

IN OUR FAMILY, 'COMPROMISE' WASN'T A DIRTY WORD

BY DANNY HEITMAN, *FORUM* EDITOR



At a church fair a few years ago, I grew tired of the noise and crowd, but a few obligations kept me from leaving. Maybe, I thought

to myself, there might be a place where I could avoid the fray, if only for a few minutes.

A busy fairground full of concession stands and carnival rides was an unlikely place to find such a quiet corner. Some empty bleachers just beyond the festival seemed the best choice.

If the deserted stands promised a small remove from the bustle, then how much better, it occurred to me, might things be at the very top? That uppermost bleacher, hovering high over the bumper cars and popcorn machines, screaming youngsters and sunburned horde, looked as good to me as a pastoral cliff above an alpine village. How great it would be to be alone.

But trudging up the stands, I noticed a lone silhouette in the very spot I coveted. What ogre could have one-upped me? I surely wasn't about to fight him. He seemed as big as my oldest brother, a man of memorable size.

*Somehow, we made that sterling contradiction,
a family of loners, work for us.*

Then I realized that he *was* my big brother. Of a thousand souls gathered under a cloudless April sky, two – precisely two – had independently felt compelled to escape rather than embrace a large social gathering. These two aspiring hermits, perhaps not coincidentally, had also grown up in the same family.

By modern standards, it was a large one. Six children and two parents lived under the same roof, along with my mother's parents downstairs. I shared with most of my siblings a tendency toward shyness and reticence, a trait that runs deep on my father's side. Given our itch to keep our own counsel, how did we manage to make a go of it in such a full household?

Our mother, the gregarious half of our parents' marriage, deputized herself as social director, nudging us to connect with each other and the broad world beyond.

And though we kids might have often preferred what Virginia Woolf famously called "a room of one's own," life forced us to strike other bargains. We learned to share bathrooms and bedrooms, meals and long car rides. It wasn't always paradise, but as in any family, we learned to give and take.

I sometimes wonder if the lost art of compromise in our national life has been driven, at least in some measure, by the decline of such big households. When you grow up with so many people, I think you come to expect, in the interest of domestic tranquility, that you'll have to meet your rivals halfway.

This would have been an interesting thing to talk about with my brother as we sat in the bleachers a few years ago. Instead, we were mostly quiet as we stared at the throng below us.

Over the long years, we'd practiced sharing everything – even solitude.

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