



LEGACY LAW

Protecting the assets in your family tree

Christmas is coming – take cover

“A dysfunctional family is any family with more than one person in it”

– Mary Karr, *The Liars’ Club*

The recent Thanksgiving holiday celebrates an unusual meal in 1621 between native Americans (the Wampanoag people) and English pilgrims who survived the first trip to America by *the Mayflower* (unlikely friends).

These two groups had to understand the seasons, build trust, work together to plant the food to harvest it, catch fish, to organise and prepare the food. Without the ability to work together there would not be three days of celebration.

The idea of celebrating in a group on a set day every year eventually caught on. The purpose of the meal and the national holiday is to give thanks to God and the luck they enjoy and families often gather to give thanks together (and for their families).

Today we have the challenge of learning to co-operate over more than simply preparing the food. Our challenges are more around managing our emotions, a second year of the pandemic and being “locked down” with our nuclear families. The Christmas holiday is the Australian version of Thanksgiving. Subject to border closures, families will be trying to celebrate with their families of origin.

Following quickly after the mental picture of a large family sitting around a full dining table, come different thoughts from the participants, such as:

“I wonder will my brother’s wife come or find an excuse not to”

“I will try not to get into an argument with my father this year”

“Hopefully, my sister does not drink too much and get angry and then cry”

“If my brother says what he did last year about my wedding I will scream”

The almost compulsory annual nature means we can feel obliged to attend and then have a year to mull over any slights or offences or difficulties in previous years. We start picturing it happening again shortly after it finishes.

I have just finished attending a two-day seminar on Bowen Theory and Family Systems which can help us see what is actually going on when adults in a family are forced together and expected to drink alcohol and enjoy themselves. Bowen Theory (unlike psychology which usually focusses on the feeling of an individual or a couple) treats the family as an emotional unit. This thinking is different and allows us to see anxiety as a natural part of a family system and to be less “blame orientated” when it inevitably appears.

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There are always family differences and hurt feelings leading to us being cut-off from those with whom we may clash, but social media pushes us further into our positions or corners. People are emotionally reactive, feelings run the family rather than principles, and mental health problems have increased. What can we do about the strong feeling that the other is at fault, is dangerous, foreign, and perhaps spreading Covid or other threats to our happiness?

This year some families will be further divided into those who are vaxxed and those who are not. We have our opinions echoed to us in our social media feeds. I am not an anti-vaxxer so have not seen most of the material that anti-vaxxers see. The same may apply to them. Yet, we are annoyed with the other side.

The last two years, I have seen the truism of “my health is your health”. Other people’s choices about their bodies can have a very quick negative impact on our bodies.

We know who is on our side usually. Primates and humans have been wandering around in small social groups for eons. Our tribal brain is designed to manage hierarchies, look for agreement, and distrust strangers. People would rarely meet another human and so in our more violent past those who were different were killed or left for dead.

For thousands of years, we could only trust the people that we associated with, which meant about ten adults and children, this small group formed our “pack.” As tribal people, living in caves for a few millennia—any new person we encountered would automatically be deemed the enemy. We have been programmed to react to differences, initially with physical violence but now with words or passive aggressive acts.

Humans have evolved and, if there is hope, can be expected to continue to evolve. In order to survive, we acquired the ability to grow food and we began to live in communal towns and villages. We needed to work together with other people for our own survival which led to our fear of strangers being minimised.

What we cannot see, we cannot deal with. For us to understand how we affect others and how they affect us, we need to become better observers of relationship dynamics. We can either linger in anger or learn to move past negative emotions when people let us down. Christmas gives us a relatively rare time to focus on accepting differences in our families, decreasing anxiety around blame and polarisations, and increasing our ability to cooperate with those who are not like us in order to overcome our biases.

Building better relationships with difficult people is very challenging. There may be ways of arranging the environment, the tables, and the chairs, to create enough distance for everyone to be able to have Christmas lunch despite their differences. When people fail to make meaningful efforts, they will revert to automatic ways of managing differences: distance and conflict being the most obvious.

Cutting off from family members threatens all our futures by decreasing co-operation and increasing divisions in our most valuable resource, our families. When families are torn apart with blame and hurt feelings, the possibility of working together to prepare and eat a meal seems impossible. Christmas gives us an opportunity to do this better.

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Will we pass on to our family members the negative or the positive aspects of having less than perfect family members at the table? What are the strategies that enable any of us to be around the people we are related to and should love but are dreading having to see? After all, there is no magic to this process. There is just working on self to overcome the tendency to cut off, and to refuse to sit at the table with the “other.”

Instead of building up tension to an inevitable burst of anxiety or anger, can we see that we have the same parents, a similar upbringing and much history? Can we acknowledge that none of us had much control over that and we are all thrown into a petri dish (thank you Covid) that is our family. Yes, one person may have said or done something repeatedly that causes annoyance but, as adults, we have the ability to be more neutral and not take the bait and be triggered into a reaction we regret and that escalates a dispute.

Bowen tells us the optimum position for each of us in a family to occupy is to balance the force of individuality with that of togetherness. Year round, we may veer to the former and then on holidays we are expected to prefer togetherness. Without having built the muscle for the latter, we can falter under the weight with negative consequences.

In addition to excess food and alcohol, there can be excess togetherness at Christmas.

If we can create a balanced atmosphere, the younger ones we force to join the occasion may see more mature behaviour modelled and be more likely to not repeat the follies of the past and develop better relationships with their cousins. Bit by bit, we can all evolve. As ever with evolution, it will not happen before our eyes or even while we have a snooze after lunch. But we can dream that it will start to happen on our watch.

Let’s look at the big picture and be the biggest versions of ourselves. To be a better ancestor¹™ is my wish for us all this Christmas.

¹ The author has written a book with the provisional title “Be A Better Ancestor” due for publication in 2022. He will use this as an excuse over Christmas to get some “individual” time and test his grandiose hypotheses.