

LOST AND FOUND: Sibling loss, disconnection, mourning, and intimacy

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"We wanted more. We knocked the butt ends of our forks against the table, tapped our spoons against our empty bowls; we were hungry. We wanted more volume, more riots. We turned up the knob on the TV until our ears ached with the shouts of angry men. We wanted more music on the radio; we wanted beats; we wanted rock. We wanted muscles on our skinny arms. We had bird bones, hollow and light, we wanted more density, more weight. We were six snatching hands, six stomping feet; we were brothers, boys, three little kings locked in feud for more.

When it was cold, we fought over blankets until the cloth tore down the middle. When it was really cold, when our breath came out in frosty clouds, Manny crawled into bed with Joel and me.

"Body heat," he said.

"Body heat," we agreed.

We wanted more flesh, more blood, more warmth.

When we fought, we fought with boots and garage tools, snapping pliers—we grabbed at whatever was nearest and we hurled it through the air; we wanted more broken dishes, more shattered glass. We wanted more crashes.

(Torres, 2011, pp. 1-2)

So opens the novel, **We The Animals** (2011), by Justin Torres. Clearly semi-autobiographical, if not fully so, Torres creates a vivid portrait of three brothers forging a world unto themselves—touched upon by their parents, but largely free of them—until a secret of the narrating brother rends the family apart. The story ends in tragedy, but in the telling is an extraordinary tale of sibling intimacy, with all of its passions, tenderness, competition, and violence. I was stunned when I read this book, and jealous of these three brothers. The book filled me with delight, excitement, warmth, grief, and--most of all—envy.

Coincidentally the novel is set in the same area of upstate New York where I grew up--the brothers' mother working in a brewery. In my identification with this novel, I imagined the brewery to be the Utica Club Brewery that was built behind my great grandfather's saloon. The U.C. brewery was a few blocks from my maternal grandparents' home where I lived my first 4 years. The rich odors of the brewery filled the neighborhood and still come alive in my memories of life with my grandparents.

The family therapist, Salvatore Minuchin characterizes the sibling "subsystem" within a family as "the first laboratory in which children can experiment with peer relationships. Within this context, children support, isolate, scapegoat, and learn from one another. In the sibling world children learn how to negotiate, cooperate, and compete" (1974, p. 59). Unfortunately, neither this description nor Torres' passionate prose was remotely like my own sibling relationships.

In our professional papers and conference presentations, we tend to tell the stories of our clients' lives, or of our lives with our clients. This essay has at its heart the story of the fracturing of my sibling relations and the struggle to establish an intimacy late in our lives.

It was about fifteen years ago, as I was imagining my psychoanalysis to be coming to a close, that my analyst said to me—with no conscious prompting on my part—"Do you ever wonder how it is that while you never mention your brother or your sister, as though they have never existed, that I find them often on my mind?"

"No," was my singular reply.

"Perhaps we could wonder about it together?"

"I'm not interested. My brother and sister have never been a part of my life. Why the fuck are you bringing it up now?"

"I don't know really, it's just that I find them on my mind. And you don't seem to have them in yours. Might you wonder why my question has evoked such anger in you?"

All that I could feel was my anger in response to what I experienced as a stupid, rather ill timed intrusion. No answer was to come right away. I didn't even want to think about it, but now I was stuck—my brother and sister, or their absences, were now firmly on my mind. Gradually what I came to realize was that I had come through my analysis to a point of reaching a compassionate understanding and acceptance of my parents and their limitations (which were substantial). When I began to think about my brother and sister, Gary and Debbie, my acceptance of my parents fell into ruins. I found myself hating my parents again, and I didn't want to do that. I would rather sacrifice the psychic existence of my living siblings than lose the connection I had at last forged to my deceased parents.

In my eyes, I had been the fortunate eldest brother. I got all the breaks. I was the one who had the love and care of my maternal grandparents (and the rich perfume of the brewery) for my first 4 years, during which my father had had a depressive breakdown and my mother suffered two miscarriages. Years later, I was the one who--off to college--had escaped the final family breakdown. I was the one who had been able to create a good life. What my parents had to offer, they gave to me. Though only 4 years older than my brother and 6 years older than my sister, I grew up essentially as an only child. I recall no particular interest in my siblings; I cannot recall even playing with them. The center of my life was school, the outdoors, and my dogs. I lived my childhood years as though I had no siblings and no close friends (these two things that I can now see were intimately linked).

