



## ***Links in the Chain:*** **Untangling Dysfunctional Family Ties**

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To achieve **self-knowledge**, we must look both within and outside ourselves to focus on and understand why we are the way we are. It seems that we must first sort through our many different **selves** within to determine which our true self is. We need as well to wade through the **norms** and **mores** that depict what is expected of us. That said, we are required to evaluate the very nature of our souls, not just our presentations of our selves in public. Our **sociological imagination** depends on our perception of our realities both within and without.

As the saying goes, if you don't know where to begin, start at the beginning. A few pieces of relevant background information about my life may be useful in this regard. Without such knowledge the reader may not adequately understand the unique nature and interplay of **micro and macro** forces shaping my personal life.

I was born out of wedlock in the early 1970s into a large, **dysfunctional** family. My father had five children from his previous marriage, with whom he had no visitation rights. It has been explained to me by my mother that this is why I exist today, i.e., as a sort of consolation prize for him. The theory presented to me was that he would

not feel the absence of those children of his former life if he had children with her in his new life. My immediate family also included seven siblings from my mother's first marriage. I think my mother married at eighteen to escape her role as mother, not just a sibling, to her brothers and sisters after her mother abandoned them. My grandmother made this decision because of my grandfather's alcohol dependence and physical abuse. My grandmother took only one child with her, who remains institutionalized in a hospital to this day—a common practice at the time for those who suffered from birth defects.

The four youngest siblings from my mother's first marriage lived with her and my father. Given their actions, we seemed not to be welcome additions to the family. The sibling rivalry our existence induced resulted in a more hostile, tense environment. Presently all of our siblings continue to refer to us as half-sisters, if we are politely acknowledged at all.

My mother's children made it obvious that they were resentful that they had to live with my father versus their own. To this day, they do not accept her position on their divorce. Their father was an abusive alcoholic whom our mother had to escape from, or die trying. Those who were older and had also married young, with children, did not have much contact with either of their parents. However, to hear them speak of him, their father was a victim and should have been crowned with a halo. Also, the older children have accused my father, rather than their own father, of abusing our mother.

My mother alleges—and outside sources confirm—that my mother's first husband would work long enough to earn money to sit at a local bar, holding all the household's money and making my mother sit and watch him drink it away while she pleaded with him for hours to have enough money to buy some milk or bread to feed their children. Other accounts in-

clude her having to walk to the local grocery store and beg for groceries on loan until her next paycheck arrived so the children would not starve. Their allegations against my father include attempted murder by injecting our mother with needles, putting a rope around her neck and beating her in her sleep. In contrast to the many accounts of abuse and neglect inflicted by their father, this and other lesser allegations have not been corroborated with witnesses, police reports, or even pictures.

I cannot recall them taking in my mother or any of us in response to these allegations. I must question the idea that if they knew this was occurring, why did they do nothing to assist her? They did not contact the police or the Department of Social Services to perform an investigation. They did not come to the house to bear witness (as I had done) to the (non-existent) needle pricks, rope burns, or bruises. They did not help her plan an escape of any kind. They certainly did not advise her to get mental health counseling. They did not see our Saturday night ritual of homemade pizza and ice cream and other demonstrations of harmony among them. We might see them at a family funeral or wedding, but that was all. So, since they did not live with them and I did, I have to question their motivation for saying that he had abused her. I must also allow for the possibility that it did occur, however, because the truth has many sides to it.

From an early age my mother has shared with me that she would not be alive today had she remained married to her first husband. Her life had been endangered by frequent beatings to unconsciousness, exhaustion, malnutrition, and attempted murder by choking. Several miscarriages and several children resulted from repeated episodes of rape. However, the feelings of their children altogether did not go unnoticed by either of my parents. My mother would plead with them, crying and begging for their forgiveness for a sin she did

not commit. (Much like, I assume, she had done with her husband and possibly her father.) My father understood he was not welcomed and why, but did not give up on the idea of being a parent that would be there for them. I do not doubt that he considered leaving his home—many stepparents do. I also do not doubt that many things could—and should—have been done differently.

