

so good. . .”—the objects of inheritance would mean much less to her. She might still want the money or the diamond ring, but the possessions wouldn’t be invested with so much emotion. The caregiver might think, “It really mattered to Mom that I was there for her every day, though my brother was always her favorite. He and I can work it out.”

With a lot of effort, adult siblings *can* forge a new relationship after their parents are gone. They don’t have to perpetuate what was done to them by their parents.



ARON: If adult siblings have been very close before their parent dies, are they immune from inheritance wars?

DALE: They’re not immune, because, in the end, a simple request can spark a conflict. For example, a mother I knew asked her two daughters, who were quite close, to sit with her in the hospital and discuss who was going to get every piece of valuable jewelry she had, item by item. At one point the mother said to one daughter, “You always liked that pin.” The daughter replied, “Yes, I did,” and the other daughter quickly chimed in, “You know, *my* daughter loves that pin.” To avoid a fight, the first daughter asked her sister, “How would you feel if I kept it and then passed it on to your daughter?” That solution short-circuited what might have become a sore point between the two sisters. Had the first sister said, “But I like that pin and I want *my* daughter-in-law to have it,” it might have initiated an emotional tug of war. It doesn’t take much for things to go wrong.

EDIE: That reminds me of the story about King Solomon being asked to judge a dispute between two women who claimed to be the mother of the same baby. The wise king ruled that the baby should be cut in half. When the real mother cried out, “Let her have the baby,” King Solomon knew that she was telling the truth.

We ought not to confuse love with possessing. Relinquishing something we desire may be the best way to express true love of a parent. Yes, we may feel for the moment that we need to have a particular object because it is valuable or a symbolic reminder of our relationship with that parent, but there is no greater tribute to one’s love of a mother or father than demonstrating generosity and maintaining harmonious ties with siblings after the parents’ deaths.



JOY: What can parents do to try to prevent inheritance issues from arising?

DALE: They can write an ethical will, a final personal message or document that spells out a person’s thoughts, mem-

ories, values, advice, life lessons, and perhaps hopes for the future. Another approach is writing a letter to each child, concentrating on what you admire about him/her, the accomplishments you’re proud of. Recall a story that makes you feel warm and connected to your child. Children of any age need to be reminded that their parents notice them in loving ways. Even if you’ve been habitually critical or judgmental, use this opportunity to express unconditional approval. Make this letter an act of love.

EDIE: Writing such a letter during one’s lifetime endows it with additional potency. In essence, that’s what both the biblical Jacob and Moses did before their deaths: They spoke eloquently to those gathered around them—Jacob to his sons, Moses before the whole Israelite community. Doing this not only allows for repair and reconciliation, but creates new memories that can sustain a mourner during the time of grief and beyond.

DALE: The same principle applies when it comes to bequeathing objects such as money, furniture, and jewelry. It’s much better to share your distribution plan openly and directly with your children. You might say, “Please understand that we really tried to be thoughtful in writing the will,” and then give them insight into your thought process. Also, be sure to ask each of your children, “I’d like to know what objects you would like, and when.” Don’t assume you know what your sons and daughters desire; very often you’ll be surprised.

One woman I know had all of her children come to her apartment and pull a number out of a hat to determine the order in which they could choose what they wanted. If you got number one and your first choice was the big green vase, you got the vase. You could also trade it later. Someone else I know had everyone prioritize what they wished for in a private note. The objects were then laid out, and each person talked about why this or that meant so much.



JOY: When talking about dividing up objects among siblings, is it advantageous for all the family members to be present?

DALE: Yes, but you can’t always do it. If the adult children aren’t talking, it’s going to be hard. In any case, it’s a good idea to ask loved ones to give you a better sense of what they want and why. There’s no guarantee, though, that in doing so you’ll avert potential problems. I once went to a funeral where one of the adult siblings was late. He called to say he had car trouble. Do you know where he really was?

EDIE: He was getting the will?

DALE: No. He was getting loot from the house.

EDIE: So much of this sort of behavior can be traced