



# FAMILY TIES THAT BIND

*A Self-Help Guide to Change  
through Family of Origin Therapy*

**Dr. Ronald W. Richardson**

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## NOTICE TO READERS

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All of the case histories reported in this book are an accurate reflection of what has actually happened in the lives of my clients. However, in every case, identifying characteristics have been changed to protect confidentiality, and occasionally the histories of two or more people have been amalgamated into one for a clearer and more effective presentation of theory.

Most of the case histories are about women, which is merely a reflection of the greater number of female clients I have had. It seems that women are more often willing to seek professional help to work on issues in their lives. This is usually a sign of their greater health and motivation.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In a *New Yorker* cartoon, a publisher at his desk says to a somewhat surprised author, “Well, it’s good. But people just don’t write books all by themselves anymore.” That was certainly my experience with this book.

I learned the concepts of how families operate from the writings of Dr. Murray Bowen of Georgetown University. He is one of the earliest pioneers and practitioners of family therapy. Most of what is in this book is based on his research and work with families, which began in the early 1950s. I have simply tried to translate his concepts into popular language. I learned how to implement the concepts in my own life and in my clinical practice from Dr. David Freeman of the University of British Columbia. He has been a caring and more than competent guide in helping me sort through the meaning and usefulness of family of origin work.

But the book would never have existed without my wife, Lois. A professional editor and an author, she first suggested the idea of a book on family of origin therapy for laypeople. After I did my best at writing it, she rewrote and reorganized much of it to make it clearer and more readable, often over my protests, but finally with my gratitude. This book is as much her effort as it is mine. The chapter on sibling position is entirely her work.

And, of course, I thank my own family of origin — my mother who was an enduring example of love and support; an unknown father; aunt; uncle; cousin; grandparents; great-grandparents — all who knew me as a child and who I have tried to get to know better as an adult.

# Chapter 1



## INTRODUCTION

*The more intensively the family has stamped its character upon the child, the more [the child] will tend to feel and see its earlier miniature world again in the bigger world of adult life.*

— Carl Gustav Jung

Life in the family of origin (the family a person is born and raised in) is a tremendously powerful experience for everyone. And the impact of that experience is not restricted to childhood. The way we see ourselves, others, and the world is shaped in the setting of our family of origin. The views we develop there stay with us throughout life.

At some point, most of us leave our families of origin physically, but we rarely leave them emotionally. Even if you put an ocean between you and your family of origin, or never return home again, you will continue to re-enact the dynamics of your original family in any new family you establish. The specific content may well be different, of course.

For example, you may do many of the very things your parents did, even though you always swore you wouldn't. No doubt your parents swore the same thing about their parents, who swore the same thing about their parents, back to the first cave man and woman who swore they'd never be the apes their parents were. At times, this decision to be different can take interesting turns.

### Example

Annette, a divorced parent with children aged 14, 12, and 9, complained that her parents never liked or approved of what she did. She made a rule for herself as a parent to always praise her children



and let them know how much she liked them. To her surprise, her oldest child told her one day, “Mom, the problem with you is you’re always telling us how good we are and we can’t believe you because we never hear the other side!”

One of the most difficult things in life is to gain emotional separateness from that powerful early family environment and not continually repeat it or react against it.

The purpose of this book is to help you find new ways to deal with that family environment — to have a better life here and now by learning a different way of dealing with your “leftovers” from there and then. If you can look at the unfinished business of your past in an appropriate context — the environment of your family of origin — your present and future experiences in life can be more positive. You can be more in charge of your own life, less defeated by undesirable events, and better able to create for yourself the kind of life you want.

Think about how you feel when you visit or phone your parents. Do you feel or act similarly to the way you did when you were living at home? How long can you last before the old feelings start? Five minutes? An hour? Two days? What happens to you when things start getting tense? If you can last more than three days before acting or feeling like a 13-year-old again, you probably don’t need this book. Most adults, however, tend to act in ways they wish were different. Some attempt to fit in as peacefully as possible. They deny their own feelings, do what their parents want, and don’t rock the boat.

Others make a point of being the opposite of what their parents want and expect. They are perpetual rebels.

Some try to show their parents how they failed as parents and work on improving them. Many just have as little to do with family as possible. They are emotionally distant and rarely visit or communicate with their families.

