

branching out

Going home for the holidays can mean getting stuck in old family patterns—or growing into something new.

If you think you're enlightened, go visit your family. Ram Dass, the influential American teacher of spirituality, said that back in the 1970s. For Anne, who called me recently to confess her dread of an upcoming family gathering, it's more than just an ironic quip.

Every year, 50 members of her extended family—siblings, stepsiblings, children, stepchildren, grandchildren, and spouses—arrive at her father's ranch in Montana, each harboring a personal grievance, grudge, or rivalry with at least one other family member. Anne's mother can't say hello to Anne's sister without making a comment about her weight. Two of Anne's cousins are Scientologists, and another is a born-again Christian who believes that Scientologists are cultish Satanists. Even the yogis in the family disagree about one another's life choices. Anne's sister-in-law blogs angrily about a former teacher—who happens to be Anne's teacher.

Even the gatherings of relatively happy families can simmer like a *samsaric* stew, with everyone's issues bumping up against each other over drinks and dinner. Memories, rivalries, and disappointments are only a piece of it. More basic is the forced **encounter with parts of yourself** that you thought you outgrew years ago, and the equally insidious confrontation with the ideas that family members have about who you are. A family is not just a collection of individuals united by blood or marriage. It's a system, an entity of its own. Years after you leave home, the family system tends to pull you into itself even when you've sworn that this time you'll remain an island of loving detachment. So you revert to



your role as the family rebel, or the good kid who takes care of everyone else. (And that's just your family of origin! What to say about your in-laws and the roles they might have cast you into?)

Not all families are difficult or dysfunctional. But most families have their emotional minefields. If you always felt bossed around by your sister, you might still react to her suggestions with resentment, even when you know she doesn't



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intend to be bossy. If you and your father argued through your teen years, you may still feel the urge to defend yourself no matter what he says. Part of the difficulty is that as family members, we tend to think of each other as not having changed from the people we were when we lived together. How you were as part of the family system may have little to do with who you are today, but chances are good that many of your family members don't see that. A friend of mine relates that at one family gathering, she interrupted a conver-

None of us can help being influenced by how our family members perceive us.

sation between her father and brother to announce that dinner was ready. "Greedy as ever," her father said. My friend, who had been chunky as a kid, was so hurt that she spent the entire meal speechless with shame and resentment. As a child, she had reacted to being denied dessert by sneaking sweets and hiding candy bars under her pillow. Now slim, healthy, and something of a food disciplinarian, it took her weeks to recover from the recognition that, 10 years after she'd left home for college, her father still saw her as the daughter with no self-control.

It might have comforted her to realize that not even enlightened beings escape being seen through the prism of the family story. In *Autobiography of a Yogi*, Paramahansa Yogananda's great memoir of spiritual life, he describes the time the mother of his guru, Lahiri Mahasaya, came to visit Lahiri's ashram. She seemed compelled to keep taking her son down a peg. "I'm your mother, not your disciple!" she would say. To her, he was still the kid whose nose she'd wiped. My suspicion is that, at least occasionally, he fell into that role when he was with her. We all do.

FAMILY TIES

None of us can help being influenced by how our family members perceive us. The way you are seen and mirrored by

others will to a large extent create your perception of yourself, and this is never more true than in your family system. In other words, you grow up seeing yourself through the eyes of your family. Those early patterns become part of your internal wiring. So when you slip into the old roles, you are slipping into a consciousness matrix that you and your family members each hold in your individual emotional brains, and mirror for each other.

Your family members share not only blood and genes, but also values and response patterns—regardless of how much all of you may have changed or worked through the family stuff. "For me," a student told me, "the hardest thing is watching myself slip into the groove of the family temperament. Everyone in my family is cheerful on the outside and

filled with existential anger underneath. After an hour in their company, all I can see are currents of undirected rage shimmering in the air."