The undercurrent of sibling rivalry led to hostile and physical aggression toward my younger sister and I since we were the product of our parents. In other words, we were to blame for keeping them together. Our **role** was to become the targets upon which they could project their fears and insecurities. Since my father was a strong and muscular man, he would appear to be a powerful and intimidating force to reckon with. Since he was easy to frustrate, but did not leave us behind, he would have to be punished for remaining with my mother through his children. Also, someone would benefit from their revenge if they were punished, sometimes corporally, for not performing their chores or not responding appropriately to what they had been told by either of my parents. I can recall vividly many examples of such behavior. Their insubordination, physical acts against my parents, my sisters, and myself were acts that demonstrated how they felt about their lives. These acts were irrationally violent yet effective ways of meeting their petty purposes. For example, if they requested to spend the night with a friend and were denied, it would be decided privately by them that it was our fault. We were to suffer because they felt that as younger children we received whatever we asked for—which was not true. Actually, as younger children we had less perks but different responsibilities to perform around the home. To be fair to my parents, we also received lectures, grounding, and had privileges taken away for discipline; this was because we were younger, not because we were their own

common flesh and blood. We needed to learn and understand the rules, plus we were not pushing them to resort to corporal punishment. (I am not saying that I agree with the use of corporal punishment though.) It was not **nepotism** which motivated my parents to deal with us differently. Many households have a different disciplinary structure for teenage children versus preschool children, *as they should*. The age gap has not been represented accurately in their estimation of abuse. Age had to be factored in to the equation then and it should remain so now.

Understandably my younger sister had a little more protection from my mother because as the youngest child she was with her the most—because she needed to be. I admit to spending a lot of time with our mother, assisting her in chores that never seemed to end, even assimilating her helping personality to try to keep the peace. My relationship with our mother and my actions aggravated the other children and made them even more opportunistic in their efforts. Their feelings regarding inequity and favoritism were reinforced unfortunately. To this day they know I am still close with our mother and my father. Any thoughts or secrets our parents have shared with me about the past remain a secret. I cannot share certain things about the past or the future with my brothers and sisters, as it would only hurt them. I will not do so until they are truly ready to listen to the truth as my parents saw it. They need to be able to put themselves in others' shoes—to understand others' perspectives and common sense ways of knowing and acting in the world, as **phenomenological sociologists** aim to do.

They also need to behave as mature adults. As many are parents now I hoped they would have realized by now the stress of being a parent, the love and commitment necessary to be a *good parent*, not to mention the added pressures of being step-parents in a mixed family environment. I would

also hope they could realize how my father's many headaches were caused by more than the stress of our family's situation. He has since had to have a brain tumor removed before it became inoperable. It does not absolve anything that occurred. However, having similar headaches myself, and knowing two of his daughters have required surgeries for multiple brain tumors—not to mention having a step-child myself—I can see how difficult it must have been for our parents. My situation pales in comparison to their lives.

Looking at my own personality I tend to take it another step backward. I often wonder what makes a man commit to a woman with seven children that were not his own, even after he had been married, divorced, and was the father of five children? What makes a woman raise seven children of her own, after raising her brothers and sisters? Why did the pattern of abuse and alcoholism repeat in her life? And why did they then have two additional children despite financial hardship and a crowded house and yet still not be wed? These are questions I cannot answer. If I were to put myself in their places I could only make assumptions. If I were to ask them now I might receive two very different answers.

The film *Twelve Angry Men* portrays how the same occurrence or situation set before the members of the jury are interpreted and acted upon differently by them. I believe no two people will recall the same event in the same way. My parents' perspectives and my siblings' perspectives will no doubt vary from mine. Having performed interviews and interrogations professionally in the past, I have proved this theory time and again.

The **conflict** that results from **inequity** within a mixed family can be illustrated by using my older sister as an example. As the youngest daughter of my mother's first marriage she had little contact with her father. Not having contact with her father

made her feel **alienated**, feeding her low self-esteem. She felt she was not equal to the others who did know their father, but was also not equal to my younger sister and I who have known our father from birth. My mother had left her father when she was an infant, so my father was the only true father she had known. However, as she aged she was transformed from being one of the young ones that was being bullied by the others for her relationship with my father, to being a manipulative bully herself. She has hung on to the idea that she had been kept from knowing her father by my parents. She does not feel her father rejected her. She has never dealt with the realization that he never sought visitation with her. She has also mentally blocked out her own history of not just being a victim of physical and sexual abuse, but a perpetrator as well.

