

*"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..."*. Charles Dickens

To make a baby, we need two people. Seems simple. Boy meets girl and baby comes. I know it's not that simple. How about a different type of two like a bee and a flower? They don't have sex but that's how it works. Flowers don't make bees and bees don't make flowers, but they work together like symbiotic sex. They need two.

Two people have sex for a whole range of reasons. I suppose some people sit down and plan out a birth. Sometimes they even plan it down to cycles of fertility. (Personal) We did not plan the first one. Yet, I did say after one symbiotic sex session that it was a baby making one. It must have been because our first boy was born soon afterwards. What I'm saying is a bee does a sex dance without sexual fulfilment (I imagine). Humans generally have sex for fulfilment. That dance sometimes creates a baby.

You have heard many people say "we are planning a family." The baby is the beginning of a family. I suppose a man and his dog could be a family. However, by tradition, a family is at least three people: a man, woman, and child. Our society is built on that tradition. We all began in a family.

Did those parents plan the family arguments, disagreements, lack of money, and sleep? Probably they dreamed of lawyers, weddings and sport victories. I was never prouder, for some reason, when my boys scored their first points. I dreamed of that. A family plan looks all fluffy and nicely wrapped up in a pink or blue blanket. Then the in-laws ruin it all.

My opening quote is so true of family. It's the best of times when a baby comes. Everyone is happy. In that moment the family has all the potential in the world. It can also be the

worst of times in a family. Between harsh words, abuse, and failed dreams, family can be a tough place to be. We love it when it's good and hate it when it's awful. I know several family members that have let the family unit down. They have caused trouble. I hope for the best of times and fear the worst moments. Family is all over the map.

Family is who we are. Every single person on the planet has family. Ninety nine percent of those human beings have some sort of blood family. I'm sure even the test tube babies have a human beginning. It began with two people. Scientists have worked tirelessly to end the family. Maybe they had a bad experience. What if we could clone the human gene and reproduce a person synthetically? Many movies have been made about test tube babies. To date, we still need humans to complete the process. The Family is safe for now.

Years ago, a group of scientists wanted to study a mother's influence on babies. I mentioned this before. They created a wire framed monkey with milk bottles for breasts. The babies were fed but they slowly deteriorated because of something else. The love and nurturing from a real mom were missing. The scientists put fur on the wire monkey and it helped for a time. Still though, the baby monkeys eventually regressed. We need our mom and dad. We need family.

Two people bond together to create what they are: a human family. It is interesting because parents are not blood. Yet, they make blood. From brothers and sisters to twins, there is a connection from blood. Oddly enough, that does not make harmony, similarity, or love. No two twins are alike in character. Brothers are different in so many ways from their siblings. How often have people said jokingly "he's not from my side of the family." Family is not cut and dry from birth. Yet, we need them.

My mother and I struggled to co-exist. I still don't get it. After she died, I have lost something. She was blood. My wife has a strange set of parents. One died very early on. Yet, she still remembers birthdays dates, memories, and she cherishes anything to do with her mom. Her dad is a different cat. He is distant and recluse. My wife would probably do anything to make a relationship that he does not want. Why does she still need him? It's in the blood.

I have heard that an only child is sometimes different. They can be single minded at times. I'm sure that's a broad statement. Yet, my wife grew up alone. She was excluded from parents and siblings. She yearns for family. At times though, she is in her own world. I'm betting these children are driven more. Feeling like their own captain. They had no reason to share like a large family has to. Instead, they gained the whole package from their parents. They receive all the traits and faults. No sharing required.

We need family to create conversation, harmony, and union. We also need family to grind against us. People need to know their place in community. It begins in the family. Those wire monkey babies tended to be distant and irritable. They lacked the love of family. Sure, there are different types of family. Yet, I don't think it's by mistake that American thanksgiving is the busiest travel day of the year. We want our family close.

Why do we need family so much? Certainly, most people joke about their terrible family experiences. There are mother in-law jokes. Brothers fight and sisters' scrap. Parent divorce and people are abused, robbed, and killed by extended family. The police say that quite often abuse begins close to family. In some strange and twisted way, it's a love/hate relationship. Regardless, most people yearn for family.