In my family, we routinely interrupt each other—a tendency I've carried into later life, as friends and colleagues often point out to me. But along with the normal discomfort of seeing your personal eccentricities mirrored by your family members, there can be more serious sources of discomfort at family dinners. Political and cultural differences, for example. One classic disjunction between yogis and their families is the culture gap. Perhaps you have parents with strong conventional values, or your siblings have turned into people whose view of life is radically different from yours. Maybe you're gay, and your family has a hard time accepting that. Maybe you have political or religious views that you have to keep to yourself in order not to wreck the atmosphere at dinner.

Even for those of us lucky enough to have a great relationship with our extended family, there are often layers of unspoken feelings, difficult issues, hidden resentments. The family dysfunctions can burst out during get-togethers, or, just as often, be hidden under a veneer of normalcy that can make such gatherings feel strained and artificial. If you see your

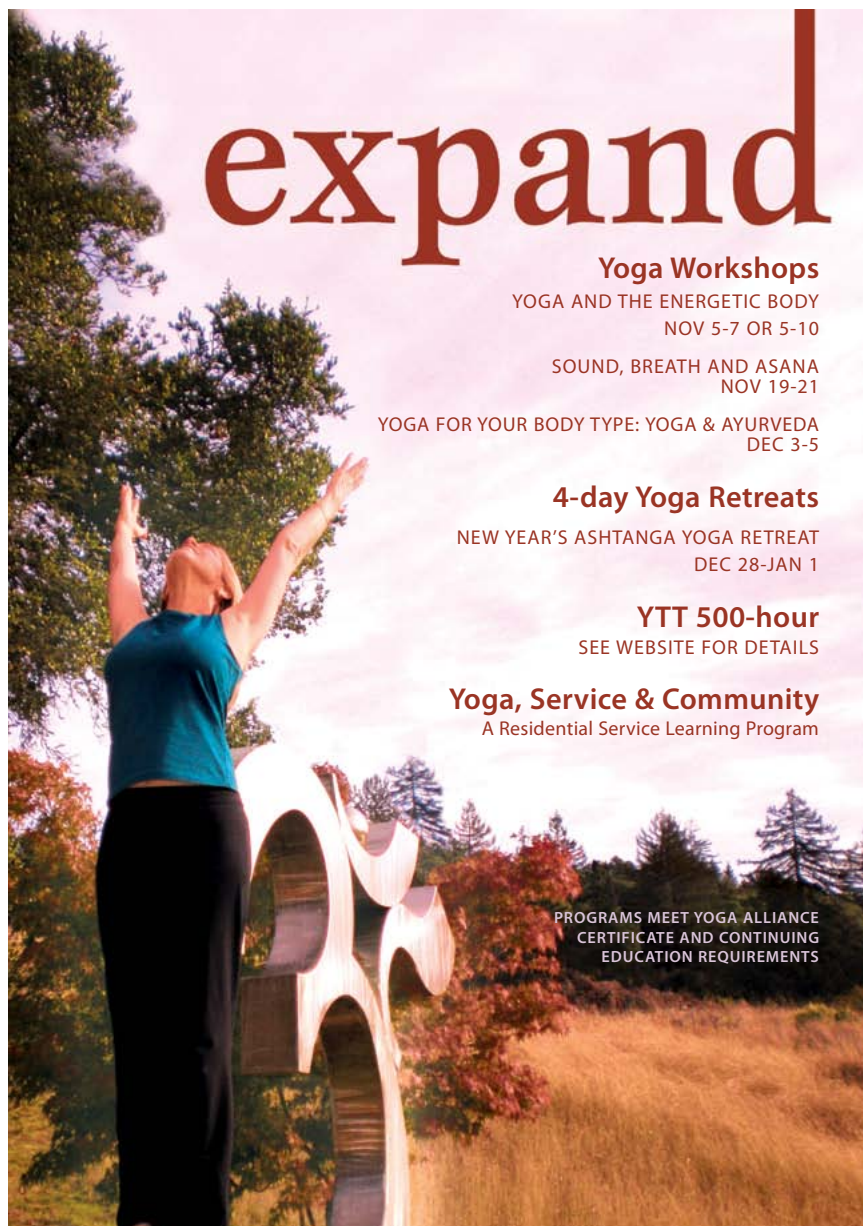
extended family only on holidays, it's possible to paste on a smile and skate through the occasion, knowing that you'll soon be able to leave. But at some point, most of us feel the need to evolve our relationship with our families. They are, after all, central players in our karmic drama.