She continues to live a life where she appears to literally enjoy fighting with others. As a result, she and other siblings have repeatedly been in unsuccessful relationships and have strained relationships with their own children, not just with each other. The majority has married, divorced, and remarried with additional children being brought into the world. As a result, I no longer seek to keep in touch with many of them because I simply cannot keep score among their disagreements. I do not restrict them from my world; however I do not often invite them into it either.

Recently, my younger sister lost custody of her three boys due to abuse and neglect in the home. Their father admits to some of the allegations; however, he does not willingly attend counseling or parenting classes. The court mandated my brother-in-law to attend parenting classes and anger management therapy, but my sister has yet to acknowledge she played an active part in the abuse and neglect. Therefore she is not able to receive the help she desperately needs because she is unwilling to admit her guilt. She was not an innocent

bystander, those children were. In an ironic twist, the older sister that was such a bully to us was the one called upon to take in the three children. The boys knew her, so familiarity was to her advantage; however, our past crept into their future. Since my younger sister still resents how she was treated, she does not act maturely and responsibly. Stress from both sides is painfully obvious whenever I speak with any of the adults or children involved. The children no longer wish to return to their home but I know Family Court will award custody to their parents eventually. The cycle of abuse needs to end and it has a chance of doing just that if the right people say the right things at the right time—and mean what they say.

The film *The Matrix* has an interesting premise regarding a software program that implies a world of free will while really intentionally forcing subjects into playing out a predetermined role. You might consider the Matrix an artificial reality within reality. This relates to my life as it seems I was also placed artificially into a dysfunctional family to serve a purpose as my father's consolation prize. The idea that we humans could be so manipulated, for the best and worst of intentions, is a horrible realization. The pattern was set in place even before I was born. We seem to be born into a role in which we had no say, like paper dolls. The idea of predestination has escaped my attention while growing up. Excuses for dysfunctional behavior were offered in terms of environmental factors, two broken homes trying to make one. At least that is what I have been offering as an explanation to myself, until maturity taught me at a young age that *people also make choices*.

Partly because of such choices, however, I have been assaulted verbally, physically, mentally, and emotionally throughout my childhood and adult life. Any innocence I had was robbed of me when others exercised their free will to sexually plunder my body by the time I attended elementary

school. You might consider this submission to abuse as an **irrational choice** if you didn't know anything about why they did what they did. I sought to understand it and not just cope with it. My mother explained to me that my brothers and sisters were just "jealous" of us. That seemed like a generic parental response, which did not console or appease me. So, I required myself to break out of this seeming predetermination. Like Oprah Winfrey's character, Sophie, in the movie *The Color Purple*, I need to know that despite fighting with my family one day I will not have to fight in my own house.

As a young child I needed to know if I was strong enough to live through this experience just as my mother had done—except, perhaps quite selfishly, I wanted to do so without the same consequences. I did not wish to repeat the nervous breakdowns, depressions, broken bones, broken homes, and altered perceptions of others in general. I did not wish to apologize to my children because they are unhappy with the choices *I made*. This was my dysfunctional family's life and a legacy left to us; though I had to tell myself it wouldn't have to become *my* life.

Regrettably, I bought into the projection. I promised myself and my mother that we would not continue to live this way if we did not continue to live with my father. I believed our everyday interactions were undeniably a product of our environment. As a result of my immaturity and 'free will' my mother tried to scrimp and save money to allow us to run away from our situation. In convincing her to take us out of the pressure cooker we called home I incorrectly thought that the issues of sibling rivalry and abuse would deteriorate. (This is something I have kept from everyone but my mother, until now.)

Before this could occur my father's ex wife passed away. The children she had with her second husband remained with him. The youngest daughter and youngest

son that she shared with my father came to live with us. We inherited these two strangers with problems of their own. Adding two more children to the mix created additional difficulties. Beyond the fact that there was financial hardship during the 1970s and a large family had to make do with even less, how dare we have two parents that are alive when their mother had died? They didn't know their father. They didn't realize he could only stare at them through the schoolyard fence at recess while on his lunch hour. They had never met my mother or us. They didn't know any of us at all, yet they had preconceived notions about us. They too attacked us for our relationship with *their* father since he was their father first.

My mother was very good to them, as my father had tried to be to her children. This produced another dimension to the sibling rivalry issue. Again, her children accused my mother of favoritism from her first marriage. Yet, she and my father tried to continue to spread themselves too thin for all those who needed them. Needless to say, the great escape was not going to happen. Eventually the pressure cooker we were living in exploded beyond recognition.

