

## Do You Know Your Own Story?

by Margaret J. Marcuson

Learning about our own family story, and reflecting on how it impacts our leadership, can benefit us more deeply than any class, workshop or seminar. This may seem surprising, but we all learn how to relate to other human beings in the families where we grew up. We often default to the reactions we learned at home, especially when we are anxious or under stress. Over time we can learn to become less automatic and more thoughtful. It's not easy, but it's worth the effort.

For example, our sibling position contributes to our functioning in family and work life. Many leaders, especially in the helping professions, are oldest children (or functioned as oldest growing up, even if they weren't technically the oldest). Oldest children tend to be good at taking responsibility -- sometimes too much so. And generally speaking they, or I should say we, are not always as flexible as we might be in relating to others.

Other patterns may show up in our leadership as well. Some of them can enhance our leadership: a minister who comes from a family where sons are close to their mothers may find himself easily able to develop a relationship with the matriarch of his new church. I come from a family where people frequently move, going back generations. I adjusted quickly to a cross-country move for a new leadership position. Another leader from a family that is well-connected across the generations finds it easy to stay in touch regularly with staff, enhancing the work of all.

Some patterns can trip us up in our leadership. If your family had high anxiety about money over the generations, you may face additional challenges now. A family pattern of head-to-head confrontation can limit our repertoire when disagreements emerge. Likewise, a conflict-averse family can teach us to postpone difficult conversations or decisions.

These family patterns do not arise with one person or in one generation, and we can't address them overnight. It's a lifelong task to observe ourselves and learn about our families from an adult perspective, rather than the childish point of view we internalized early on.

Real, long-term work on the family issues which color (and sometimes hinder) our leadership can't be done in an afternoon. A skilled coach or therapist can offer help. (I also recommend the [Leadership in Ministry](#) workshop, which is not just for ministers.) But here are a few questions to consider:

Can I see how my leadership functioning is affected by my family story? What comes to mind first? What about my sibling position?

Who are the "insiders" and the "outsiders" in my family? What do I know about the outsiders?

What have people done for work over the last three generations? Are there any other leaders?

What gifts did my family give me for my leadership?

When we can become curious about what we do and what others do, both in our families and in our leadership setting, and become less automatic in our responses, we'll be more effective in all our relationships.

<http://www.margaretmarcuson.com/>