

## Preface

Accurately or not, I've come to think of my natal family as operating like a force field, forcefully embracing the seven members and forcefully rejecting outsiders. Force should not be confused with intimacy; of that there was little. We were a 1950s suburban, White, upper-middle-class family with carefully delineated age and gender roles. And although we had our own quirks, we also structurally resembled most other families in the neighborhood: fathers worked outside the home; mothers stayed home; children went to school and played in the neighborhood; maids cleaned and looked after children. Each evening, after my father came home from his job in the city—and sometimes we picked him up in the (literal) station wagon as he got off the train—he had a drink. Then we ate dinner together. Some of us shared rooms and secrets; we did not share secrets across the generational divide.

Whatever the intimacy or lack of it inside, there was a clear line between who was in and who was out. We all had friendships outside the family, some of them very strong ones. Years later, I can still name most of my four siblings' best friends. But, aside from a live-in maid for a few years, no one else ever lived with us, and the comings and goings of outsiders were announced and predictable. We asked permission before we invited our friends to stay for dinner. Other children did not come in without ringing a bell or calling beforehand. My parents "entertained" other couples. I know my mother had close friends and I remember her talking with them on the phone. But neither they—nor the cousins, aunts, and uncles who lived in close proximity—ever simply dropped in. Family was family. Everyone else was a guest.

My four siblings have largely created the same kind of arrangements: all have long marriages and nuclear families with clear boundaries between family and "not family." Some of my siblings have had others live with them for brief periods. Most if not all of those "guests" have been members of the extended

family. Two of my siblings invite nuclear and extended family members to regular Sunday night dinners. None of us holds regular, even ritualized, dinners with friends. Years ago, when the parents of one of my son's friends died, my husband and I spoke to our children about whether we should ask this young boy if he wanted to live with us. When we broached that offer, he refused, saying that he did not know whether he could live in a family that ate dinner together every night. I think he meant that we had our own family force field. He was right. My husband and I had also created a carefully bounded family.

My fascination—one might even say obsession—with the topic of this book stems in part from its novelty to me. I have never had a relationship in which I could walk into someone else's house without at least a peremptory knock on the door. Although I have been very close to many people outside my family over the course of my life, I never really thought of any of those people as being "like family." The members of my natal family have been there for me during moments of casual need and serious distress, as I have been for them. Some have also been both critical of and hurtful to me, as I am sure I have been to them. These dual characteristics have made it unlikely that I would use family as a model for the relationships I create.

There is another aspect to my family's relationship to "outsiders," even more difficult to discuss. When I was an infant, my mother had three children ages four and under, a husband who was in the Navy in the South Pacific, and for a brief period during World War II a full-time job outside the home. She hired a live-in maid, a woman called Martha, a pseudonym I use here but also one my sister Emily and I used when we wrote about her. Martha was African American and the mother of two school-aged children. She moved from her home in Charlottesville, Virginia, to live in Washington, D.C. Some years later, she moved with us to the suburbs of New York. She stayed until I was in second grade. She had her own room and, as I recall, her own mealtimes. I loved her passionately. I do not know what my mother's relationship to her was, but a year or so after our mother's death, Emily and I wrote the following:

We were taught from a young age to view this relationship as a form of class and race exploitation. Despite her domestic arrangement, our mother was a leftist. One story illustrates the gulf between her politics and the reality of her life, as well as her desperate, sometimes bizarre attempts to close that gulf. When our mother died, we wrote to Martha. She responded with a long letter in which she reminded us of a time during grade school when one of us had brought home an African American girl who asked our mother whether Martha was our maid. Our mother had answered, "No, she's my cousin."<sup>1</sup>

Emily and I also wrote that "our family's reliance on Martha, our own deep attachment to her, and our mother's discomfort with the contradictions

of her life helped to shape [our] research agendas . . . when we became social scientists.” We both separately and together studied caregiving by family members and by hired caregivers.

In my work, I initially largely focused on childcare, dissecting the relationships that develop among providers, children, parents, and providers’ own families. I have also been interested in the enactment of reciprocity, that is, how people carry out obligations to family and friends in similar and different ways. More broadly, I am fascinated with families: I have written about how economic circumstances shape family life and how single mothers “do” family. I have also, most recently, written about how a sense of family is created through genetic links when children are conceived with donor sperm or donor eggs.

A distinct life-changing event led me to analyze again the border that defines family. In the fall of 2002, when she was fifty-eight years old, Anna Meyers (pseudonym), my friend and colleague of almost thirty years, was diagnosed with what would turn out to be terminal cancer. She had neither partner nor children. She was geographically and emotionally distant from her only siblings (two brothers) and was equally distant on both counts from her elderly parents. After considerable deliberation, she asked Louis (another friend of hers; this name is also a pseudonym) and me if we would take on the responsibility of durable power of attorney for her health care should she become unable to make her own health-care decisions. We both said yes.

For almost two years, our “durable power” remained an abstraction—a scary, albeit sensible, arrangement to be enacted at some later point. But after Anna fell, broke her hip, and began to fail mentally, Louis and I had to start making critical decisions. Eventually, with input from some of her other friends, we changed her designation at the hospital to “comfort care” with a do-not-resuscitate order and signed her up for hospice services. A month later, Anna died in her sleep.

For the three months between Anna’s fall and her death, I found it nearly intolerable to have to make these decisions. I did not think that, as a “mere” friend, I should have such authority. Nothing in my own family life had prepared me for acting as if I were family for someone who was not kin. I tried to analyze my unease in personal essays. I also tried to understand it through more scholarly analyses. Eventually, I decided to write this book. Although it does not answer all my questions or resolve my uneasiness, it has helped me make sense of how other people create relationships that are neither family nor friends, but something else entirely. And writing this book has helped me appreciate the creative generosity of the many people who have given me permission to tell *their* stories of the unique relationships in their lives.



**Like Family**