Torres describes the impassioned cabal he and his brothers formed to hold at bay the psychological and economic disturbances of their parents. My brother, sister and I grew up as virtual strangers to one another. In our clinical theories we speak of attachment patterns, internalized object relations, script injunctions and decisions, and so forth, all of which emphasize the enduring impact of our relationships with mother and father. But our childhood family relations are in fact a more complex mix the vertical forces of parental relations and the lateral forces of sibling and peer relations. In some family systems our peer relations seem to provide an escape from or a balancing alternative to parental dynamics. In others it seems the sibling relations are the field within which the unconscious forces and disturbances of our parental psyches are enacted.

The latter was the case in my family. The French phenomenologists speak of the infant, often even before birth, being *thrown* into roles and functions to fulfill the unconscious needs and fantasies of the parents. As the first born—born immediately after the War—I was *thrown* into all the hopes of my parents, formed if you will as an expression of those hopes, and *thrown* into a lifetime of over-functioning to compensate for their losses and insecurities. My brother, however, was born following my father's post-war depressive breakdown and my mother's two miscarriages; he was born into a world of anxiety and fragility. My sister was born a girl—not good news—to be imbued with all of my mother's sense of worthlessness as the sister of a star older brother.

In my memory (and perhaps imagination) everywhere my brother or sister might go, I had already been there. I was the star of my extended family, of the schools, of the small village in which we grew up. "Oh, you're Billy's brother (sister), well then, we certainly have high hopes for you." They were quite simply fucked. How were they to find places, recognitions of their own?

As life ground our parents down, they had little to nothing to offer to Gary and Debbie. My brother and sister suffered for this. The final blow to the life of my family was my mother's diagnosis with terminal leukemia. Although I was away at college, I was deeply involved in my mother's illness and knew that she would likely die. Though Gary and Debbie knew that Mom was sick, my parents never told them *how* sick. Then she died suddenly as the result of a medical error. Her death was a total shock to them. My father collapsed in the face of it all and left his younger children, then 12 and 14, to fend for themselves. I had no idea of this at the time, as I had returned to college to complete my studies and prepare for graduate school.

After graduate school I started a family of my own, but I gave my brother and sister nothing of my life. I left them in the dirt. My children never knew them. As adults, Gary's and Deb's lives were broken and isolated. Debbie, still a teenager, married the first man who showed any interest in her and had four children as quickly as she could, imagining that she would die young like her Mom and hoping she could live long enough to get them to adulthood. My sister lived in a violently abusive marriage, desperate to keep her family together until her kids were grown, believing that she was not worth anything more than the abuse and control her

husband heaped upon her. My brother lived alone in the Utah mountains—in my eyes an angry, apparently anti-social isolate. I could not face the guilt and shame I felt in relation to them. *This* was what I could not face with my psychoanalyst. It was a classic example of what the Bowen family systems folks call “an emotional cutoff” as a fundamental defense against my anxiety and guilt.

I was fortunate that my analyst did not buy into my guilt, so with his support and persistence I was gradually able to realize that my guilt was largely a defense against the pain and losses in my family history that I could not tolerate. I also had to look at aspects of myself that I had disavowed and assigned to my siblings. My own submissiveness and masochism was neatly ascribed to my sister—I could feel “sorry” for her and subtly judgmental while disowning those characteristics within myself. Even trickier was to acknowledge the paranoid streak in me, which I had convincingly projected onto my brother. I was gradually able to re-own these disavowed qualities within myself, so I was more able to accept my siblings as a part of my life and psyche. I was also able to accept that my life had in fact moved in a dramatically different direction from that of my siblings. I began to feel concern and interest in them, but I was still unable to reconcile with them or initiate actual, present-day relations with them. That was to come a few years later. I’ll return to this story after we have explored some ideas about sibling relations.

In a compelling coincidence, at the same time I was invited to write a chapter for this book, I was also invited to give the keynote address for a conference in Sydney, Australia, the theme of which was “Allies & Enemies: The role of real and metaphoric siblings in our psychological worlds” (ACIS, 2012). I felt ill equipped to address the topic in any thoughtful way. But having decided to attempt this writing, I turned—as is my habit—to the literature. This proved to be a considerable challenge in that I soon discovered there was very little literature about sibling influences in psychological and relational development—at least from TA or psychoanalytic perspectives. “A cruel joke this is,” I thought to myself, “alone again—where are all the brothers and sisters who have gone before and addressed this topic with wit and wisdom?”

