

# Looking at Families

BY MAILE JONES



## What is a family?

Almost any definition we could come up with would be either too simple or too lengthy. More interesting questions might be: How can we come to understand a family? Can we take a few steps back in order to look at family patterns? What kinds of tools are there?

When it comes to families, at lot of people in the Worcester area think of Zelda Schwartz, LICSW, BCD, past director of Jewish Family Service in Worcester. Zelda has had a long and distinguished career, but that's not what she'd say about herself. She'd say she is a person who likes to listen to stories and tell stories. She likes to help other people figure out their stories. This is her approach to family therapy.

"I don't know what a family is," says Zelda Schwartz. "Families now are a very complicated package. There is no single way to define family other than people who care about one another, or alternatively, people who don't care about one another, are very disconnected, and cause each other great pain even though they are biologically attached."

## The Immigrant Generation

Real Women Press asked Zelda Schwartz about ways to shed light on our families. To start with, Zelda tries to discover where people are stationed in

the history of their family. "How many generations back was the immigrant generation; who had the courage and spirit to come here? That generation didn't speak the language — expecting them to speak the language is probably not particularly realistic — but hoped that the second generation will. The third generation is the educated generation.

The story of where the immigrants came from and what they were hoping for is so important in our lives. Most of us carry the wish or the dream of some generation before us."

On the other hand, Zelda points out, immigrants are often frightened and therefore insular. What are the consequences of that fear? "One of the stories I have followed," Zelda says, "is the legacy of fear." Zelda describes a Jewish immigrant family who arrived at time when there was a lot of discrimination and anti-Semitism. Because they were so frightened, this generation told their children not to date anyone who wasn't Jewish. "As with other waves of immigrants, there were quotas for Jews and many places they weren't welcome. Imagine how scary that would be for parents who didn't want their children to be hurt? That generation kept to their community and developed a kind of phobia.

"It helps people to be aware of the stories of different generations and how they can cause a breach or disconnect between the generations," Zelda says. "Changing cultural opportunities open up belief systems. The openness has to be terrifying to the immigrant generation. Currently I know of a family, for example, where the parents are the immigrants and their 40ish gay daughter is about to have a commitment ceremony. The parents don't know what to do with that."

## Belief Systems

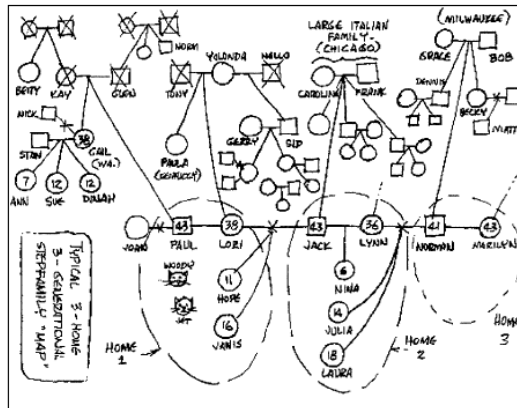
"In my work I ask questions that look for belief systems," Zelda says. "A belief that certain things are important is passed down generation after generation. The way a family observes a holiday, for example, or Sunday dinner."

"A friend told me about Sunday night pasta suppers at her grandparents' house. It inspired me to reflect on the belief system where my mother had a family dinner every single Sunday. We sat in the dining room and she prepared this lavish, delicious meal. Meanwhile, I had friends waiting outside on their bikes. So I never served Sunday dinner, and now when I look back on it as an older person

stillbirths, children out of wedlock, people who have been erased, really anything you want, depending on the questions asked.

"The most interesting thing for me in using the genogram is how secrets emerge," Zelda says. "Secrets are usually about trauma and loss; the complicated relationships I think people have to come to terms with. Hopefully the genogram is used in a sensitive, healthy way so that it is safe to look at the fact that you had a brother who was retarded or an uncle who committed suicide, for example. It helps to know where to put them so you don't feel shame.

"We can learn a lot from our losses in terms of developing our own com-



with grandchildren I'm always amazed that my kids are so busy on Sundays. I think oh, I should have served pasta! I gave it up because I didn't like it in my generation, but now I'm thinking wouldn't it be nice to see my grandchildren a little more often on a ritualized basis.

"It's fascinating to listen to what gets carried on, who helps it, who develops it, who designs it, and who runs away from it. There's no right and wrong, it's just interesting to see how people operate with ritualized observance. That's the stuff that offers cohesiveness in the family or pulls a family apart. It used to be that people didn't question rituals, but now there is more diversity in families so those belief systems are more examined."


## Genograms

A genogram is a graphic tool for charting relationships and examining patterns in families. Sometimes it helps to see things visually. A genogram can graph and track marriages, divorces, adoptions, miscarriages,

penalties and reaching out and making relationships with substitute families and other communities that can offer some sort of connection. If it can't be with your family of origin then you create an alternative one with a loving connection that will mean something.

"The way you choose to understand the genogram is the thing that gives you peace of mind and helps you celebrate and honor yourself and the people of your family. The most important way to use it may be to identify and honor the strengths in a family so that you know what resources can be called on when help is needed. Even the saddest story can lead to a reframe that says, 'without those supports, look what you've been able to do using your own strengths!'

"Families give us our backgrounds, give us structure and safety; or they can stifle, close, dampen, and disconnect so that there is no room for all the different stories. Our stories are the picture frame in which we sit. We have the right to know our own story."



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