



## RELATIONSHIPS

## On toxic siblings, and why it's not your fault you can't stand your brother

JEANNE SAFER IN CONVERSATION WITH KEN MACQUEEN

"I HAD AN OLDER brother," writes Manhattan-based psychotherapist Jeanne Safer, "but he was never a brother to me." That admission, and her curiously detached response to his death, may seem an admission of defeat for a therapist who specializes in sibling relationships, but conflicts among brothers and sisters are as old—and as inescapable—as time itself. Her latest book, *Cain's Legacy: Liberating Siblings from a Lifetime of Rage, Shame, Secrecy and Regret*, traces the dynamic in many families back to its earliest roots: the internecine feuds of the Book of Genesis.

**Q:** Let's start by defining the problem. You write that one-third of adult siblings suffer sibling strife, and as much as 45 per cent when clinicians such as yourself start probing?

**A:** There's an awful lot of sibling strife around.

**Q:** What kind of strife are we talking about?

**A:** Well, we're talking about the gamut. Not just a little tiff about somebody you really love and get along with; that is a part of life. We're talking about people who are basically uncomfortable with each other. They don't

get along. They don't feel they have anything in common. They dread seeing each other. It's the opposite of what we long to have in a family relationship with the person who is actually our closest biological relative.

**Q:** You write about "sibspeak" where words are weapons. Could you offer a few examples?

**A:** It's an archaic language in which the main point is grievance collection and accusation, and avoidance. One of the ways you know you and a sibling are involved in sibspeak is you



**O Brother:** The author and her brother, Steven: 'When he died I felt, primarily, relieved'

don't know what to say next. Some examples: "You never thanked me for the flowers I gave you in 1982," or, "You never call me"—when that person has just called. One of my favourites, which actually happened in my extended family, was at a funeral. One of the sons said to the other, "You know, when I went through Mom's stuff, there was a closet full of stuff of yours, and only a shoebox full of mine." The person to whom this was addressed, he'd had success [as a writer] at quite a young age, said, "Well, what was I supposed to do, un-write my work?" One of those things I feel is critical in improving those relationships—and an unusual point I make is that not all relationships can or should be—is to not allow those kinds of comments to be unresponded to.

**Q:** You've written about contentious issues before, and family taboos, and yet you say getting people to open up about their siblings was your biggest challenge. Why is that?

**A:** It's fascinating. These interviews went on and on. I was really starting to despair, are they ever going to get to the point? When they talk about their siblings they get tongue-tied and

brain-tied. I think it's because we file [away] this relationship. There is an idea that this is something that you don't have to address. I call it the Geographical Proximity Fallacy, which is: if only so-and-so lived in the same town or on the same street we would really be close. My thought is: you lived in the same house and you weren't close. If you lived across the continent or across the world and you wanted to have a relationship nothing would stop you.

**Q:** *This rivalry seems ingrained in nature. Everything from blue-footed boobies pecking their rivals out of the nest to Magellanic penguins, where parents feed just one of two offspring, to sharks that eat their siblings in utero.*

**A:** I like the Indian rosewood tree the best. [The first seed to sprout from the mother tree sends a poison that kills the other seed pods.]

**Q:** *So this rivalry just comes naturally to all species, including humans?*

**A:** Yes. I think we are all full of love and hate. In family relationships, particularly with siblings, aggression and difficulties precede affection and love. At first this person seems like a rival and then later on you can have other kinds of feelings. But there is a great deal of it built in. It makes sense: evolution requires us to be the one who survives, to be the one who prevails. But I think what screws up siblings more than anything else are parents.

**Q:** *I want to explore that. In your look at the Old Testament, the Bible reads like a soap opera of sibling strife and bad parenting.*

**A:** I have never had so much fun writing anything as writing about the Book of Genesis. I didn't know that these people were so psychologically minded who wrote this.

**Q:** *You even take the Heavenly Father to the woodshed, for inexplicably rejecting Cain while favouring the younger brother Abel [who is then murdered by his jealous brother]. Is Genesis a cautionary tale?*

**A:** For one thing, it's a mirror of human nature. There is really a trajectory in Genesis from the first sibling murdering the second, to Joseph at the end of Genesis actually reconciling with his brothers. It takes forever, but they accomplish it. I loved Leah and Rachel [the two battling sisters who shared Jacob as a husband].

