

## What We Inherit From Our Parents

“Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”  
– Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*

Have you read Jonathan Franzen’s new novel, *Freedom*? It has the dubious distinction of being one of Oprah’s Book Club selections and receiving a devastating review in *The New Republic*. There being no such thing as bad publicity, the breadth of comment and reaction in many venues at many levels of criticism and approbation has it firmly ensconced on the New York Times best seller list.

The main plot, the trainwreck of a marriage between Patty and Walter Berglund and all the collateral damage caused to other family members and friends, I will leave to your reading. The Berglunds are liberals during the George W. Bush administration and raise a family, have affairs, destroy relationships and generally wreak havoc. As Ruth Franklin, writing for *The New Republic* says, *Freedom* is a “The Way We Live Now” novel in which, as in Trollope’s novel of that title, the perfidy and moral vacuity of the age are laid bare. “Mistakes were made.”

Near the end of the book, Patty Berglund’s mother, Joyce, is trying to make an estate plan. She is a widow, and owner of a family “estate” her husband inherited from his father. Spoiler Alert: The story that follows about Patty’s family is near the end of the book. You may want to wait and read the book. On the other hand, in truth, this particular vignette has precious little to do with the rest of the book; and you won’t really be spoiling anything.

What is Joyce’s problem? Her children and other family members are pressuring her. Her son Edgar, his wife and numerous children live in the “estate” which has fallen into grave disrepair. They live there rent free, of course. This son has produced Joyce’s only grandchildren. He threatens that he, his wife and the precious grandchildren will relocate to a settlement on the West Bank in Israel if he doesn’t get his way. Patty’s two sisters, Abigail and Veronica, who were the favorites while Patty was growing up, have failed to become “self-supporting” and count themselves entitled to mother Joyce’s support. Patty hasn’t been part of the family for years - since the first Thanksgiving after she married Walter. Now she is back in the picture trying to broker a deal. But of course, she and her children aren’t in line for part of the inheritance - she has been the family black sheep for too long.

Also in the picture are Joyce’s two brother-in-laws. Her husband received the family “estate.” from his parents. The other two brothers were left other assets in the will but, regrettably, these declined in value and were worthless when they were inherited. Joyce feels they may have a “moral claim” on part of the family estate.

What is the inheritance here? False claims of entitlement, emotional blackmail, long-held grudges, greed, and jealousy. Who is the property owner? That would be Joyce. Does any one care, does anyone even ask, what she wants? Joyce is paralyzed by the conflicting demands, so does nothing. Which is always making a decision in itself. By doing nothing she is choosing to let New York’s

intestacy statute apply, dividing the estate equally among the four children. And who is to say that is not the best thing?

From generation to generation: what is the legacy for Patty and Walter's two children? That selfishness and cruelty continue down the family tree? That people are really "selfish and shortsighted and egotistical and needy."

Will Walter make sure that his children get the lake cottage he inherited from his mother? Will one of the children demand that they get all of it - cutting off a sibling in juvenile rivalry?

And you, what will you do with your estate? Are you avoiding making decisions because you know the children will be "unhappy." Are you planning your dispositions secretly, so the bomb will go off after the funeral when the will is read? It's interesting that Franzen's book is entitled *Freedom*. What you leave to your family is, after all, your free choice.