Parenting As a Spiritual Journey

Deepening Ordinary & Extraordinary Events into Sacred Occasions

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Ch. 4
Siblings/
Connection

For People of All Faiths, All Backgrounds

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essence of my son was not tied up with his gender, so the essence of God is beyond gender."

While we are busy diapering, toilet training, dressing, and fighting about clothing, a miracle occurs. The little body we cared for becomes bigger and bigger, more and more its own separate person. "In only twelve years," Joe said, "my daughter went from a tiny creature, smaller than the chicken we roasted for dinner, to a shapely young female, taller than any woman I ever dated. One day she seemed part of us; all of a sudden we turned around and she was a being of her own."

We had a kind of sacred shrine in our home for years, a place that evoked wonder every time I walked by it. The shrine was created around an idea in a work by Mordecai Kaplan, a great American Jewish religious thinker whose version of Judaism—Reconstructionism—is the kind I practice and teach. In one of my favorite passages, Kaplan writes, "There can hardly be a more real and more God-revealing experience in the inner life of a child than that of growth. Every child realizes how much bigger and stronger physically . . . he grows with every year. . . . It is not something he can get himself to do at will. . . . It happens to him as it does to [plants and animals]."

Because the physical growth of our children seemed as miraculous to Seth and me as it did to Kaplan, we began marking on our front hall archway each of our children's heights, along with the date, every six months or so. While the realtor who appraised our house for possible future sale disapproved of the defacing of our walls, for us, this chronicle of the children's growth definitely belonged in a privileged place in our home.

One summer, we arranged to have our house painted while we were on vacation. Alas, we returned to discover that we had forgotten to tell the painters about our shrine! It was all neatly painted over, a clean white hall that would make a realtor rejoice. Saddened by the loss of nine years of records, we resolutely picked up where we had left off, using bold markers to make permanent the mystery of bodies growing.

Chapter 4

SIBLINGS

Connection

"My favorite part was when my brother said he was connected to me."

At 12:30 P.M. on April 4, 1991, the playground at our local elementary school was filled with noisy, carefree children. Two minutes later, two small airplanes, one carrying a U.S. senator, crashed in midair and landed in flames on the school playground, killing all the passengers. When the chaos had abated and the schoolchildren had all been accounted for, two had died, one was seriously burned, and the rest badly shaken but physically unharmed. Five years later, people in our community still talk about that afternoon.

I asked a third-grade teacher what she remembered most vividly. "I'll never forget the reaction of the children. They were terrified, of course. We were trying so hard to get the kids back to their classrooms, but the kids had a different agenda. 'Where is my brother? Where is my sister?' Every one of them with a sibling in the school had the same concern. That morning at breakfast, two brothers may have been teasing each other mercilessly, but now their only thought in the nightmare was to make sure the other was OK."

As Marian Sandmaier, the author of a book about siblings called *Original Kin*, points out, our sibling bonds are the longest-running relationships of our lives. In most cases, we encounter our siblings before we meet our friends and partners, and we continue to know them after our grandparents and parents are gone. We compete with them, we live out roles

ourselves against them. They are our earliest and longest-lasting experience of connectedness, of sharing. The bond is deep, primal.

Hugo took his sons, Steve and Ian, to a church breakfast. Before the pancakes were served, everyone was asked to say their name and whom they were connected to. That night Hugo asked six-year-old Ian what he had enjoyed most about the morning. "My favorite part," Ian said, without hesitation, "was when Steve said he was connected to *me*."

When my younger daughter was three days old, it was time to bring her home from the hospital to meet her four-year-old sister. Waiting in the hospital lobby for Seth to get the car, I sat down on a couch with the baby in my arms, directly behind an elderly woman talking to a doctor. The woman was quizzing the doctor on how to care for her seriously ill older sister who, it became clear, was a patient in this hospital about to be released into her care. At that moment, I imagined the baby in my arms as a seventy-five-year-old, inquiring how to care for her seventy-nine-year-old sister.

That image has sustained me through many rough spots over the years. For along with the deep connection comes, as any parent will attest, fierce competition. For example, there was the night the children had head lice. We were discovering the literal meaning of the metaphors "nit-picking" and "fine-tooth comb" as we went to work trying to find and remove the tiny nits from the girls' hair. (My friend Mary, who had been through many cases with her child, had told me that the disease was never fatal—except to the sanity of the parents.) As we methodically combed and picked, we commented on how many nits we were removing from each head. Suddenly, our younger daughter began to cry. "It's not fair! My sister has more head lice than *I* do!"