DEEP ROOTS

No matter how different you may be from the rest of your family, you were born into this particular configuration of souls for a reason. Regardless of whether you accept the notion of karma, or believe in past lives, the truth is that your family relationships are part of who you are. You can break up with your romantic partners, even your spouse. You can quit your job and stop being friends with people you've grown beyond. But you can't divorce your family (though in extreme situations you may decide that it's better not to spend much time with them). And at some point it makes sense to learn how to turn them into allies of your growth.

At the very least, being with your family is a powerful spur to self-understanding. You may never get your father to approve of your sexual orientation or your spiritual choices, but you can learn a lot about yourself by observing your reactions to him. Every member of your family is a teacher. Some of them teach you through their good qualities. Some of them teach you through their mistakes. Even more important, your family members offer a mirror of the issues that confront you in this lifetime. They show you your strengths—the skills and competencies you came into this life having mastered. They also reveal your weaknesses, the wounds and triggers that you'll need to deal with sooner or later. A family gathering offers you the opportunity to understand something about who you are and what you need to work on. If you accept the fact that these people truly are your kinfolk—internally as well as externally—then they become teachers in the truest sense. They are the book in which you can read your own character and karma.

A friend of mine had a deep aversion to his mother. He couldn't spend time with her without getting depressed, and



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so he avoided her most of the time. At one point, a job took him to her city, and he had to live with her for a month. During that month he went through every shade of irritation and impatience. But he also began to recognize that some of the qualities he disliked about her were (big surprise!) also in him. His mother was a stickler for control and punctuality. He considered himself to be exactly the opposite—laid back, always urging everyone to get mellow and let things unfold. But while living with his mother, he found himself impatiently trying to get her to relax, and he suddenly began to see the inherent contradictions in his attitude.

He realized that his insistence that everyone relax and not worry was as much an attempt to control others as her anxiety about making plans and keeping things on schedule. And he began to recognize other traits they shared—some of them positive, others not so positive. Like his mother, he cared about helping the underdog. Like his mother, he loved gossip. Like his mother, he carried an undercurrent of

fear in his being. Recognizing both her positive and negative qualities in himself, he found that he could feel compassion for her—and even began to enjoy her company. When the month with his mother was over, a knot of inner tightness had been released that was so noticeable that his friends commented on it. By seeing the karmic, genetic heritage he carried, and accepting that what he saw in his mother was also in him, he loosened its power over him. One of the miraculous effects of accepting your family is that it helps you accept yourself.

FAMILY PRACTICE

So when you go to your next family gathering, see if you can look at each of your close family members and ask yourself the following questions: What do these people show me about myself? What do I have in common with them? What do they teach me about how to live?

Anne tried doing this with her family last year. Here's what she saw. Like her, most people in her generation are seekers,

looking for transcendence and meaning in some sort of practice tradition. They clearly share an interest in transformation. The members of her parents' generation were generally absent parents, but all their children—Anne's siblings and cousins—are deeply engaged with their kids. So they had all learned a new way to live, by committing themselves to changing one of the family patterns.

Anne's parents have a kind of gallantry and style that she still unconsciously emulates—making light of troubles in front of others and doing their best to make other people comfortable. And the whole family cares deeply about the Earth. There was more, of course. Anne and her sister still giggle about their starchy sister-in-law who can't stop criticizing Anne's more laissez-faire style of child rearing. They still roll their eyes when their brother makes remarks that reveal his Tea Party sympathies. But Anne also sees that she's as intolerant of her siblings' political positions as they are of hers (the common quality being intolerance) and that her

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sister-in-law's attitude challenges her to stand up for her own way of living.