I also turned to thinking about my clinical work. I have long been known as a therapist who works directly and comfortably with his clients’ sexualities. I often hear from supervisees, “My clients never talk about

sex. How come yours do?” “Perhaps that’s because I ask.” It may not be such a surprise that my clients rarely talked about their siblings! I have discovered that, much like with sex, there was great interest in talking about siblings, too. All I’ve needed to do is ask.

There is the question of what constitutes a “sibling”. In his study of **Sibling Relationships across the Life Span** (1995), Victor Cicirelli defines full, half, adoptive and “fictive” siblings; others (Colonna & Newman 1983, p.303) added the term “social siblings” to denote those who are taken into a family system in sibling roles while biologically unrelated. I would suggest that even for only children there are likely to be cousins, neighbors, friends, and others who are inducted into quasi-sibling functions. While the place of siblings is almost universally absent in the psychoanalytic and clinical literature, the child development literature is replete with research into the importance of sibling and peer relationships as fundamental in our psychological and interpersonal development, with the potential to be among our most enduring attachment figures.

So, in the beginning there was *FREUD*. I could find but 6 references to siblings in Freud’s 23 volumes of writings, though he had 5 sisters and 2 brothers, one of whom died as a young boy. Further surveys of other central analytic figures, including Winnicott, Klein, Bowlby, Berne, and the relational psychoanalytic literature unearthed a dearth of discussions about the psychological and relational influences of sibling relations.

It took Juliet Mitchell’s work to bring to bring a serious theoretical focus on sibling relations and their unconscious meanings in our transference relationships and adult intimacies. She argues that “vertical,” i.e. parental relations are over-theorized, at the expense of “lateral,” i.e., sibling, relationships. Mitchell forcefully challenges the absence of sibling influences in psychoanalytic theories of psychological and relational development, arguing that:

In all cases, accounts of neurosis are dependent on the vertical framework. The context in which the theory is formed is the private consulting room which echoes the private [I would add, nuclear] family. However, lateral relations exceed this private space—occurring in the wider social world of [sibling,] street, school, and workplace and bring these spaces and their rich occupancy into the family. (2003, p. 18)

One often gets the impression from the analytic literature that the mother/infant relation and the Oedipal crisis are the primary—and perhaps only—crucibles of psychic development. Mitchell demands attention to the lateral dimensions of siblings and peers the social worlds outside of the nuclear family. She argues that, “the baby is born into a world of peers as well as parents. Does our thinking exceed this binary?” (ref)

At the heart of Mitchell’s psychoanalytic theories of sibling dynamics (2003, 2006) is her concept of sibling trauma:

But the [newborn] adored sibling, who is loved with all the urgency of the child’s narcissism, is also loathed as its replacement—[for] the baby it can never again be.... The sibling is *par excellence* someone who threatens the subject’s uniqueness. The ecstasy of loving someone who is like oneself is experienced at the same time as the trauma of being annihilated by one who stands in one’s place. ...These qualities, which can be seen in any distressed toddler, seem to me to arise as a response to the trauma of sibling replacement. (2003, p. 10)

While I found Mitchell’s work to be deeply thought-provoking and intellectually rewarding, I found her ideas to suffer from overgeneralizations and great leaps to conclusions that I have not found in my clinical experience or in the child development literature.

Prophecy Coles, while acknowledging the importance of Mitchell’s work, takes a different perspective stressing, “I believe siblings can genuinely love each other, and the games they create among themselves may be some of the most precious moments of a remembered childhood” (2003, p. 26). She goes on to argue “that to see the parent-child relation as the sole seat of health and pathology is to omit the importance of the sibling/peer relationship, especially when the parent/child relationship is absent or negative” (2003, p. 75). This view is much more consistent with the findings of child development research which delineate sibling factors that are far richer and more complex than single-factor theories common in the analytic literature, such as sibling rivalry, birth order, reaction formation, or sibling trauma (Dunn, 1985, 1993; Dunn & Plomin, 1990; Hetherington, Reiss & Plomin, 1994; Cicirelli, 1995; Akhtar & Kramer, 1999; Sanders, 2004).