My teenage brothers from my mother's first marriage decided they had had enough of my father and his children. My mother could not convince them to stay. One of her daughters took in the older son after he attempted to throw a punch at my father during an argument over alcohol consumption. Within a year a neighbor took in the younger son after he received corporal punishment for not performing a chore, not putting away a bicycle when he had been told twice to do so and uttering a vulgar expression in retaliation to my father. The punishment was physically drastic and my father was out of line. Belts are to be worn around the waist as a fashion accessory, not as a handy tool to abuse someone. I do not condone shoving my brother

to the floor with his hand twisted behind his back. On the other hand, I also do not condone the behavior of my brothers toward my parents, my sisters, or myself.

As for my brothers and sisters from my mother's first marriage, those who did not live with us claim they mothered us. Those who abused us claim they did not. The perpetrators also actually romanticize the abuse they received by telling us they endured beatings for us as well as for each other. My brother recently told me that he would kick my father while he beat my other brother just to beat on him for a while. As stated earlier, no two people are going to recall the same event(s) in the same manner.

All of my mother's children now speak to my father when they see him, but have never apologized for not giving him their respect. I do not honestly know if he ever apologized to them either. Perhaps this will never happen among them. It is possible that one day they will understand what it must have been like for our parents when their own children speak of their parenting skills, or lack thereof. I can only hope for a more positive, if not more progressive outlook about their upbringing.

I will never hope for an outcome that is utopian, since a perfect place does not exist among imperfect people. Not even in my imagination would I dare to dream of such a thing happening. Despite the frequent attempts to undermine my parent's authority and love for each other, my parents remained together for thirteen years. They were never married though. My mother said long ago that marriage never came up. One day when I felt I needed to ask why they had never married my father stated he bought her a ring and she refused his proposal. Whom should I believe? My response to that is, who cares? I only say that because it does not rewrite historical fact to offer an opinion now.

My mother remarried a much older widower approximately a year and a half after we left our home. Due to this union, I

would now know what being a stepchild felt like. I also inherited a much older stepbrother and stepsister. They are still treating my mother, siblings, and myself as though we are white trash looking to steal away their inheritance from them. My family is a lot of things, but not that. (They know nothing of our past.)

As for my father, only after my brother and sister moved out from my father's house did he remarry. I have since met and dealt with two stepmothers, both of which he has since divorced and both of which brought additional stepchildren to the already complicated family. My father now lives with another divorced woman, yet keeps his own residence. She also has grown children, whom I have heard many nice things about but am yet to meet. My father has been with this woman nearly two years as far as I know.

As an alternative to all this negativity, I can honestly say I can empathize with both victims and abusers in some capacity regarding domestic violence cases. *Please don't misunderstand me; I do not condone, excuse, justify, or support such behavior!* But I can do more than sympathize with these people. I can understand the underlying tension, apprehension, insecurity, and longing for control that I feel could be the root cause of abuse that occurs. I can also relate to the people in the film shown in class about **multiple personality disorder**. I know exactly what Gretchen, John, and Barbara mean when they sometimes don't want to be touched. I also understand why they look inward to another personality when they seek certain strengths to deal with difficult situations. I believe that their destructive alter-egos would rather harm them than let someone else do it again to them.

Further, I know from my childhood that those abused can become abusers themselves. I can only suppose that that is the reason why an uncle who married into the family also molested me and was ac-

cused of molesting other female cousins. Could he have been himself victimized as a child? We need to acknowledge that possibility and try to help abusers heal, not just attempt to rehabilitate them before they create other victims and/or abusers. If we live in denial as my aunt does and do not reach out to them they are going to suffer consequences such as being isolated, allowing them to have more freedom to commit such acts as a result. If we keep our friends close, and our enemies closer we could know who is doing what, where, when, and for what reason. Obviously, resentment can easily be extracted from this equation. Frustration brings up other questions... Would it be too much of a stretch to ask if *any* individual would have to heal himself or herself had a group protected that person in the first place? At what point would the group deny responsibility? Would it be at a certain age? Would it include a legal threshold? Would it be at a point at which no glory and only blame would result from accountability? Having said that you might develop a better understanding of why I have my views and why I have made certain decisions in my life.

In my adult life I have pursued a career in the Human Services field. Criminal Justice seemed to be a proper niche when I attended college in the early 1990s. During that time I participated in internships with a local attorney's office and a Probation Department's Juvenile Division. Both of these had a tremendous impact upon my thinking. This was an opportunity to do a lot of soul searching.