Of course, all siblings experience competitiveness. Ben told me about the time he took his children on a hike in upstate New York on a trail that passed through deep forests and sparkling waterfalls. "At the trailhead, there was a stack of biodegradable shopping bags with a sign asking hikers to collect any trash they found on the trail," he recalled. "For the next hour, we walked through indescribably beautiful scenery as my boys fought over each beer can and cigarette wrapper we passed along the trail."

Janice's daughter loves true stories about herself, and the one she never tires of is the story of her birth. "I had gone into labor around midnight," Janice began. "We had parked our older sons, asleep in their pajamas, at a neighbor's and gone to the hospital. But when we got there, the labor slowed down. I even slept most of the night. In the morning, I decided to call to see how the boys were doing. As I dialed the number, a huge labor pain rocked me nearly out of the bed. I hung up the phone without saying a word, and ten minutes later, our youngest child entered the world, kicking and screaming. I cannot begin to describe the satisfaction my daughter gets out of hearing about the moment when *her* needs took center stage. Nor can I count how many times she has made me tell her that story."

How do parents feel about their children's rivalry? What does it bring up for them when their children fight? I asked this question of parent after parent. The response was unanimous: "It makes me crazy. It is the hardest thing in the world."

How do parents deal with sibling rivalry? Harvey reported that in his family sibling rivalry—or at least its expression—was always diffused by a brief sermon. He would simply say, "In this house are the people who are going to be there for you no matter what. These are your long-term allies. Don't even consider meanness." A book I read suggested that when children fight with each other, the parent should intervene and take them both for a walk to a beautiful spot where they can sit and pray together. Needless to say, these solutions require parents who are unusually centered and, in the latter case, blessed with an unusual amount of free time.

Clara shared with me a ritual she designed when her three grade school daughters were involved in daily scrapes. She told the girls that there would be a special event later that afternoon and that each of them had to find a present—something really wonderful—for each of her two sisters. The girls scurried around the house finding the presents. When the time came, the four of them sat together on the floor and Clara lit a candle in the center. Then, one at a time, each girl gave each of her sisters the gift she had selected, looking into her eyes and telling her that she loved her. When the gifts were distributed, the girls held hands and made a pact that if they ever lost the sense of love and connection they had at this moment, they would cough twice. Then their sisters would know to reach out extra hard. When the vow was made, they all lay down on the ground with their heads together in the center and blew out the candle.

Several parents reported that family meetings helped to strengthen a sense of connection among siblings. Grace, who had only been practicing

the art of family meetings for a short time, was very excited about the process. "Every Saturday morning, we sit down together on the floor and we have appreciations. Everyone says something nice about each of the other family members. Then we have announcements and divide up the chores for the week. At the end, we all hold hands. I have noticed a kinder spirit permeating the rest of the week."

Sandy, a veteran parent, held family meetings each Thursday night for twenty years. Sandy had grown up in a traditional churchgoing family but had left organized religion when she married a man of a different race. Raising her children in an interracial home in the fifties and sixties was not easy. Family meetings were "sacred" time, attended by everyone and faithfully tape-recorded. The tapes accumulated in a dresser drawer and were rarely listened to; nonetheless, the taping enhanced the importance of the occasion.

"Each meeting had a chairperson, a job that rotated among the parents and children," Sandy recalled. "When a child reached the age of six, the child could take on the job of chair. Each meeting had the same format: happy, angry, sad. The chair would announce the topics one by one, and each family member would share something from the week that fit the category—what had made them happy, angry, and sad that week. When we first moved to a new neighborhood and the children were experiencing a great deal of racism, the angry and sad sections took quite a while. The children learned that when they were hurting, the best resource in the world was their family."

Another difficult aspect of sibling relationships is the way in which brothers and sisters tend to get stuck in roles. Andrea told me this story: "One sunny, icy Saturday afternoon, I rushed into the kitchen from grocery shopping, my arms filled with bundles. Before I could set them down, I saw open on the kitchen table the *Merck Medical Manual*. On the top of the page it said, 'Head Trauma.'"