TRAINING GROUND

What I often tell students who have problems with their extended family members is to think of their next visit as a training opportunity. Maybe you're training for freedom—freedom to be with your family without getting emotionally bent out of shape. Maybe you're training yourself to notice your own emotional triggers. Maybe you're training in compassion, or in letting go of resentment. Maybe, as one of my Facebook friends shared, you're being given the opportunity to be loving, without caring how your family responds. In fact, one of the best ways to approach a family gathering is to see it as a special opportunity for practice. Rather than go into it with expectations or dread, wanting to be recognized or loved by family members, or counting the minutes until you can leave, decide that you'll approach your family gathering as a practice experiment, an unparalleled opportunity to put

your yoga to the test. What follows are some traditional yogic practices that, when applied to family dynamics, can turn a family gathering into a practice of internal yoga.

offer service with a smile (seva)

Seva—selfless service or karma yoga—is one of the fast-track practices of yoga, offered in every tradition for its power to cleanse the heart, kindle compassion, and turn your karmic challenges into enlightened activity. What better arena for practicing it than with your family?

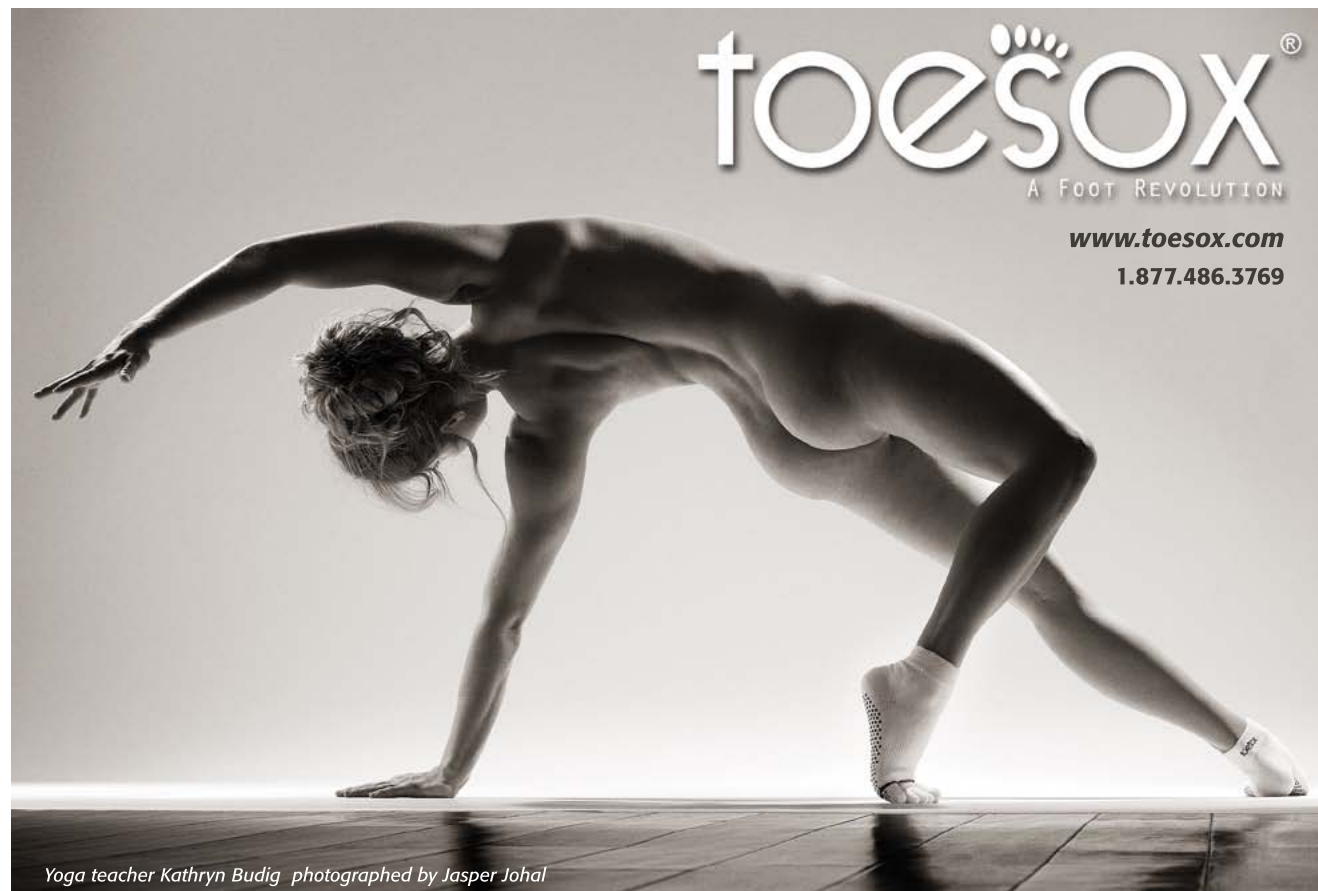
Randall is known among his siblings and cousins as the family saint. This tag is only partly ironic. He spends family gatherings doing his best to make other people comfortable. He talks to the kids, spends time with the deaf aunts, refills people's water glasses. Years ago, Randall realized that he needed to have a coping strategy for dealing with the intense feelings of alienation that he experienced when he was around his