All of these ways of relating bear testimony to the power of our families in our lives. Most of us have not learned how to be close to these significant people while continuing to feel like our own persons. We find ourselves reacting to them, rather than doing what would make sense to us in our most objective moments. Yet, until you can be an independent adult with your family, it is unlikely you can be this way with anyone else in an intimate relationship.

The same issues end up getting dumped into new intimate relationships: marriage (legal or common-law, same-sex or opposite-sex), children, work, friendships. The extent to which a satisfying adult life can

be established is dependent upon how well you learn to deal with these forces in your family of origin.

One way to do this is through family of origin work. The goal of this work is to change your experience of yourself in your family of origin and, by extension, in your present relationships.

None of us really has a choice about whether to deal with our families or not. Even choosing not to deal with them is a way of dealing with them. You can't be free of your early experiences by denying their significance or ignoring them. Your early experiences are bound to repeat in your present life with different characters and in different contexts.

Doing family of origin work is one way to begin changing this self-defeating pattern. Some people do this work with a counselor, or a family therapist, but you can also do it on your own. In fact, people were using this approach long before family therapists started taking credit for it. A natural part of becoming a mature adult is to reassess the earlier relationships with family and make adjustments in them.

Doing family of origin work requires an understanding of how families function. Chapters 2 to 7 will help you with this. Those chapters discuss specific family dynamics that you will want to examine in your own situation. Throughout these chapters are questions and exercises for you to think about and do. You don't have to sit down and write out answers to the questions, but you will benefit most if you read each one carefully and let it simmer in your mind as you read further. Do the exercises that make sense to you in your situation and that you feel comfortable with.

Understanding the concepts and being able to identify the dynamics at work in your family are only the first steps. This book is not intended to provide insight only into your family. For that insight to be meaningful, you will have to change your behavior and way of being in your family of origin. Chapter 8 gives you the instructions for doing the practical work. But don't cheat and skip straight to that chapter; it won't make a lot of sense unless you know something about the theory that comes first. Take your time and be patient. Once you have waded through all the theory, you will be amazed at how well and simply it all fits together.

Even those who have been out of touch with their families for years can do this work; old relationships can be renewed. If your parents are dead, friends or relatives can be contacted for information about your childhood environment.

People of any age can and do use this method for changing themselves, although it is easiest for those who are at least in their late twenties.

Younger people are often still trying to get away physically and can't yet handle the stickier emotional separation. However, no matter what your age, dealing with your family of origin can be difficult, and you may find it easier if you have some support. If you are fortunate enough to know a therapist who is familiar with family of origin therapy, you would do well to use his or her services. Because family of origin work requires you to do all the work, these therapists usually call themselves coaches. In fact, any good listener who can provide the support you need and ask appropriate questions can be this kind of coach. Sometimes a group of friends can provide this for each other in regular meetings set up for this purpose.

A spouse or lover does not make a good coach. Even the best of them find it extremely difficult to remain neutral about family matters. Your spouse's involvement can only complicate things for you. Your coach must be able to ask you a lot of questions to help you begin to think differently about your family. Spouses are more likely to tell you what to think despite their best intentions.

You also won't get very far with this work if you do it with someone (spouse or therapist) who believes that your parents are to blame for all your problems. You'll just end up feeling justified for your anger or hurt, or whatever your feelings are toward your family. The point is for you to change — and you must do that by looking at your family in a different light.

One warning: Some people, who are deeply troubled or come from families with severe emotional problems or a history of sexual abuse, should not attempt to do this work without professional help. However, most average people with only the normal complement of problems can do this work without involving a third party.

In any case, there are two important things to remember as you work your way through this book:

- (a) Keep the emphasis on yourself. Just as no one else is able to make you change, you cannot make anyone else change. So don't even bother trying. (A nice side effect of your changes may be that other family members change in a positive way, too, but that is not your goal.)
- (b) You need to be motivated. Do you really want to change the way things are in your life right now? Doing family of origin work is hard work, and it is not for everyone. It is not an easy-answer, quick-fix program. It requires a commitment of time, energy, and thought, but the rewards are great for those who hang in there.

The following story of Sue and her family shows how effective family of origin therapy can be.

### **Example**

Sue was going home for the first time in six years. She didn't really want to make this trip, but she felt she should. Her five younger brothers and sisters had let her know how hurt Mom and Dad were that she never came to see them.