"Where is she?" Andrea yelled, running into the living room to find her husband sitting on the big black recliner with a dazed and gray daughter in his arms. Their five-year-old, Wendy, had just fallen on the ice. She couldn't remember anything for more than two minutes and complained that her head hurt. The pediatrician had been paged and would call back "soon."

During the next three days, Wendy regained her orientation but continued to have headaches. After several trips to the hospital emergency room and much worry, she was diagnosed with a "mild concussion." Andrea had a list of trouble to watch for: stiff neck, vomiting, serious head pain. And watch she did. Constantly. After a week, the doctor declared the event completed.

"What am I to watch for now?" Andrea wanted to know.

"Nothing," he said. "Forget the concussion ever happened. Your daughter is herself again."

"But Wendy wasn't herself in my eyes," Andrea told me. "I was still watching for the signs, still expecting her to have headaches. She was returning to her old self, although more cautious. I even overheard her saying to a friend, 'Be careful on the ice or you'll slip and get a mild concussion.' A week or so later, a friend of ours who was a family therapist told me about two adult brothers whom she treated. One of the brothers had a concussion at age ten. Even as adults, they were still locked into their roles. One was the 'bright boy,' the other 'the concussion.' To me, my daughter was still 'the concussion,' and I began to notice how my special concern for her was affecting her relationship with her brother."

Andrea understood that Wendy now needed to say good-bye to her "sick girl" role and be welcomed back into the family as "regular Wendy," occasionally sick, usually well, always normal. That night, a Thursday, as her family sat around the dinner table, Andrea announced, "Tonight we are going to make Havdalah" (the ritual that separates Sabbath from the weekdays).

Doing a ritual at the wrong time is bound to get people's attention. "But it isn't Sabbath!" the kids protested. Andrea said she realized that, but she wanted everyone to say good-bye to sick Wendy and welcome back regular Wendy, just as the family said good-bye to Sabbath and welcomed back the weekdays. "So we did the wine and spices and candle, and everyone told a little about how they felt when Wendy was sick, and then we thanked God she was better. In that way, we separated ourselves from the experience—and freed Wendy to be herself again."

Andrea's story made me think about the part religion can play in supporting or undermining family dynamics. Sibling rivalry and roles were an issue in my family of origin and now again in the family in which I am

daism to speak to me and to my children on this issue. I kept my ears and heart open, and eventually I was rewarded.

When my older daughter turned twelve, we began to discuss her Bat Mitzvah, the Sabbath near her thirteenth birthday when she would publicly read from the Torah scroll for the first time. After deciding on a Bat Mitzvah date, we consulted the special calendar to discover what portion of the Torah she would be required to study and chant. Her portion included the story of Rachel and Leah. Since she is a girl with one sister, I was confirmed in my hunch that this kind of thing is never entirely accidental.

I had, of course, read the story. I knew that Rachel and Leah were classic sister rivals, frozen into opposing roles and full of envy for each other. I knew their father, Laban, would have benefited from the services of a good family therapist. (And where was their mother, anyway?) Rachel was beautiful, Leah fertile. Jacob, the third patriarch, fell in love with Rachel but was tricked into marrying her older sister Leah as well. Rachel had Jacob's love but not his children. Leah had Jacob's children but not his love. They both wanted what the other had. By the end, somehow or other, Rachel had two children as well. Then she died. As far as I could remember, the story was fairly depressing.

As my daughter went to work, I began to study the portion again myself. When I finally read the whole story carefully with commentaries, I discovered to my surprise that there was one detail I had always skipped over. Leah possessed some mandrakes, a plant believed to promote fertility—the very thing her sister wanted. Rachel purchased them from her sister in exchange for a promise that she would instruct Jacob to spend the night with Leah. Each gave up the thing that the other most desired, and each achieved what she most wanted. It was only when the sisters worked together that Rachel finally conceived.

For the rest of her life, my daughter will remember that she became an adult member of the Jewish people as she chanted the story of two sisters who were "set up" to be rivals. Yet they transcended their roles to become allies. Even as they were both victimized, they found a small way to reach out to each other.