I was considered to be someone who could be of some assistance to those in need. I worked full time, often at two jobs, but I did not gain employment in the local Human Services field until the late 1990s. I became a 911 Operator, otherwise known as a Public Safety Dispatcher, for a local Sheriff's office. Listening skills became key again, but I had to separate myself from the

callers as I had done with my own family "clients" in the past. To a fault, I wanted to know more about the situation and learn of the outcome of each call. I left that wonderful job in pursuit of a position in which I could indulge that curiosity but be of even more help to the client at the same time. As a result I was on unemployment for the first time ever. Appropriately, the soul searching continued.

After two months, I found an even better job. I worked as a Crime Victim's Advocate for a local Crisis Intervention Agency. I also substituted as a Homeless Shelter Advocate. It was an almost perfect match for my skills. I had been open and honest about my past with the staff, which was liberating instead of shameful. In my disclosure, a firm exception were the clients. It would be inappropriate to have shared it with them. Prior to these two positions, I had only shared it with others on a need-to-know basis.

When 9-11-2001 rocked the world it restructured our agency. My part-time position was consolidated with another position, raising the educational requirement to a Bachelors degree. I had four years of college credits but in the form of two Associates degrees in Applied Sciences. So, after having a much-needed surgery I attended a local college to get my degree. I hope to return to a position with the same enthusiasm as I had in the past. I really miss helping people, despite the inherent stress of this type of work. It is questionable that I can return to this field, however, because not everyone would view my past as an asset instead of a liability.

In the film *Erin Brochovitch*, Erin also proved herself to be worthy of acceptance despite a downtrodden past of regrets. This was not because of sympathy for her, but was due to the extent to which she sought *justice for others*. The film was based on a true story and not the work of a talented scriptwriter, so I can only hope that the reality of justice prevailing in the film can

also prevail in the real life of other victims throughout this world. Nobody truly *wants* to be a victim! Epitaphs are not given a volume discount for etching that word on tombstones. People can gain from being a victim in certain respects; however, this does not mean people desire to be victims in the first place. Love and abuse do not have to be exchanged for benefits to result. They can be so embedded in a person's life that they may be passed on to future generations as well. Just as a child does not ask to be born, they do not ask to be abused either.

I continue to ask and attempt to answer several key questions regarding my life to date. My past includes abuse that even my parents do not know about. I have kept it from them mainly because I was afraid of their reaction. They may never learn of it and I may never regret not sharing it with them. Ultimately, I need to live without the pain, shame, and regret that stems from such experiences. Exposing my childhood for what it was is only one option. Using it to an advantage, i.e., to have empathy for others, is another alternative. However, a third option, perpetuating the cycle is an unacceptable option for me.

Through counseling, education, and self-evaluation I have accomplished several key things in my life. I am not repeating some of the old mistakes made by others before me. I did not marry young and have children just to divorce, remarry and have additional children. I have no addictions and I do not abuse or depend upon any substances. I am not unfaithful and I do not have on again, off again intimate relationships. I do not raise my hand on others unless I am waving at someone. Nor do I look upon my parents as saints or sinners.

I have a higher education, but am I a scholar? Do I scientifically observe and evaluate my world around me using objective procedures? Am I giving myself credits that I do not deserve? Wouldn't an intellectual be far too intelligent to live a life like mine?

I need to question several of my other decisions. For example, I had an acquaintance that terrorized me as a stalker in college at age nineteen. I did have a brief relationship with a man who might very well have abused me physically had I remained with him. I had also briefly dated someone I believe might have been married (I have no proof of this, just a strong suspicion). After all that, I also contemplated accepting a proposal from someone whom I had had a long-term relationship with. Later I believe he suffered from depression and became suicidal. I also realized he eventually turned to using marijuana and alcohol to dull his pain.

I do not wish to know of any of their whereabouts now, although I am curious as to how to answer the questions that haunt me relating to them. How did I attract these troubled men (I have never sought out male companionship)? Why did I deal with it as long as I did? What made me think they were appropriate people to have in my life? How did I believe I could make it better for them when it kept getting worse for me? Was there an unrealistic part of me that believed I could actually help them? Or was I merely appeasing them as I had done with bullies and various other manipulators throughout my life? To answer these questions I have had to search within myself and essentially perform an autopsy of my life.