**Q:** *Talk about passive-aggressive.*

**A:** And aggressive-aggressive. They were so embroiled in their rivalry they destroyed their whole world really, and the next generation, because they set up Joseph and his brothers. Until I was researching this book I had never really seen the contemporary relevance of [Genesis]. We have blended families. We have stepchildren. We have twins. Women are no better than men at this. A really critical char-



acter in Genesis, to my mind, is Esau, who was not favoured, and, in fact, was screwed by everybody in the family. He gets over it. He has his own life. He doesn't allow what happened to him as a child to define him.

**Q:** *There's a lesson in that.*

**A:** He says, "I have enough." I think that's the most critical, profound psychological thing that anybody says in the Book of Genesis. Having your own life. Getting out of being a victim. Acknowledging the favouritism that you didn't deserve, if you were the favourite. That's the way out. As an agnostic Jew I can tell you I was very impressed. The Bible is much more sophisticated about siblings than Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis—my discipline.

**Q:** *He avoided the whole [sibling] issue, right?*

**A:** He certainly did. I really make a point of why Freud ignored those things and the consequences for psychotherapy of his avoidance. My point is: when you ignore something as profound and internally radioactive as a difficult sibling relationship, it comes back to haunt you in ways you can't control

or understand.

**Q:** *Let's bring this forward into contemporary American life. Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, they had fairly dysfunctional brothers. Madonna had a brother living under a bridge. Does success for one necessarily doom the rest?*

**A:** I don't think it necessarily dooms the other. But it's tough, particularly if parents idolize the successful child, and make that child the bearer of his or her destiny, which was done in my family. I speak from a lot of personal experience, being the favourite, and realizing over time and really working on this, that I always took things [thinking], it's just because I was wonderful and brilliant. I didn't think about the fact that this was unfair. And I also didn't think that unconsciously I felt profoundly guilty.

**Q:** *Tell me about that troubled relationship with your brother, Steven.*

**A:** He's been dead for five years. I realized, after assuming he had no influence at all, just like Freud thought, that indeed he was profoundly important to me, in a convoluted sort of way. He was the image of what I tried not

**Ancient hatred:** *The story of Cain and Abel 'is a mirror of human nature'*

to be. Our relationship, I think it was probably doomed from the start. He's seven years older than me. He was already having a lot of problems socially and in school when I was born. I was the golden little girl. Both my parents were younger children—parents are always implicated in this—and I was just what both of them needed. Of course, I took that as perfectly normal. We never had any closeness. I never felt I could count on him. I tried to approach him [in the last years of his life]. By this time he had a lot of serious physical problems. He died a double amputee. He was a talented man, he was a fine, professional musician. He had a Dixieland band late in his life. But when I tried to approach him there was no way. You can work things out inside yourself, even if the person is dead, but you can't make a relationship with the other person if that person is unwilling or unable.

**Q:** *You write you didn't mourn his death until a piece of music a year later brought on the tears. What hit you at that point?*

**A:** When he died I felt, primarily, relieved. I wanted to say this out loud because it shouldn't be something people feel that they're monsters about. If a sibling is nothing but a thorn in your side no matter what you do, and the person dies, it does make life easier in certain ways. But there was something about listening to this joyous music. I felt the limitations of his life, the tragedy of his death and pain and fear. I also felt, as much as anything, that I couldn't do anything for him. When I heard this music that was so important to him, it really hit me: what a loss, not of him, because it was never possible, but what a loss of what I would have wanted the relationship to be.

**Q:** *Was writing this book, and the previous book, *The Normal One: Life with a Difficult or Damaged Sibling, a way of exorcising family demons?**

**A:** It was actually more of a coming to terms. I wanted to be absolutely forthright about it because that's what I'm encouraging siblings to do: to face what you really feel, to face what the relationship is, to face your part in it; to try to see the sibling in a different way and yourself, vis-à-vis that person, in a different way.

