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Birth Order

I've read a number of articles over the years written by psychologists and anthropologists about their investigating the effect of birth order on personality and career selection. I probably was attracted at first by the memory of my sister Martha's insistence that she, as the "sandwich child" in our family, had a number of experiences that my brother, two years younger than she, and I, two years older, did not have. She claims that the middle child suffers by comparison to the oldest, who had the parents' undivided attention; whereas the third child is pampered as the baby but still allowed to participate equally in the activities of his older siblings.



Of course, my viewpoint frequently varied from hers. I don't remember feeling that she impinged on my status in the eyes of our parents but that she was considered equal to me in age and ability and was allowed to join me in activities that I had had to wait awhile for. I frequently wanted to "lead" her in her activities, but I was seldom able to do so. I remember fruitlessly urging her to take Spanish when she started to junior high school so that we could practice our Spanish together. Neither would she join me in reading some of my books that I would have enjoyed discussing with her. It was hard for me to believe that she did not have the same urges and likes that I had. Now, of course, I realize that she was just as much an individual as I was. While we played together happily frequently, she seldom followed my lead as the psychologists believe! She always gave the impression that being the "sandwich child" was not the most desirable position in a family. I don't know; maybe she feels differently about that position now. I know I had my shortcomings in leadership and have faced up to them, no longer feeling that she was deliberating thwarting me.



I do know how I feel about being the oldest of what eventually turned into a family of five children, with a considerable gap between number three and the twins, numbers four and five. I don't have any insight into how Brother (named Willett but always called Brother) felt about being the third (but first boy) in the birth order. And as far as the twins are concerned, the twelve-year gap between them and me makes for a totally different relationship. I always felt that their relationship with us first three was somewhat remote until they became adults, but I found their relationship to each other endlessly interesting without the closeness one ordinarily expects from twins, even fraternal ones. I know there were many years when I felt that I was a kind of parent to them instead of a pesky older sister.

According to the psychologists, number one is the leader of the family, developing a strong personality and feeling responsible for the younger siblings. I did indeed feel responsible for my younger brothers and sisters, but almost from day one, they each showed determined individualism and grew into positive, highly admirable persons. In fact, not only did we not look alike, but each of us had such distinct characteristics and abilities that we hardly seemed to have been influenced by the same genes and environment. In our adult years, when it has been necessary for us to act as a family, Martha has been the initiator and leader in ways that I could never imagine myself doing. Her handling the intricacies of settling our parents' estate after Mother's death was efficient and expert.

As a youngster, I fretted about the liabilities of being the first: I felt my parents were more protective of me and less likely to let me experiment in new activities. I especially remember my dismay when Brother was allowed to ride his bicycle to the other end of the block before I had leave to do so myself. And he was four years younger than I. Moreover, when he was eight or nine, he was allowed to have a newspaper route, a job I envied. Of course, that I wasn't permitted to seek such a job was probably more a function of gender typing than age.

On the other hand, Martha and I generally had the same privileges and opportunities, although I haven't consulted her opinion about that. I do know that she resented following in my footsteps in school because she was always compared to me. She did receive a kind of liberation when she went to the new junior high school, an institution that didn't open until the year she entered the seventh grade. I couldn't help envying her some of the courses she could take in junior high that didn't exist in high school and I didn't consider my greater age an advantage then. Moreover, petite, pretty Martha began dating before I did. Even after I was dating, she always had many more boy friends than I did. That sounds suspiciously like a bad case of sibling rivalry, but looking back, I don't feel that I was really deprived. After all, we were different.

When we both studied piano, I was unhappy that Mrs. Howell gave Martha piano pieces that had many runs and trills while I had pieces with heavy chords. When I asked for a piece with scales and runs, Mrs. Howell announced firmly that Martha was the "rippy" type and that I was the "muscular impulse," chord type. So, we were as different musically as we were physically and personality-wise.

Martha went away to college and I attended Southern Methodist University, living at home. I don't recall any feeling of deprivation from that difference. Indeed, I was happy that I had a scholarship and could get through college with working only in the summertime, whereas Martha had to make ends meet by living in a cooperative dormitory, where she must have learned many of the superior cooking and housekeeping skills that differentiate us today. Incidentally, she was also a more willing student of the household sciences than I ever was and was an apt student with our mother, while I was shirking household duties whenever I could.

I guess what this superficial analysis tells me is that, regardless of birth order, we five offspring developed at our own pace and in our own way, without undue influence on one another. I know I have admired my "little" sister for all her outstanding accomplishments just as much as I've admired my other sister and two brothers for their quite different accomplishments. Maybe age has something to do with my feelings. After all, two years' difference in Martha's and my ages in our mature years is considerably different from two years' difference when we were eight to eighteen. I can read the analyses of the influence of birth order on personality and accomplishments among brothers and sisters and say, "Well, maybe for some families, but not for ours!"