when you are! Rather than explaining what your life looks like to you—the picture that your puzzle makes—ask them to describe the picture of their life's puzzle.



Don't Be a Therapist

There are two parts to therapy, listening and suggesting. Therapists are taught how to appear to listen. Listening is not entirely intentional, it's sort of like meditating. Anyone can sit still, but either you can clear your mind or you can't.

Most therapists can only hear what they know to listen for. Most people can do that just as well once they realize that most of what they hear is their own mind thinking. Listening, then, is hearing what's beyond the chaos of your own thoughts. It's tuning yourself out and hearing someone else's chaos. It often doesn't make sense and isn't very interesting, so you must be patient.

The second part of being a therapist, that of making suggestions, is only relevant if you're with someone who's receptive to suggestions. When families gather there are many assertive voices and no one is open to suggestions. Don't bother making suggestions, they'll be taken as earthquakes.

What You're Trying to Make Happen

You're gathering intel. You're looking for the bigger picture. You want to extract from your family members what they really think about themselves. In the process, they may relate to you as people, but probably not. Each family member's personality has incorporated other family members in their own self-defining and inflexible ways.

Your objective should be to build trust. If the family has not convened for a while, then you can probably fool them to believe that you have become a calm and accepting person. It is important that you issue no judgments, but most likely you'll be full of judgments because their fantasies of your family will conflict with your fantasies of your family. Be careful not to say anything.



What You Don't Get

"If the father must always know best, if the second child must always be at fault, if the child marked for success must always be blameless in his his or her failures, if mother's actions must always be seen as love, if anyone must always be anything, then nothing can ever be understood, and no change can take place."

— **Frank Pittman**, in *Turning Points, Treating families in transition and crisis*.

You won't change anything. You're exploring, not terraforming the landscape. Whether or not these relatives—your parents most importantly—picture you correctly, you have blank areas in your picture of yourself that could be better informed by the pictures your relatives have invented for themselves. After all, your and their personalities are fabricated from the same history.

Any attempt to "do battle" for yourself and those within your personal orbit, whose self-image may be in conflict with the images held by others, has no chance of success in a family gathering. No one is open to suggestions. So it is that gatherings often become gladiatorial with all parties taking damage.

In rare cases, you'll encounter a wise person and things will be different. In the presence of a wise person you don't need to do anything. They will already know what I'm saying here and will be doing it. They will be listening to you and they will not be suggesting anything.

What Can Happen

Most family dynamics stem from each member conceiving of each other member as a person who should fit in their picture, and then trying to force you to fit that picture. This generally aggressive intention is not stated, it's by convention. Each person presumes that they will continue to assert their personality, define their assumptions, and prevail in conflict.

Recognize the combat and drop your intention of presenting yourself; you'd only make yourself a target. Say little about yourself and pretend only to be interested in what others have to say. They may say interesting things, but most likely they'll only elaborate on what you already expect. That is enough and you should not expect more.

But when you accept other people's personalities, or at least pretend to, then they become content and peaceful. Your uncles may make even greater fools of themselves and your parents betray even greater ignorance, but they'll be happy fools and there will be a change in the social fabric to a state of tolerance.



Your goal should be to learn. That's what your goal should always be. You can accomplish far more by learning than you can by suggesting. Your mother may be preoccupied with telling everyone else how to live their lives. If you give her space, then after a while she'll lose interest and you'll start to see the real person.

The “real person” is the fabricated personality your mother presents as real. Most people’s personalities are under constant stress, and your object is to release that stress so that each personality can speak without reservation.

Your father, if he’s typical of most fathers, will have lists of expectations, judgments, and evaluations. By letting him out to pasture you’ll first see a great exhalation of pronouncements that will taper off to a drizzle of prejudices and preconceptions. Once those are expressed, and you’ve made sure that no one will present contradictions, the person that remains is a nonverbal personality capable of emotion.

With attitudes uncontested and weaknesses unrecognized, you can invite your parents to reveal their emotional selves. Emotion is at the core of our ill-designed personalities. It is our emotions that define how we feel and remember, not our attitudes and intellects. The best family reunion would be one where everyone feels safe enough to share their emotions.

I’ve never succeeded in doing this in my family, and I’ve never heard of anyone else doing it either. But I did listen to a young woman who prevailed upon her whole family to take MDMA before their reunion. She didn’t just do this once, but made it into an annual family tradition. The results transformed the family into something so positive that she could not describe it.

MDMA, 3,4-Methyl enedioxy methamphetamine commonly known as ecstasy, E, or molly is a popularly abused party drug. MDMA is now being recognized as having therapeutic purposes. It is known for amplifying a person’s connection with emotions and creating empathy in groups.

I’m presuming that what can be done with MDMA can be done without it. This may be impossible, but at least you can try.

“Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.”

—**James Arthur Baldwin**, author

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