In answering these questions about myself I have been left with other questions. For instance, I have been monogamously involved with my boyfriend since late November 1994. He is older than I and is divorced with one child. Both he and his daughter were born into a dysfunctional family as well. Even though we live together as though we are husband and wife, I have yet to accept his many marriage proposals. I operate on the theory that if I never get married I can never get divorced. I do not wish to be divorced since I take the marriage vows very seriously. I also do not



wish to have children born out of wedlock, as my parents and some siblings have done. Nor do I wish to have a mixed family with some children living with me while other children might live with an ex-spouse for whatever reason. In fact, to tell the truth it would be fine with me if I never give birth to children. I say that because there are so many children out there who could use a better life, beginning with a better living environment. These personal conflicts within me create a contradictory lifestyle.

For example, I have often entertained thoughts of becoming a foster parent. However, this has a catch: you should be either 'completely single' or 'completely married.' In other words, I must demonstrate that I am happily and faithfully married or happily unmarried. Either way I must show that I can offer a stable home, with little risk of change to it that might impact the child(ren) negatively. For instance, do I like where I live? Is there enough room for the child(ren) to live there comfortably? What is the relationship between my spouse and myself? Are my spouse and family receptive and supportive to the idea of another family member(s) joining them? Do I get along with my neighbors? Am I considered fit to be a mother by my family and close friends? Do I have a proper support system in place to assist me with the child(ren)?

Also, they would need to know of my history. The powers that be may not want to chance having a formerly abused person become a guardian of a child. As noted above, my personal experience and professional training has taught me that abusers were often victims in the past. It would serve in the best interest of the child to investigate me. It would also serve them well to gain access to the psychiatric evaluations I passed in order to gain employment with two agencies.

Further, as a foster parent wouldn't I be exposing my boyfriend's child to yet another 'mixed up child' and a 'mixed up family life'? She already has a complicated life as it

is. Her father and stepfather are not the fathers of any of her sisters. She has a younger sister and an older sister. Since none of these girls has the same father I would be perpetuating the mixed family that I very much want to avoid (as her mother has done, as a product of yet another mixed family.) Yet I want to help someone out because that is the right thing to do. Which way do you go when there are more right answers than wrong, when almost all of the choices *feel* wrong?

So when I try to not make the same choices as my parents or siblings, in a way *I have*. Most notably I live in sin, despite believing in the merits of marriage. Like my parents and some of my siblings I am involved with someone who has been divorced and is a parent. How exactly have I *differentiated* myself from the old patterns? Is it that I am only one of two that has yet to marry? Could it be that I do not believe in divorce? Or is it because I have no child(ren) of my own, or desire to have any? What truly sets me apart and allows me to be *different*?

I honestly did not set out to be better than anyone else. I just want to be someone who lives better as an adult than as a child. I have no desire to be of a higher **social class** with the added pressures of maintaining an identity based on **status symbols**. I do not wish to suffer from **Affluenza**, a social disease described in the film by the same name, with symptoms of greed, insatiable materialism, and debt in pursuit of an illusion of happiness. I do not need to be what Nietzsche called the "Ultimate Man" where status and self-worth are gauged by the accumulation of material possessions and wealth. I do not believe power and wealth are based upon tangible trinkets. I believe power and wealth come from an understanding of yourself and of what truly matters to *you* in your life. Just because I want a simple life does that entitle me to one? Is it possible to deserve a simple life

and never achieve one, despite lifelong efforts? Will I ever experience an inner peace when there may never be one within my family? Where (and when) do I ever separate myself from my family's influence? Can it be done by simply changing the environment? I have to question this since there are days that I feel like the only change I have made is a change in venue. So, how will I define a simple life when I have not known one?

Also, in my own little world why do I rent rather than own a home? Why do I continue to turn down my boyfriend's marriage proposals? Do I promote a mature relationship but not foster one in any way, with anyone? Why do I have the strong belief that people should not share bank accounts? Is it really because I think that everyone should be responsible for their own credit rating? Am I truly saving my unborn children from a confusing and uncomfortable life in this world by not giving birth? Or do I justify this to myself to avoid my commitment and trust issues? Which choices can I make without repeating the same mistakes I have made and those of people around me? Who around me can offer himself or herself as a positive role model?