Even in the family setting, people are people. Why are we born so different? God says he made us that way. We are individuals with a purpose. That's all fine and dandy, yet many families are strained. Why? It's because of the individuals. We all have different character, flaws, talents, and desires. Shove that into a (no choice) birth family and you get an insane relationship swamp. A mire of jealousy, misunderstandings, and abuse. I have considered sending God a sternly worded letter for insisting on jamming different types of individuals into the same bubble called a family.

I know family can be a wonderful place. Yet, so few people seem to have a great family history. Instead we have what most people have: difficult parents and strained relationships with their siblings. Everyone has a strange uncle or an eccentric aunt. Oddly enough, who has weird grandparents? Most of us don't have that. Instead, they tend to be cool. The rest: not so cool.

*Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city-* George burns

They say that what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. There are sport team codes. What's said in the locker room remains in the locker room. A marriage has privacy. Church has a code of conduct policy. If it makes us look unholy, bury it. Even in farming, there is an unwritten rule towards diseased animals: shoot, shovel, and shut-up. Yet, in family, we tend to let it fly. Maybe, that's why we travel to see them. Who wants to live near the people they struggle with? The only code in family is blood not abuse.

Some things within the family unit are hidden. Yet, most things are fair game with family. People say "oh, did you hear about aunt Ruth?" "Did you know your brother is in jail?" How about "Mom, he said a bad word." Even I'll give you one. I had a family member tell me I'm not welcome to help clean out my mom's place after her death. They felt it was only fair since my

relationship with my mom was nonexistent and distant, I had no right. They might have been right. Yet, upon her death should we really be throwing stones? In family, hell yeah!

Someone was quoted saying “*at birth, we are given, by each of our parents, their character flaws as a free gift.*” I am like my parents. All of their bad habits are mine now. What made them unique? Was it being a penny pincher, outspoken, or that both of them could not sit still? I am the sum of my parents. Lucky for me I gained both of their traits combined, and I’m not even an only child! What’s up with that?

I had a friend approach me in distress. They knew I had spent time with their parents. This person told me they were terrified of being like their mother. They could see their mom in all that they are. I said comfortingly that those traits are yours now. (Very observant Patrick). Of course, they did not want to hear that. If you want to live differently than your parents: good luck with that. History rarely skips a beat. Instead it tends to repeat itself.

There are solutions for our family flaws. Those flaws can work out for good. My friend seemed unconvinced because their mom was complicated. She is a conniver, schemer, and sweet talker. How can anything good come out of that? I said “take those traits and use them to be a great communicator.” My friend had always looked at those traits as a flaw. I’m saying they are still a gift. My friend is using what her mother gave her for good. She has become a great preacher and speaker.

Family is a unique relationship. I suppose we learn about relationships within that family unit too. Family is silently strained, why? That’s probably because so many of us suck at it. The trouble is found in those three words again endure, tolerate and compromise. All the flaws we inherited are used in family relationships. Imagine what would happen if a whole family shared

flaws and character hiccups? The same flaws and hiccups. That's possibly why so many families are a complicated hot mess. Who wants to endure, compromise, and tolerate that?

I heard an interesting story, years ago, about two southern family lines. I can't remember names but it's a good one. The first were made up of upstanding lineage. Good Christian upbringing. Through the generations they spawned several doctors, lawyers, and wealthy business people. The second family came from a rough stock family line. They had little money but plenty of trouble. Through the decades they spawned murders, divorces, adultery, jail time, and many other offences. That story is true. I only mention it because of family. What comes around tends to continue going around.

God's word says in Exodus 34:7 *"Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation."*

It seems harsh to punish the children for what the parents did. I want to look at that statement in a different way. Suppose God allows us to have free will. We are free to choose our own path. So, in essence, God allows you to do as you please. Maybe the verse above is meant as a warning. Our path might go farther than we intended. Part of the Old Testament is all about lineage. A good line produced good people. Even cities and countries produce good and bad heritage. As for bad lineage? Check this verse out.

