

The Genogram

by Eve Nicol

It can be found on the stony, time-worn walls of the earliest versions of man. It is meticulously maintained in the crumbling wasp-wing-thin pages of the most prolific of family bibles, Torahs, or Scrolls. It is hanging from a thousand grade-school walls. Thick primary colored leaves dangle from bare paper branches: the family tree. The genogram, its conclusion. The rough sketch to the Renoir.

Before we can understand the importance of the genogram in the study of cyclic or repetitive behaviors within the family system, we have to understand its basic nature. Genograms in *Family Assessment*, by Monica McGoldrick and Randy Gerson, define it as "a format for drawing a family tree that records information about family members and their relationships over at least three generations. Genograms display family information graphically in a way that provides a quick *gestalt* of complex family patterns and a rich source of hypotheses about how a clinical problem may be connected to the family context and the evolution of both problem and context over time."

We have to be careful to not confuse it with its simple family tree origins, as a tracker of who's who within the family lineage, for a genogram tells you not only that Uncle Bob and Aunt Rosy had 3 children, but that one was adopted, that Uncle Bob was a manic-depressive, an alcoholic, and a poet while Aunt Rosy has a sister she hasn't spoken to for years, is continually unfaithful, and has asthma. I compare it to the act of drawing. Sketching an old and familiar room in your home, you are forced to view things you might never have noticed before: that gossamer cobweb in the corner, that razor-thin crack spreading along the south wall, that moss-green crayon mark made by your two-year-old. Wow. Who knew so much could be hidden in things we know so well.

Virginia, a close friend of mine and a contributor to *Pact*, has been plagued by depression and a feeling of not belonging, both within the borders of her family and in society at large.

After years of therapy, she comes across a therapist who works with genograms. After several sessions with both family members and therapist, the two women are finally able to compile a remarkably in-depth "sketch" of Virginia's family for the past five generations. What most strikes Virginia, a Caucasian mother of three adopted children of differing nationalities, is that the women in her family have a history of infertility and of raising children not only whom they did not bring into the world but also of different nationalities in times when this was far from common. In listening to her, I'm thinking, wow, sounds like a neat family, but earth-shattering? Obviously no one else thought so, for it was never discussed; but for Virginia, it was The Big One. Coming from a strict Protestant background, she learned at an early age that to be different was to be rebellious. You did not call unnecessary attention to yourself unless you are defective in some way, desperate, breaking away from the team, the family unit. Hence, although she loved her children more than life itself, their existence was a red flag drawing down on her head the bull of her family's perceived disgust.

Why this subject had never been initiated or discussed by a relative, she will probably never know. Blame it on the hustle-bustle of everyday life, the hectic roller coaster ride that leaves no time for getting off, for spending those extra moments with the friend or family. Was there a string tied around somebody's finger as a reminder to get around to it? Whatever the reason, or lack of one, there will always be things out there that we are just not seeing, mostly due to the lack of looking. Just as we know the country's system — that we are children of democracy and free speech and capitalism and its effects on how we think and behave — we should know our family system. The genogram offers us an opportunity to take control of our story, to force the ghosts out of the knot holes and to shake the secrets from the branches. This is the only way we have to stop the vicious cycles and to gain empowerment and self-understanding from the not-so-vicious positive cycles.