Women that I have looked up to still struggle alone despite having been married until death parted them from their (only) spouse. My social reality includes friends that are my age, are married with children, divorced with children and unwed with children. I have looked at their parents and often wondered what their lives must have been like while growing up in what they might call a "normal" household. Is there such a thing as a *normal* family? I would like to think so after having grown up the way I did.

How can I truly help others after all this has gone on in my life? For some reason, close friends and previous employers believe I can. Part of me firmly believes it could be the best outcome of this crazy life

of mine. I could choose to use it to motivate myself to assist others, and thereby assist myself. I still may cringe a little when explaining my past to those who need to know it, but I have accepted it as a part of me.

The HBO documentary *Multiple Personalities* concluded by suggesting that sharing secrets with doctors and other caring selves is the first step toward healing. Releasing details such as these can be uncomfortable for victims. It takes courage to explore oneself honestly. It makes the discloser to become vulnerable to others' judgments. A look of pity could make someone regret telling her or his side of the story. Also, a certain amount of betrayal could be felt for revealing such personal details publicly. A family's existence is a private matter. In saying this, I admit I myself feel I have offered too much information. I have had to convince myself that if it helps someone else, I should continue to speak of it, as long as it serves as a benefit to others. This is yet another way to elevate my personal troubles to the level of public issues to be reflected upon and discussed by others. Conversely, it is important to understand how public issues become personal troubles. There is no better practical way to exercise one's **sociological imagination**.

As much as I want to believe that we construct our own social reality, with our own free will, in the end I am left in agreement with several of the previous contributors to *Human Architecture, Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*. In her article, "Struggles and Predicaments of Low-Income Families and Children" (2002), Jennifer Van Fleet acknowledges the impact of her environment by describing the role parents play in a child's life. "Children are easily influenced by what their parents tell them or by how their parents act when they are around them" (Van Fleet 37). In "Honor thy Father and Mother," Nancy Chapin also echoes this sentiment as well when she writes, "Parents are transmitters of atti-

tudes that the child adopts in forming a self-image. Our personal narratives are initially largely constructed through our relationships with our parents or other significant adults. The relationship that we form with our parents is elemental to the concept of self, forming the base of our identity" (Chapin 45).

My early childhood environment also included poverty. Like Chapin's tale of her life, I can not escape the impact poverty has had on my upbringing, on the relationship with my parent(s) and in having and/or raising children. I can relate to the struggle to make ends meet while not enduring the added pressures of another mouth to feed even in my present life, yet I was the additional mouth to feed while living in the poorest county of New York State during the economic crisis of the 1970s. Our family did have many wants and needs not met because of financial restrictions, but I have to say that in all fairness, we developed adult-like independence at an earlier age and have been self-sufficient with limited resources ever since. There were parts of our childhood that made us stronger, more resourceful, and smarter than others around us, despite the heartaches and lack of 'glory days.'

Through my childhood experience I can also relate to the anxiety and vulnerability expressed by Peter Dai in his journal article, "Why is P Afraid to Love a Woman?" (2002). Like him, I can trace some of my commitment phobias to my past. There are other similarities between us though. I too do not attribute one particular act or one specific person to be the factors that have shaped my life into what it is now. As mentioned earlier, as much as I would like to have complete and total control over my life, it is self-evident that there are other forces acting on it. My decisions are based upon experiences that are built upon those of others.

Related to this, Stephanie Roth offers an excellent point in her article, "For the

Love of Our Many Lives" (2002). Similar to my mother, her mother also had a troubled relationship with her grandparents and went on to have a relationship with a man Roth described as "controlling." We need to acknowledge the impact of broader social relationships on our personal life. We need to expand our understanding of those relationships that extend beyond our microsocial relationships within ourselves and our families. Our personal realities can not be fully understood until we look at the broader social environment.

In conclusion, I try to forgive my past but not forget my past. I must continue to acknowledge and explore where I have come from. I cannot cope and move forward without continuing to rely on a truthful assessment of my past. Yet, I need to also continue to look forward and accept responsibility for my own actions and choices. I must not take my good times for granted. I must realize that good people are capable of doing bad things. And I must remember that everyone deserves a second chance. Above all, however, I need to acknowledge again the power of choice. I need to make informed decisions based on a clear understanding of the uniquely personal as well as broader social forces shaping my life. Among all the selves I have internalized from the far and near past, my true self is that which continues to educate, cultivate, and empower herself in order to make informed choices in life.

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