**Q:** *You don't have children. Was this a way of avoiding the issue?*

**A:** I wrote a book on that, actually. My first book was called *Beyond Motherhood: Choosing a Life Without Children*. I think it had to be some aspect of my own choice. Every sibling who has a serious problematic sibling is afraid that their child will be like the sibling.

That's a terror people have. I hear that all the time. My reasons were more complicated. They had to do with really wanting to be primarily the focus of my own life, and having a marriage that was different from my parents. But Steven has to be part of that, because, remember, I'm saying that siblings affect us everywhere: in the bedroom, the boardroom and everywhere.

**Q:** *What can parents do to foster a healthy relationship among their children?*

**A:** I have an unusual suggestion: don't think so much about your children. Think about your childhood. Think about your relationships with your own siblings, absolutely openly. Who was favoured? How your parents felt? What position you had, and they had, in the family? All of your feelings, totally honestly. If you do that you will tend to project less on your children.

**Q:** *You mention one set of parents that gave their boys boxing lessons with great success.*

**A:** My feeling is that sibling rivalry is here to stay. But sibling strife is a product of how parents deal with their children. Sibling strife is sibling rivalry gone ballistic, where there is not enough good feeling to soften the envy or all the stuff that happens in families. Another way parents contribute is over-the-top favouritism. It often comes out in how wills are written. I did a consultation with someone last night because she had just found out—her parents are still alive—they left the family home to her brother, and the three other siblings get nothing. He is actually fairly wealthy and she just went through a divorce where she lost her home. I tell you what went through their heads: "He lives near us, and he does more for us, so therefore we just exclude everyone else." And the brother went along with it, which is really the problem.

**Q:** *You have many examples of people overcoming such rejection. But you also write that there are relationships that simply can't be fixed.*

**A:** That's right. I think it's a huge relief to people to know that they are not required by God, by therapists, or by society to get along with a brother or sister simply because they have a biological relationship. Brotherhood and sisterhood must be earned.

**Q:** *A natural reaction, in that case, is to banish a bothersome sibling from your life and from your thoughts. But you also say that at some level that is impossible, they're with you forever. So, there's no escape?*

**A:** But being with you inside is a different thing from having to go to Thanksgiving with them.

**Q:** *So, would parents be better off having just one child? Or will your next book be on the trauma of the only child?*

**A:** No, I don't think it's the number of children. I think it's the self-awareness of the parents and their coming to terms with their own conflicts, their own family dynamics. That's the hidden dimension of families and the things that go wrong with children. It's the parents. There's another doctrine that I think gets people in trouble, and that's the doctrine of equal love.

**Q:** *Will you dig into that one a bit?*

**A:** It's kind of like a mathematical equation. Okay, I did this for you so I'm going to do [exactly] that for the other. What that leaves out is that all children are special and unique, and you can't mete things out like that. It never works. One of the things that happened in my husband's family is that his mother made a decision, because she was very favoured in her family, that she was going to space her children six years apart so they would never be in the same school, so that way there would be no competition. Isn't that a great solution?

**Q:** *Makes it harder to be close to your sibs.*

**A:** Not only that, they're intensely competitive. I don't think favouritism is completely avoidable. Self-awareness is key. You can feel like one of your children has qualities that particularly appeal to you.

But then you make an effort to look at the other ones and what they have, things that maybe you didn't have and you envied in your siblings. That's something I was able to come to with my brother. I came to tremendously admire his courage in dealing with these dread-

ful things he had to deal with. I think post-humously I have a much better relationship than I did when he was alive.

**Q:** *Really?*

**A:** We have relationships with our family in us until the day we die. I think it's a hopeful message—when you work things out you don't have to be enemies, even with an impossible sibling. You can have a certain sympathetic understanding of how they got that way. In these relationships that can't be worked out, you can mourn your loss, the loss of the possibility of a good relationship. When you mourn, you are able to go on. I want people to think about this, so we can get rid of Cain's legacy for ever and ever, and have Esau's legacy instead. ♣

**Siblings are not required by God, therapists or society to get along just because they are related**