family. Seva is what saved him. "When I'm doing my best to serve the situation, I feel positive, they feel positive. It just works," he says.

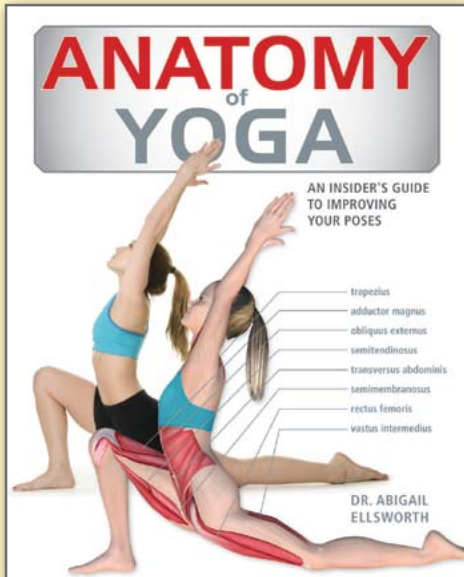
I understand what he means. Years ago, during a time when I felt estranged from my father, my guru invited him to visit the ashram. After I introduced the two of them, my guru turned to me and said, "Remember, he's my guest." Taking care of honored guests was one of my jobs

Approach family gatherings as an opportunity to put your yoga to the test.

around my teacher, and it was immediately clear to me that I was being shown the way through the difficulties between my father and me. Looking at him as an honored guest, trying to make him comfortable, serving him in different ways, made our relationship far less personal,



The advertisement features a black and white photograph of a woman, Kathryn Budig, in a deep yoga pose (Urdhva Dhanurasana) on a wooden floor. She is wearing white socks with small black dots on the soles. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. In the top right corner, the brand name "toesox" is written in a large, white, sans-serif font, with a registered trademark symbol. Above the 'o's in "toesox" is a graphic of a foot with dots representing the sole. Below the brand name is the tagline "A FOOT REVOLUTION" in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. Further down, the website "www.toesox.com" and the phone number "1.877.486.3769" are listed in a white, sans-serif font. At the bottom left of the image, the text "Yoga teacher Kathryn Budig photographed by Jasper Johal" is written in a small, white, sans-serif font.



