

Families and Politics: Surviving Differences

By Dr. Serena Patterson and Monika Grünberg, RCC

He's Green. She's NDP. His parents used to be Socreds, and now they are Conservative Alliance members. Her parents don't vote. Can this relationship be saved?

There is nothing like an election to bring out the differences in some families. Even after it's over, the sorting out of winners, losers and disappointed hopes can leave a bitter sting that defeats good humour.

Serena had a grandmother who set a rule for her boisterous sons: no politics at family gatherings. The four brothers ignored the rule, and Serena's childhood memories of family gatherings are full of the uncles arguing loudly, her father the only Democrat, and his children valiantly defending him among the cousins. When her brother tore the "Nixon Now" bumper sticker off Uncle Jim's car, everyone was a little bit surprised that he survived to tell the tale. Yet these brothers still gather twice a year to tell stories, laugh, and, yes, talk politics. Clearly some families survive political differences.

One household Monika knows displayed two different party signs on their lawns during the last election – an example of living with party- political differences and taking it public. She was puzzled about why this isn't seen more often around town. After all, how do these disagreements in households get addressed? Who does get to choose the sign? Or is the implicit rule "no agreement, no sign at all?"

In everyday life, similarity is the basis of friendships and of group solidarity, and the ability to highlight similarities is the first tool of every skillful negotiator. It is easy to feel close when we agree.

But if similarities bring a sense of closeness, then differences can bring a sense of distance and discomfort. If someone whom we admire expresses an opinion very different from our own, we are left with a state of disequilibrium. Psychologists have called this "cognitive dissonance". It goes like this: "I like Susan, and I like myself. But Susan believes one thing, and I another, and we cannot both be right. Therefore, one of us isn't as smart as I thought. How could I have been so wrong about Susan?" Cognitive dissonance demands some fancy thought-work if we are to keep both our self respect and our friendship. It takes a certain amount of maturity and self-respect to hold on to both our confidence in my beliefs, and the connection to Susan. The more important the topic of disagreement, and the personal connection, the more painful cognitive dissonance can be. No wonder Serena's grandmother made the rule for her sons: in a family that valued both politics and family ties, these differences felt threatening indeed, at least, to her.

Living with differences is a learned skill. One place where many people practice this is with siblings. Siblings fight because they can afford to (they usually won't lose the connection), and because they can't afford not to (they are stuck with one another and need to work things out). It matters very much how the differences of siblings in childhood are managed in



a family; by adulthood, our sibling relationships are some of the deepest sources of support, or of pain, that we carry through life. “Blood”, said Serena’s grandmother, “runs thicker than water.” She wasn’t talking about genetics; she was talking about the value of permanence that allows, and requires, a relationship to be tested by differences. If we hide your differences in order to stay connected, then we end up in shallow relationships. Part of the meaning of family is a commitment to stay attached, to try to understand and to value the differences between us. It does not always work that way and it is this kind of acceptance we long for, try to create for our children and seek in the people we choose to call family throughout our lives.

With skill and faith in one another, differences eventually can make a connection between people richer. Talking about differences allows us to develop bonds between real individuals, irreplaceable because of their uniqueness. Differences can test a relationship, and in doing so allow us to reaffirm or to move beyond, ties that were once based upon simple common interest. Talking about differences can also help to stretch and develop better thinking and problem solving skills, more empathy for others, and a broader perspective in life. Sometimes (unfortunately not always) talking about differences leads to a new and novel strategies for attacking tough problems.

When the differences heat up or seem overwhelming, as they may at election time, it helps to keep them in perspective. Remember that no one has a crystal ball; when it comes to politics, we are all giving it our best guess based upon incomplete knowledge. Acknowledge common goals, and respect different theories about how to get there. Try to separate the political differences from personality or other issues that might be clouding the waters. Be honest with yourselves and with each other.

When political differences threaten a family, and perspective seems lost, it might be a good idea to seek professional help. The goal will not be to decide whose position is correct, but to refocus the relationship in a mutually appreciative direction.

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