

My personal experience of growing up is of a fairly pleasant, happy childhood enveloped in chaos. My parents divorced several years before I was born, but had obviously remained friendly and working together. I have a sister born during their marriage who is 5-1/2 years older than me. I lived from birth with my mother and sister. My parents' amicable divorce turned adversarial when I was about two, centered on an incident with my sister and the fallout from how they both handled it. My father was very affluent but with the animosity toward my mother and just for general strange principles, he was not forthcoming with much money. I started spending weekends with him when I was about three when he remarried. Sometimes my sister would join us, but often times not. I was able to go on very nice vacations with him and have the best of toys and gadgets and clothes during the time I was with him. With my mom, we lived way beyond simply. We often were completely strapped for cash and I remember buying gasoline most of the time with change, a dollar or two at a time, until they cut us off at the gas station and imposed a minimum – with no pennies allowed! Often we would have no car at all and went where we needed on foot or by bus. We moved frequently although I did not know at the time it was because we would get behind in rent. From Pre-K through 8<sup>th</sup> grade I attended the same private school, so I had a real sense of continuity even as we moved from one apartment to another within the same town. I switched my living arrangements when I was twelve and went to live with my father and stepmother, visiting my mom on most weekends. Though this was hard on her emotionally I know, it was much easier on her financially and logistically. I had all the advantages of a safe, secure home with good food and still got to spend time with her. I left home right after high school and have completely supported myself financially, but remained close to both my mom and my dad.

I am already married, and we have made the choice to delay parenthood for some time. While we would love and nurture a child who arrived "accidentally" we are taking precautions to avoid it until we are ready.

The essentials of family life that I consider most essential to implement into my own family are strong communication and absolute commitment to the family bond. My father, just like his parents, was an angry man and not a faithful one to any of his wives. I think families grow together through laughter, hard work and much play, and a willingness to talk about anything without reservation. I believe that trust and integrity are the most important assets one can bring to a relationship; I am blessed to have an incredibly attractive, giving partner as well.

I think families in general spend too much time worrying about money, and I say that as someone who has experienced all the advantages and disadvantages of a father pretty much obsessed with financial success and at the same time have experienced all the advantages and disadvantages of a financially struggling mother. From her I learned a lot about street smarts, how to make a small amount of money go as far as possible toward things like education, important experiences, and fun – even if the money never stretched so far as to have a decent car or any kind of a safety net.

In my personal life, I have felt closest to my nuclear family on separate occasions, very seldom when we were together as a group. My half-brothers and half-sister were so much older than me that we never formed close attachments since I never lived with them. I was well taken care of by my stepmother but not close to her. I was never close with my stepsister but we got along fine. With my mother, I was always close and secure. We had many adventures which I came to realize later were often her way of making me feel safe when the world was very chaotic. She was hospitalized several times and would go on and off her psychiatric medicines,

but I never felt that she was anything other than strange in a good way. With my father, I was a golden child of sorts and he absolutely favored me over any of his other children or his adult relationships. But he had to be handled well. With my sister I am sure we were close when I was very little, but she tried to take over raising me away from my mother. She still would insist that any success I have is because of her. I grew contemptuous of her lack of gratitude toward our parents and her manipulative lifestyle.

I felt furthest from my parents when my sister would cause issues. My sister was bipolar and possibly just ill-behaved when she was a teenager and now as an adult. She has always felt entitled to more than she has and very clearly blames her parents, siblings, society, everyone except herself. She caused a great deal of stress to my father until he finally cut off contact with her. I cut off contact with her after being taken advantage of many times and seeing the hardships she caused on my parents. My mother was the last one to cut the tie, but my sister was simply too great a burden on her already fragile mental health.

Looking at all of this from a Family System Perspective, one of the first things I notice, although it is not written about here, is how my parents in many ways replicated the behavior of their own parents.

I would propose my own role as that of the sane one. My stepmother would call on me to calm my father when he was in a bad mood or acting erratically. In comparison to my sister, and to the remarkably bad on occasion activities of my other older siblings, it is not hard to look sane. Oddly enough, my mother who had plenty of excuse for calling on me to provide stability to her, was extremely resistant to that. She felt that while I was a kid, I was supposed to be a kid, not a parent. As I have gotten older I know she has internalized a lot of stability from me, but she still is hesitant to lean very much. The main advantage I still provide for her is that she can

absolutely count on me speaking the truth as I see it, even if it is harsh and bursts her bubble when she would prefer to hear something else. She calls that grounding, or a reality check, figuring that since I have seen her at her worst I can be trusted to judge when she is doing okay. My stepmother when she was recently widowed leaned very hard on me and set me up to buffer her against all sorts of difficulties, not allowing me much time or freedom to grieve in my own way. Now that I have in-laws, in a family I have known since I was about twelve, it appears I fill much the same role there.

As mentioned earlier, I functioned in two distinctly different family spheres economically and I feel it was an advantage in that I was able to take the best from both parents' survival skills and coping mechanisms and hopefully will avoid some of the same missteps that they made. Together they made sure I had an above average lower school education. My mom always said that she couldn't guarantee anything about what I would do with a college education or even if I would get one, but she certainly could make sure that I had the best education while I was still in her control. Because of that, and the work ethic that I inherited, I have been very successful in my jobs even though I haven't completed college yet. My father was very social but really quite insecure, perhaps a typical sales professional's personality. My mother, though she can be charming and gregarious especially if she is being paid to be so as part of a job, is very anti-social and much prefers to be alone or with just one person. As an example, when we attended parties with my mother, she would make sure we were comfortably set, that she had said hello to the hostess or whoever, and then she would read in the car until I brought her a plate of food. When it was time to go, she would come back in and make her thank yous. My father in a similar situation would not be happy unless he was the center of attention, even if it meant embarrassing everyone who was with him.

I am very comfortable with where I have come from, where I am now in my own household, and where I foresee my future. I think I am well prepared.

As we read the text I was reminded of how many people do not turn out nearly as lucky when they have had the same kind of issues in their family as I have. But I never envied some mythical perfect family either, perhaps because I had a rather well educated eye for frauds and media hype.

I believe the section on communication was perhaps the hardest for me to respond to in our chapter write-ups, yet earlier in this paper I said that strong communication was one of the things I believe is essential to implement in my own family. I resent the idea of imposed, enforced communication used as a weapon, and I feel I have experienced that and so I always have a great respect for privacy. The communication that I am committed to is honest, respectful, rather fun-loving, and ongoing, not just pulled in for emergencies.

It has been an interesting exercise going back and detailing some of my growing-up in comparison to the statistics and theories we have read about. I hope I continue to engage fully in learning and put that to use to take the very best away from my early family life and add to it my own unique attitudes and skills.