Sue had left home at the age of 19, after the last of a long series of fights with her parents that had gone on all through her adolescence. Both parents scorned her "radical" political views, but Sue saw Dad as the primary problem and was quick to point out his shortcomings as a parent. Dad demanded she give up her modern ideas and be a "woman" and knuckle under the way his wife had. He did not hesitate to use his knuckles — and fists — to keep the family in line. Sue was the only one who ever openly challenged him. She refused to be controlled.

After their last fight, Sue announced that she was leaving home. She still vividly remembered walking out the door alone, carrying her own luggage. Dad, in the living room reading the newspaper, barely looked up to say goodbye. Mother was crying in the kitchen, not daring to risk the possible confrontation that might result if she were to see her daughter off.

There had been a few cards and brief phone calls since then, but nothing else. She knew her parents would be waiting to see if she had changed. Sue realized she had done little since leaving home that her parents would approve of. She had spent three unmotivated years in college because she could think of nothing else to do. She began living with Steve, her boyfriend, while he was still an art student, and when he graduated, they traveled in Europe for a year. After returning they got married, but it was not a satisfying marriage for either of them. In fact, this trip was a way to separate for a while — they had been arguing so much. She was currently working part time at a low-paying job in a group home for teenagers hooked on drugs. Steve worked occasionally as a freelance commercial artist but most of the time he experimented with his painting.

At the dinner table when Sue arrived home, her sister asked her about her work and the conversation turned to teenagers and drugs. Mom tried unsuccessfully to change the topic. Sue shared her sister's beliefs about why teens got into trouble. She thought they were victims of uncaring, authoritarian parents, a sick school system, and a corrupt society.

After trying to control his reactions, Dad was unable to keep quiet any longer. “Damn it, you haven’t changed a bit! You’re still spouting your hippy-dippy, commie junk. You and your worthless husband are wasting away your lives, living off society. Aren’t you ever going to grow up?”

Sue had hoped to avoid this, but she was not going to let him get away with that kind of remark. She came back at him with her best attacks from the past, honed with more “evidence” gathered over the past six years. The scene ended with Dad walking out, Mother going to the kitchen, and the others quietly disappearing. Sitting alone at the table, Sue decided to go home as soon as she could get a flight the next day.

Four years later, Sue went home again. She had changed her mind about never visiting again. In fact, she had made three short trips in the previous two years. Her feelings about going home this time were much, much different.

Shortly after that disastrous trip four years earlier, her marriage became even more difficult. She and Steve were ready to separate, but decided to seek marriage counseling first. As they discussed their marriage with the therapist, both began to see how much their conflicts related to their family backgrounds and the sensitivities developed in those earlier settings. Both were trying to resolve in their marriage the issues that remained unresolved with their separate families of origin.

The therapist had asked how much they knew about their parents as people, not just as parents, and what they knew about their parents’ own family background, childhood, and parents.

The therapist encouraged them to seek the answers from family members. After some hesitation, they began to write letters and make phone calls to parents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and grandparents, asking about the family. Slowly the pieces began to fit.

In the process of doing this, Steve and Sue’s relationship with each other began to change. They stopped attacking each other every time they disagreed about something. There was less blame and withdrawal. They still had conflicts, but they were able to think through positions and state them more clearly, without reacting so strongly against each other.

Each began to find more meaningful direction in work and more satisfaction in life. Both felt they were finally growing up.

Sue's experience with her family became more satisfying as well. She began to appreciate them, and feel less shame and anger. She was more receptive to seeing what they had done for her as parents. But more importantly, she began to see them more fully as people who had their own problems.

On her fourth trip home, Sue's feelings were very different from that first return trip. On the surface, things didn't look too much different: Dad didn't have much to say when he picked her up at the airport; Mom still acted as if her life was relegated to the kitchen. But Sue reacted differently. She told her dad the things about herself she wanted him to know and she no longer felt angry at her mother for being so passive. When her dad disagreed with her and called her the names that used to make her furious, she was able to stick up for her point of view without lashing out at him in uncontrollable anger. Neither of them walked out on the other; instead they "agreed to disagree." At times, she wanted to say to him, "I love you," but she didn't think either of them could handle that much closeness. At least not yet.

There is nothing magical about the changes that happened in Sue and her family. You can change your experience with your family too. Going home again can help you to finally really leave home, which means growing up emotionally. When you can be yourself in the difficult setting of your family of origin, you can be yourself anywhere, and you will be better able to deal with current relationship problems in a flexible and appropriate way.

