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Honoring troubling family memories

By [David Beard](#) on Dec 2, 2016 at 11:36 a.m.



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Every holiday, until Parkinson's stole his balance, my great-grandfather spent hours assembling a trainset and Christmas village under the tree. It was recognizable as the family village, but the track curved differently each year. The church might be at the center of town or on a polystyrene hillside. As I grew older and more bookish than the rest of the family, a bookstore was placed in the shopping district, making my passion part of the family village. I don't think I'd ever been happier.

I think about my grandparents every holiday because I remember joys like a sip of a grasshopper, ice cream mixed with crème de menthe and crème de cacao. Sitting around the holiday table with family seen only once or twice a year, sadder memories are excavated. For every treat or hug at the right moment, other memories emphasize feeling judged, controlled, abandoned, ignored or just distant.



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My family is not the only one to feel this way. According to USA Today (Dec. 17, 2010), "Almost 60 percent of American adults say they had difficult childhoods featuring abusive or troubled family members or parents who were absent due to separation or divorce, federal health officials report." And using a tighter definition of abuse, "In a study of 1,000 women 15 years of age or older, 36 percent had experienced emotional abuse while growing up." (Women's College Hospital, 1995). No family has uncomplicated memories.

Around the table, we treasure some memories and work through the ones that sting. We assemble our memories the way my grandfather assembled the village under his tree.

Sometimes, we puzzle through the "why." We look for the reason that the woman who cooked our favorite macaroni dish when we were small was so distant as we grew up.

In a book called "Why?" Charles Tilly tells us that people offer several kinds of explanations for our behavior. Two seem useful here:

- Conventions, conventionally accepted explanations.
- Stories, an account of cause and effect in the heart and intentions of an individual.

When we sit around the table, our bellies stuffed with ham and potatoes, sharing memories that sting, we rub alcohol on the wound if we think of conventional explanations for actions. We see our loved ones as failing to live up to conventional expectations. We imagine that there is a way that the Christmas village should be assembled and we grow frustrated when grandpa didn't put the church in the right spot, atop the polystyrene hill, covered with flecks of plastic snow.

Story gives us something richer. Stories are not about "should," and a story cannot be judged against conventional expectations. A story can only be judged against lived experience.

Sitting around the table, sharing our memories, each of us sees the story differently. We see things we were not privileged to see when our loved ones were alive. Where one of us sees a mother who was distant from a son, the other sees a survivor who held her son as close as her own pain allowed. Where one of us sees a cousin whose addictions are like a hairshirt whose coarse fibers hurt both her and the people who want to hug her, others see a cousin whose addictions help her forget her trauma. Where one of us sees a father

who was cold, who never said I love you, others see love expressed as warmly as any man could, given the emotional climate of his own life. We piece together the Christmas village of our family memories with love instead of disappointment.

A friend reminds me that the people love you as best they can. As we construct the stories of our family, we see the love they offered and accept it, as much as we can, without judgement.

When we measure our absent parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, against conventions, we create a gnawing fear that our own love might be judged. In accepting the stories of absent family members' love, we create a safe space for our living family members to share their own stories. We create the possibility of treasuring each other all the more, accepting each other's flaws while we are still present to each other.



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