The alliance with our siblings can nurture and sustain us throughout life. One of my friends, Phil, learned this in a most dramatic way. When his sister was dying of leukemia, doctors informed the family that her only hope was a bone-marrow transplant from the matching marrow of a sibling. On three different occasions, Phil traveled long distances, missed weeks of work, and compromised his own health to give the very marrow of his bones to his sibling.

Marian Sandmaier, the author of *Original Kin*, read this book in manuscript and encouraged me to listen for "the dog that wasn't barking." At first, I did not know what she meant.

"You have stories about competitive siblings and stories about connected siblings. You quote parents whose love expands to include all their children equally and—here's where the silence is. You don't explore the dilemma of parents who really do favor one of their children over another."

"That's because no one I interviewed shared with me a story along those lines," I responded.

"Of course they didn't. A parent's struggle with his own favoritism is not something he will usually choose to bring up," Marian explained. "Parents believe they should love all their children equally—even identically—and they are often ashamed to admit otherwise. But if you ask almost any parent with more than one child, you will find out the truth."

So I headed for my local bookstore, ordered a cappuccino, and waited till a parent I knew came through the door. I put him on the spot and quickly learned that Marian was right. He told me, "Please don't use my name. I hate this about myself. But one of my sons, Gene, is the child I always wanted: athletic and fun-loving. The other one is more artistic and intellectual. I know, in theory, that I should spend equal amounts of time with both of them. And I guess I do love them both equally, but I cannot help it. If given a choice, I would always rather be with Gene."

After this father left, an old friend joined me at the table, and I posed the question of parental favoritism again. It turned out that she, too, agonized over her different reactions to her two children. "It is not just a question of one sharing my interests and one being different from me. Actually, the girls are quite similar on the surface. It is a much more visceral thing. When my older daughter was a baby, she would cry as if to say, 'Please, come in here, it would be nice to get fed.' My younger child's cry was different. It said loud and clear, 'Get in this room right this minute or

younger daughter that I feel closer to. This isn't something I can quantify or describe. There is just this tug inside me that is stronger toward her."

Indeed, once I began to ask the question, it seemed that nearly everyone struggled with favoritism. Some parents felt especially drawn to their oldest child, some to their youngest, some to the child who was most like themselves, some to the one who was most different. One of my friends, after seeing the movie *Sophie's Choice*, began to have a recurring nightmare. In the movie, the heroine is forced to choose which of her children she will hand over to the Nazis. In my friend's dream, she is presented with Sophie's choice. Part of the terror of the dream, my friend explained, was realizing that she actually *did* know which child she would choose. "Over the years, the dream lost some of its horror," she said. "To my surprise, as the years passed, the child I would choose changed, and then changed again. Perhaps knowing this would help young parents be less concerned about their favoritism."

Linda's concern was not so much favoritism as limited resources. She worried about having enough energy to meet everyone's needs. "My kids compete a lot over the scarcity of my attention. The truth is, my love for each of them is limitless, but being only one human body, I can't dole it all out at once. I'll be helping one kid with something, and the other one will hook me into a conversation. Pretty soon I am letting them both down. The one who feels the most slighted will usually pick a fight with the other one, and sometimes they come to blows.

"One approach I used to use was to yell at the attacker and make him feel bad about himself for starting a fight. But that was ridiculous, because he was already feeling terrible about himself—or he wouldn't have picked the fight in the first place. I could not possibly make him feel any worse. One morning at breakfast, my sons were about to kill each other because I had mistakenly given one of them the last frozen waffle. I knew this was not simply about waffles. I made them leave the table and sit on the living room floor on either side of me. I told them that they were really mad at *me*, not each other, and they needed to understand that even though there were no waffles left in the box, I really loved them both very much. But, I explained to them, sometimes, in the morning, it is all I can do to toast breakfast.

"I thought of the most poignant line in the Torah, when poor Esau, realizing his brother has stolen his blessing, cries, 'Father, have you but one blessing?' My kids seem so worried that there won't be enough blessings for all of them. And the truth is, I sometimes feel worried too. Not about the waffles. But *do* I really have enough love to go around? Or, rather, enough energy to give out all the love?"

Perhaps we parents would judge ourselves less harshly if we acknowledged that we are not expected to love perfectly, equally, endlessly. That we are human beings, not God. God is the parent with infinite love for all God's children. We are merely parents who love our kids deeply but imperfectly, doing our best to raise them to love each other—*and* to get out of the house on time in the morning.