Servaas van Beekum (2009) published the first article in the *Transactional Analysis Journal* in its nearly 40 year history, addressing “the lateral,” i.e., sibling relations. Van Beekum (2008) had a year earlier written an article for an organizational management journal that described the ways in which the remnants of sibling relationships are often played out unconsciously within collegial and work relations. That article grabbed my attention. But his 2009 article, “Siblings, aggression, and sexuality: Adding the lateral” had a tremendous emotional impact on me as I was struggling—often poorly—with my own sibling relations and affections.

As van Beekum is one of 9 siblings, I think he knows what he’s talking about, and so I quote at some length:

Each new sibling enters a minefield in which she or he has to survive and find his or her own identity. ...The sibling is another object in the child’s life. These types of early sibling experiences form templates for relationships—carried from infancy through childhood and adolescence into adulthood—that potentially can turn out to be painful, blissful, eroticized, nurturing, disappointing, and/or shocking. (2009, p. 131)

Parents are mainly important in the way they are able to contain this [sibling] process, one in which they do not take part. The parental role of containment includes relational and emotional presence through discussion and dialogue, boundary testing, humor, giving in, letting go, and holding on to children lovingly. When such containment is missing, siblings will do what they need to do anyway, although in a less safe environment. (2009, p. 133)

My brother and sister suffered much more deeply in this minefield than did I, and our parents were unable to provide anything close to the holding environment that van Beekum describes. Van Beekum’s article opened a way for me to begin really thinking about what was happening within my own extended/broken family. The theme of the Australian conference and the invitation to write this essay—now nearly 2 years in the making—have opened many doors in my understanding of myself and in my work with my clients.

So, it is time to return to my personal story. My Dad was the third born of 4 siblings, an older brother and sister, a younger brother. He was 7

when his father died unexpectedly of a medical error. His mother, who I don't think was happy in her marriage, quickly became more deeply involved with the man with whom she had been having an affair, leaving the bereaved kids to pretty much manage for themselves. Dad was a teenager when he fled the family in favor of World War II. He came back from the war a broken man. He endured his anguish in a silent withdrawal, doing his best to earn a living, live a decent life, and protect his children from his inner demons. Encased in anguished silence, his unspoken anguish was nevertheless passed on to his children. But the history and facts of his suffering remained unknown to them. A brief window to my Dad's anguish opened unexpectedly: I had refused induction to the draft during the Vietnam war, filing for conscientious objector status based on political rather than religious grounds. To my utter surprise, this father who rarely spoke, wrote an impassioned and articulate letter to my draft board, saying that as a veteran of World War II, he could never allow a child of his to participate in any war. In spite of my repeated inquiries after his letter to my draft board, he refused to speak of what happened to him (or what he did) during the War.

He was only 40 when he lost his beloved wife, also suddenly to a medical error. After our mother's death, Dad's life became increasingly unbearable. He decided to end it. Once again, I was intimately drawn into his decision to die, while my siblings were left out as bystanders. He insisted that I not tell them. Unfortunately, I honored his request, and looking back I can see now that I felt so estranged from them that it was as though there was no basis for such an intimacy.

While I was struggling with my father's anguish and his wish to die, I was listening to Bob Dylan, as I often did and still do, when I am disturbed. Usually under those circumstances I prefer his angry songs, of which he was a master as a young man. As I was struggling to write to my father one day, I happened to hear Dylan's "Tomorrow is a long time," a delicate and mournful song about a lost love. I heard the lyric:

I can't see my reflection in the waters
I can't speak the sounds that show no pain
I can't hear the echo of my footsteps
Or can't remember the sound of my own name
Yes, and only if my own true love was waitin'
Yes, and if I could hear her heart a-softly pounding
Only if she was lying by me

Then I'd lie in my bed once again
Those words clutched at my throat. Suddenly, in Dylan's words, I could feel my father's inconsolable anguish. Dylan was a young man singing of his loss of a sweetly loved girlfriend; my Dad was a middle-aged man crushed by the unmentioned losses of a lifetime. I could suddenly set my own misery aside as I began to truly grasp what he had lost and grasp his inability to come to terms with it. I wrote out the lyrics, mailed them to him, and flew out to be with him. I, of course, did not include Gary and Debbie in what I felt or recognized. I could not help them—they were at that time but strangers at the periphery of my life.

I was horrified and furious with Dad, demanding he take care of himself. He replied, with unforgettable honesty, "You don't have the right to ask that of me. You have not lived my life, and I have had enough of this life." It was a confrontation that would stay with me forever. Even in the last days of his life, he refused to tell me of the war years that still haunted him, but we did speak of our lives and losses together in a pained and loving honesty. I was able to let Dad go and move on with my own life.

