

# Thy Will Be Done

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**Family unity is frequently the second casualty when a parent dies as disappointed siblings fight over the spoils. Do your kids a favor – and preserve their good memory of you – by resolving inheritance issues now rather than later.**

The distinction between equality and fairness is never sharper than when siblings gather to hear the reading of the will. In the blink of an eye, idealistic concepts concerning parental love and familial loyalty are shattered as the family ne'er-do-well receives the lion's share of the estate.

Instead of the money being distributed equally among siblings, it lands in the lap of the person who seems least deserving.

While parents can justify such a decision, their children probably won't be quite so generous or understanding in their views and a family crisis is certain to ensue.

For Dr. Steven Hendlin, ([www.hendlin.net](http://www.hendlin.net)) a clinical psychologist in Newport Beach, California, and author of *Overcoming the Inheritance Taboo: How to Preserve Relationships and Transfer Possessions* (available at Amazon.com), the issue of equality and fairness is a recurring theme whenever a death occurs.

"Past resentments with siblings come into play at this time. That's what makes the inheritance drama so powerful. When the kid who has struggled through life receives a larger piece of the pie, siblings are going to ask, 'Why is mom rewarding Johnnie for being a loser?' In their minds her decision is unfair and certainly unequal, but she did what she thought was right. If you ask them why they're arguing with each other, they'll say, 'I want to make sure everything is fair.' They don't realize that all the past conflicts between them are once again unfolding."

Few families escape the trauma accompanying the business of inheritance – a trying time when expectations are seldom met and old wounds often resurface.

The emotional response to death varies greatly from person to person, but it is especially intense among children grieving over the loss of a parent.

According to Dr. Hendlin, children feel a primitive need to maintain a connection with the parent. They do so by fighting over money, and battling for possessions.

"You have to get past the dollars and cents issue," he says, "and recognize that the relationship with the parent is being played out again. There is rhyme and reason to what's happening. It's not simply a matter of greed."

Far too often, Dr. Hendlin has seen love for a parent transform into hatred following death.

He cites the example of a woman who cared for her ailing mother with the promise of receiving financial reward, only to see that money go to siblings who were absent during the illness.

Her sense of devotion gave way to feelings of anger, resentment and even loathing.

Guilt followed as she contemplated her change of attitude to a once beloved parent. Only through self-examination says Dr. Hendlin, can such conflicts of conscience be resolved:

"People need to realize that no matter what promises were made, it's important to understand their motives for helping. Was it done out of a sense of love and service, or in hopes of a payoff? I attempt to focus people on the true motives for their care giving."

According to Dr. Hendlin, many of the problems associated with inheritance could be avoided if people were more accepting of their mortality.

Estate planning, while highly recommended, is seldom executed.

Dr. Hendlin decries the ambiguity that so often accompanies wills, astutely pointing out that conflicts are less likely to arise when last wishes are clearly articulated.

"If people dictate how their money is to be distributed, the beneficiaries are less likely to make an issue. Unfortunately, people don't like to deal with their estate when they're healthy, and when they're ill they're too focused on treatment and medication to think about it. The best move for all concerned is to decide who gets what when you're still healthy and mentally alert."

## To Have and to Have Not:

Try guessing the outcome of this true-case scenario: Since adolescence two children have been promised that they'll each receive half the family fortune, only now their mother has experienced a change of heart, and at 94, alters her will, leaving the entire estate to her daughter. Why? She doesn't like her son's new wife. He's unaware of what's transpired, but his sister is positively gleeful, and swears to abide by her mother's wishes.

Apprised of the circumstances, Dr. Hendlin advises that the daughter:

1. Declines to respect the judgment of a 94-year-old, whose thinking is likely impaired.
2. Acknowledges that no amount of rationalization can camouflage her greed.
3. Reverses roles, assuming the part of her brother as a way of understanding what a devastating impact exclusion from the estate will have.
4. Demonstrates flexibility and wisdom by dividing the estate as originally intended.