1 Corinthians 15:33 *"do not be misled; bad company corrupts good character."*

It brings me back to family. My dad is divorced. My first born and I are divorced too. I'll go even farther. My first born had a long-term relationship out of high school just like his dad. He worked as an oil company mail room clerk like me. We have similar driving records too. I could

go on. Family matters. How we were raised and what we've experience through family matters. Sometimes those values and experiences trickle down to the third and fourth generation.

One family fostered a lineage of success. I suppose money was involved. Yet, people do rise up and succeed without wealth all the time. It's hard to discount the second family I mentioned. Disaster began decades before and decades after. It's not a mistake. Family matters. How often do we have problems with family and it just never ends? My side of the family is riddled with divorce. I don't think one person has really risen above our middle-class status.

My relationships have been affected by my family upbringing. I long for a good family spirit. Most of our family dinners with extended family are strained at best. I wish for peace. I am sure some would hope for a little distraction. Their family dinners are boring. Let's hope not. My upbringing has affected my Ex and her family. I can see it in my children and their adult lives. The spirit of the "Green" lineage is a good one. I truly believe that. It's also a hot mess at times.

I believe that to change a family line, it begins with one person. Someone decides enough is enough. Good relationships begin with how we are treated and raised in a family atmosphere. If we can see it then change it. At some point I could see how my parents talked to me. I could see how it had affected me. Then I thought of my children. Was I repeating the same pattern? How many things have I repeated in my second marriage? This hot mess has to stop somewhere.

What I have done is to take a long hard look at endure, tolerate and compromise in the eye. Am I enduring bad family atmosphere at my expense? Was I tolerating bad family at the expense of me and my family? What compromises have I made to let bad family run wild? It stops with me.

I have talked to them all. My mom and I could not come to an understanding. That has been tough but necessary. We can respect family but not at the expense of dignity. I talked to my dad. We have a mutual respect for each other. I talked to my kids. There seems to be a changing of the guard with them. I'm putting love, respect, and inspiration ahead of toleration. Family is a good place for tough love and inspiring love. My family is a work in progress. The change starts here.

With family it's personal. I have one family member who does not like how our history went. It's not a great history. I have made mistakes. So, have they. It's personal to them. We are family but we are not friends. It's my hope that we could mend our family conflict and misunderstandings. It's tough slugging. For most of it "how do you unbreak the broken?" With family it's just not that simple.

I happen to belong to a great group of high school friends. Each of us have had different family experiences. What I have noticed is that the group is smaller than it began. Why? It's because a few of us have decided that our friendship is worth something. Some others who have faded away did not work well in a group. I think they put themselves and their agenda ahead of the group. They probably didn't work well in family either. We do criticize, challenge, and affirm each other. It's like we have created a family. Not everyone wants a functioning family atmosphere.

I believe that my high school group desires good family relationships. I hear that attitude in their stories. That heartfelt desire shows up in their friendships. We are still friends after 40 years for a reason. We don't endure but enjoy. We don't tolerate, but understand. We don't compromise but experience what the others have to offer. It's rare I know.



Family largely molds us into the person we become. We like certain foods. People tend to drink what their parents liked. We travel, buy, and vote mainly along familial lines. I know it's not cut and dry as that, but the more we try and change the more we remain the same. This goes for friends too. People are influenced by the company they keep. Couples begin to look alike. Who knows why? So did our friends search us out or the other way around? Maybe our desires, tastes, and mannerisms searched out like mined people. Welcome to the extended family called friends.

Many people have a better family relationship with friends. I am one of those. The high school friends are dear to me. I can call on them anytime. We have traveled through life together. Have you noticed that family tends to drift and divide? I suppose many friends do too. Yet, how many friends are in the same neighborhood, city, or area. My family are all over the world. Blood is blood. I get it. Friends are thicker than blood in some respects.

I believe we have a nice little family unit at home. There have been misunderstandings but generally we have found a way to get through it together. My family is more important than my agenda. My heart is still on guard. Yet, my version of family are friends and not foes. Family might be blood but friends are a close second. I think I'm lucky that my wife and I were friends first.

In relationships, family and friends are so very similar. We don't expect to be together as friends at thanksgiving. That's blood time. Yet, my friends plan get-togethers. We mark on the calendar certain house parties of friends. We're planning a big trip on a cruise, just friends. What makes friendship so unique and possibly thicker than blood? Let's go there now.