Gary and Deb did not have the privilege of that kind of conversation with him, and they suffered massively in the face of his death and his determined silence with them. Silences have echoed through our family system. Silences are embedded in the family script. Though a hard working and deeply devoted mother, my sister then lived *her* own suffering in silence, *her* history hidden from her children—following what we might call a family script. I, in my own way, also followed the family script, leaving my siblings to the side as bystanders silenced and in silence.

A few years ago, my psychoanalysis well behind me, things changed yet again. My partner, Mick, had come into my life, and as we got to know one another, he discovered I had siblings. This took him completely by surprise, as he like most people assumed I was an only child. Mick, on the other hand, was the eldest of nine siblings, the first 8 of whom were born within 10 years of one another. Mick, also, it so happened, was on the faculty of the Western Pennsylvania Family Center, a Bowenian training program. He knew something about emotional cutoffs within family systems. He took me to task. I articulated my rationalizations with full force and conviction, as I had with my analyst several years

previous. He was not impressed. I explained that my sister was married to a severely abusive man who listened in when we spoke on the phone and had never let me meet their children. He was not impressed.

Analysts tend to rely on insight and the subtle workings of the therapeutic relationship. Bowenians tend to lean more toward action—actually *doing* things, not just talking about them. “OK,” Mick suggested, “Let’s take a bit of a holiday in Connecticut (where Debbie lived). We can give them a call on a couple hours’ notice and drop by. What can he do, slam the door in our faces?” We were about to step through this history of emotional cut-offs.

It worked. My sister welcomed the two of us into her life with open arms. Her children, now in their 30’s, met Uncle Billy for the first time in their lives. In those few years, Deb and I became very close. Deb rapidly positioned Mick & me as alternate father figures for her children. But my brother held himself at the fringes (and I did nothing to change that one).

A few years later, at 54, Deb was diagnosed with multiple, terminal cancers. It was a true blessing that with our reconciliation she did not have to manage her illness and her family’s distress by herself. In spite of the odds, she lived 2 years and remained coherent until a few days before her death.

As she was facing her imminent death, she knew her children needed to know something of her life, her history before she died. But like our father, she could not speak it to her children, though they desperately wanted to know her better before they lost her. I was shocked to realize how little her children, even as adults, knew about their mother and our family’s history. Her children, three sons and a daughter, had turned to each other to ward off their violent father and to care and be cared for by one another. Deb had been a devoted mother and grandmother, the primary financial provider for the family, keeping herself the target of her husband’s abuse to protect the children. Her kids loved her fiercely, but they did not know her. They could never understand why she chose to stay with their father.

Two weeks before Deb died, I went to see her alone to talk with her about her funeral. She asked that I speak for her about her life to her

children. I told her that I had brought a recorder and we could talk together and I could play her own voice to them after she died. She said, “No, I can’t.” She wanted to talk to me and for me to then talk to her children for her. She was by this time very ill and blind, so I said to her, “You are fucking blind. I could turn the recorder on, and you’ll never know the difference.” “If you love me,” she replied, “you won’t do that. I want to talk to you and you speak for me.” I said to her, “You know that’s always been my script in the family, Billy will do it.” “Well,” she said, “Billy is going to do it one more time.”

I learned this time a respect for silence, the utter and absolute necessity for my sister of her silence. Though it broke her heart, she could not break the silence for her children. That was mine to do as her big brother--a gift to her and her children and grandchildren. At her funeral I spoke of and for my sister, and her children learned for the first time of their mother’s sufferings in childhood that had come to shape and limit her adult life.

Gary, who had come to visit only once during her illness, had told Deb “I don’t do funerals.” He could not bear all that her illness and imminent death evoked in him, and he stepped back into our familiar terrain of an emotional cut-off. I stayed in touch with him, but I could not persuade him to come see her again or even to talk with her. She called him and told him that she understood why he had to stay away and that she loved him. Deb did not cut off.

A week before she died, Gary called to tell her he would come to her funeral. He did not see her alive, but he was there for her funeral. So Gary, too, heard my story of what happened in our family—something he and I had never spoken of. He collapsed in tears and rose to speak of Deb’s death and the death of our parents with a rage and grief that I have never witnessed in my 40 years of practice as a psychotherapist.