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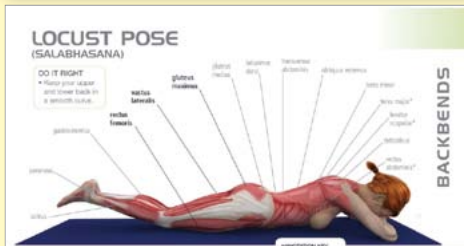
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so that instead of feeling resentful or hurt because he wasn't more emotionally present, I could interact kindly with him and enjoy him for who he was.

see beauty in the beast (inquiry)

In the yogic practice of inquiry, you ask questions aimed at taking you past your surface viewpoint, and into the heart of a person or situation. What is unique and beautiful about weird Uncle Al? Where do you think his wounds are? What might be the good intention behind your aunt's nosy behavior? Where does she hurt? Your work at this family gathering is to find a way to open your heart to that one relative you've never been able to stand. Sometimes that means looking for that person's great qualities. But you might also find that your heart opens to someone when you recognize their brokenness. Experiment. Look generously, acknowledging these people's greatness. Look lovingly, acknowledging their hurt. Notice how either viewpoint can change your attitude toward them.

hold your fire

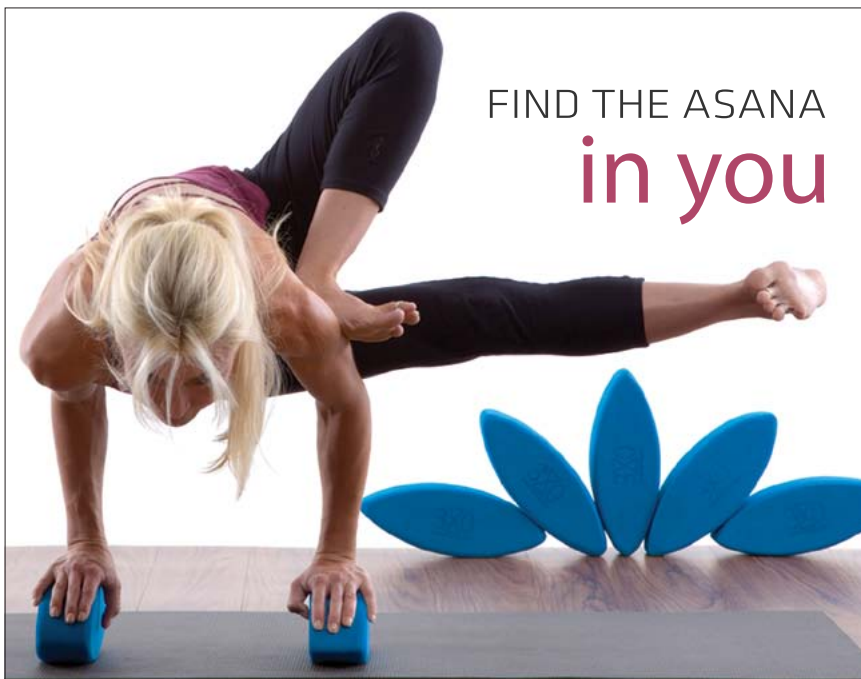
(mindful observation)

Mindful awareness is one of the key yogic practices for transformation. As painful as it can be, taking an honest look at what sets you off is one step to freedom. Be aware of your reactions as you step into the family circle. What happens to your body? What emotions come up? Notice the thoughts that cycle through your mind. Notice what you say and do. Is it reactive? Are you withdrawn? Friendly? Do your words feel authentic? Be aware of the thoughts that grab you. Then refocus. Become the knower of these thoughts and feelings. If need be, go into the bathroom, take some deep belly breaths, and tune in to the awareness that holds all this.

cultivate the opposite thought

(pratipaksha bhavanam)

This famous practice from the Yoga Sutra is the core tactic for changing your mind by changing your thoughts. Once you've noticed your reactive thoughts, you have a chance to turn them around. When you catch yourself thinking, "I can't stand



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the way Freddy chews,” quickly find an opposite, positive thought, like “I love Freddy’s sense of humor.” “These kids are driving me nuts” can become “Isn’t their energy wonderful?” Even if you don’t fully believe it, your effort to change your thinking will calm your stress hormones and might even inspire a feeling within of love or compassion.

give your blessing (positive intention)

One of the great practices of the devotional yogic tradition is the practice of offering blessing. So whether you feel loving toward your family members or not, start with the intention that your presence in the gathering will be a blessing. Then, whenever your glance falls on someone, send them a silent blessing.

A friend of mine tried this during a particularly gnarly weekend with her siblings and their spouses. At one point, a fierce argument broke out between her brother and sister. My friend kept repeating silently, “Blessings to Sara. Blessings to Rick.” A few minutes later, the two squabbling siblings looked at each other and started to laugh. “We’ve been doing this since we were six,” said her sister. “Truce?” My friend swears that it was the power of her blessing. We’ll never know. But one thing we do know: It didn’t hurt.

LESSONS LEARNED

Human beings need to make meaning—it’s simply how we are. When we have trouble with family members, it’s often because we’ve assigned painful meanings to our past or present encounters. If your father’s gruffness translated for you into the feeling of not being loved, or your mother’s anxiety created tremors of fear in your stomach, consider what these folks are teaching you. Is it about letting go of anger? Recognizing that we are responsible for our own feelings? Loving no matter what? Notice how your attitude shifts toward these people when you see them as a teaching pod rather than as the people who should have loved you better or done a better job with their lives, or as the group of people in whose presence you feel most self-critical or lacking.

Seeing your family as your teachers will immediately loosen your feelings of negativity. If the meaning of your relationships with family members is to learn, then no encounter is ever negative, because every one of them has something to show you.

DRAWING BOUNDARIES

Sometimes, with some family members, it’s important to keep your distance. There may be people in your family whose behavior is abusive or hostile, whose presence causes you so much pain that strong boundaries become imperative. When a family situation is truly toxic for you, staying away from family gatherings may be your best option. And even with less toxic situations, there are times when it may be important to keep some distance.

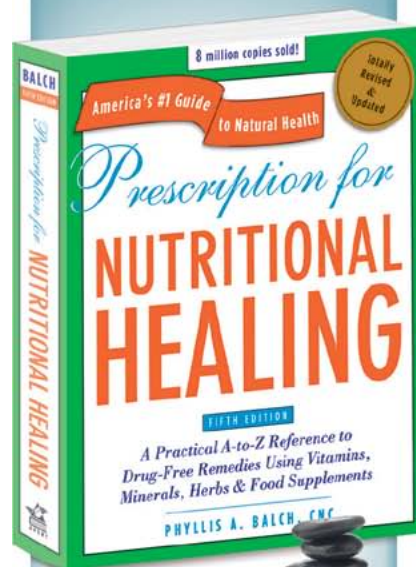
Ultimately, it’s our relationships that test our attainment, our maturity, our capacity for growth. More than that, they are our opportunity for healing. In the Jewish tradition, there’s a teaching that human beings come together for the purpose of *tikkun*, a Hebrew word that means “fixing.” In other words, relationships are the arena through which we fix what has been broken, not only between the two of us, but between human beings in general. Fixing doesn’t necessarily mean becoming best friends with every one of your family members. But in every family, there are streams of brokenness, unconsciousness, and grief that are passed on along with family gifts and wisdom.

Each generation has the power to shift something in the family heritage. Sitting across the table at Thanksgiving, toasting the bride at a family wedding, we can sometimes recognize what needs healing in the family line. And with every conscious recognition of the beauty and pain that each of your family members carries, with every opening into compassion, you heal a piece of that brokenness. Sometimes, one family member’s loving intention is just what is needed to make the crucial difference. ❖

Sally Kempton is an internationally recognized teacher of meditation and yoga philosophy and the author of The Heart of Meditation. Visit her website at sallykempton.com.

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