Gary and I have now found each other as brothers in a tentative but genuine relationship. It required our confrontation as a family of a massive tragedy and loss in order for Deb, Gary and I to refashion our sibling bonds, to reestablish our care for one another.

In van Beekum’s article, he spoke to the complex dialectic in sibling relationships between the need to find and sustain an individuated

identity on the one hand and sustain intimacy and inter-reliability on the other.

Research on sibling relations has emphasized the necessity of sibling “deidentification” (Circirelli, 1995) or sibling “differentiation” (Vivona, 2007) as essential for identity development within the lateral, sibling dimensions. Vivona’s article, for example, brought theoretical light to my own struggles and those of many of my clients; she writes:

The lateral dimension, perpetuated in relationships with siblings, peers, partners, and many others throughout life, is structured around a particular challenge” *to find one’s own unique place in a world of similar others*. [It is no coincidence that Servaas also quotes this passage in his article.] ...That resolution, I suggest, may be accomplished through a process of differentiation, an active and *unconscious* process of identity development by which a child amplifies differences with siblings and minimizes similarities. (2007, p. 1192, emphasis added)

My siblings and I certainly had the “amplification of differences” down pat—at great emotional expense to ourselves and those around us. But I think that in the amplification of our differences and the distancing that resulted, we unconsciously created rigid, defensive beliefs based on emotional cutoffs, rather than resilient identities. For Gary, Debbie and me to find and face our similarities and our needs for one another meant facing the pains that our original family had been unable to contain. Our sibling struggles mirrored the defense of emotional cut-offs emphasized in the Bowen family systems literature (Landaiche, 2009; Kerr, 2008; Bowen, 1978) as a primary means of managing anxieties, pains, and rejections that out strip a family’s capacity to receive and contain this distress. But Debbie’s terminal illness threw us all back into our unmourned and unresolved losses and put each of us in touch with the fear, the guilt, and (finally) the love that we each had for the other.

As I have come to think more systematically about the emergence of sibling issues in psychotherapy, I have begun to understand several important therapeutic tasks”

- 1) the re-owning of projections onto siblings of disavowed aspects of one’s self;

- 2) attention to transferences and countertransferences rooted in sibling relations as well as parental relations—the lateral as well as the vertical;
- 3) the acknowledgement of the experience of loss in the context of sibling relations and working through of mourning of “lost” aspects of self.

In his brief and poignant essay “On Transience,” written on the eve of World War I, Freud (1916-17) observed “we possess, as it seems, a certain amount of capacity for love—what we call libido” (p. 306), which we attach to certain objects, and that we wish to keep those attachments at all costs. Freud described how that when we lose a loved object, it feels as though we are losing our capacity to love altogether and forever. There can be a ferocious refusal to relinquish the lost one and love anew. There was no one to help Gary, Debbie and me as teenagers and young adults to mourn the losses in the face of our parents’ hideous deaths. Distance seemed the best salve. Through the process of mourning--a profoundly painful process—Freud argued that we must release the lost loved one in order to love again and bring our life to another. Freud writes, that once our mourning is over, we learn that we have lost nothing from our discovery of our (or the other’s) fragility. My sister, my brother, and I learned much about our own and each other’s fragilities. We did in fact lose Debbie’s life, but before her death, we had gained a great deal.

I don’t believe that every sibling birth has to create a psychic or household trauma as Juliet Mitchell seems to suggest. The presence of siblings in our lives can enrich as well as diminish our sense of self and provide rich opportunities to deepen our capacities for intimacy. Sibling relations create a dialectical tension between loss and love, differentness and similarity.

Van Beekum describes the parental responsibilities of supporting sibling differentiations while containing sibling rivalries and hostilities. The child development literature is full of rich examples of the parental tasks in the service of sibling relations and intimacy. I think our work as therapists, counselors, supervisors and organizational consultants provide us the innumerable opportunities to provide—if somewhat belatedly--the containing atmosphere to address and heal the wounds of our sibling and peer relations.

I have come to see the capacity to mourn as essential for the overcoming of the need for a defensive amplification of differentness and to establish (or re-establish) the pleasures of difference, the acceptance of similarities, the delights of competition, and the joys of sibling intimacy.

It has been more than 30 years since our father's self-imposed death--after a hell of a lot of study and psychotherapy, being a father myself, getting a divorce, sending my sons off into their own adult lives, and finally having the firm and compassionate accompaniment of my new partner in life--that I could stand alive and open in the face of my sister's dying and my siblings' long neglected sufferings.

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