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“Personal Stories: Accepting the Gift-As Is”

A Conversation with Molly Stranahan

Based on an interview with Pamela Gerloff

My grandfather and father set up trusts for my generation when we were small, as an estate and income tax avoidance device. When I received my first trust at age 18, my immediate reaction was to find out how much money, in total, would be coming to me. I wanted to know how much I could spend without running out of it before I died. That's when I learned there were other trusts, which I would receive at ages 21, 30, 35, and 40. Knowing this, I financed my college education and gave myself a yearly "allowance."

Receiving money at a young age led me to choose economics as my major, and later, to work in a bank, where I eventually became a trust officer. I wanted to know how money worked. In time, I was allowed to read the trust document for my inheritances, which is when I discovered that there had been misinterpretations of one of the trusts. I pointed this out at a family meeting, for which I had prepared a presentation about my generation's trust documents. My uncle (a lawyer and a member of the bank's board of directors), said, "We'll have to have a lawyer look at that to see if you are right."

I interpreted his comment as a lack of respect for my expertise. After all, my employer paid me to interpret trust documents, and I had even testified in court as to what trust language meant.

This was one of a number of incidents in which I felt that I was not considered an equal to my father's generation. I have since learned that when money comes through family connection, there is often some family "baggage" that comes with it. This was part of my baggage.

When I was in my 20s, we began to have two or three family meetings a year to discuss our investments and handle the business of our foundation. After awhile, we began to experience tensions between the generations. The younger generation felt that the administration of the trusts was controlling and infantilizing. The older generation felt the younger generation was greedy and couldn't be trusted to handle the money well. Finally, around the time of the sale of Champion, we realized that we needed to separate "business" from other family issues, and we agreed to hire some consultants to help us work out our differences.

During our first try at it, we broke into small groups to discuss several questions the consultant had prepared for us. I don't remember what those questions were, but I sure remember one of the answers my grandfather gave in our group. He said, point blank: "I don't think it has been a good thing for your generation to inherit money, so I don't plan to give you any more." When we reported this back to the large group, the two members of my father's generation who don't have children echoed his sentiment, saying: "We don't feel a need to pass the money on to our nieces and nephews. We can spend it better than you, so don't expect anything from us either."

This forced a dramatic change in our expectations. The message we had always gotten from the family was not to be so impatient to have control of the money—we would be getting a lot more in the future. So I felt as if I were being disinherited.

I felt hurt and angry, and on the way home from that meeting I cried, as I wrote down my thoughts and feelings: "It is natural to leave your assets to your descendants. Therefore, I must have failed my grandfather in some way for him not to want to leave me money. He thinks I am not responsible or worthy. He must not love me." I discovered that I had the belief that if my grandfather didn't want to leave me money, it was because I had not proved myself worthy and I was not good enough.

When I got home I shared my feelings with my husband and he noted that he could see some validity to my grandfather's view. Some members of my generation were addicted to drugs. Some had never had a full-time job. Some simply were not responsible, perhaps because having money meant they didn't have to be.

At two intense retreats focused on separating "family" from "business" issues, we explored together our expectations and feelings. My grandfather explained that he wanted to give the rest of his money to other places, including charities and his new wife and her children and grandchildren. I came to accept that this was his choice, and to believe that it was not a personal judgment about me. He also told us that he believed everyone in a particular group should be treated equally. He didn't think it was right to say to one of his grandchildren, "You deserve money, but your brother doesn't," so he chose not to give any more money to any of us.

As I looked at the situation from my grandfather's perspective, I concluded that his belief could be legitimate. Though I felt I was being punished for the self-destructive behavior of others in my generation, I concluded that my grandfather had a right to do what he wanted with his money. Just because I believed that if you inherit money, you should pass it on in the family, that didn't mean my grandfather's beliefs were wrong.

I also realized that my grandfather had been feeling that my generation was unappreciative of the trusts he had already given us. He had been interpreting our anger at the way the trusts were being administered as ingratitude for the gifts he had bestowed on us. Once, he mentioned that few of us had ever sent thank you notes for the \$100 birthday checks he regularly sent us.

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I decided to let my grandfather know how much I appreciated all he had done for me. I began to send thank you notes, birthday and Christmas presents, and Father's Day cards. I think it meant something to him. I still have a note he wrote one year, thanking me for sending a Father's Day card. Through this mutual effort, we developed a caring relationship, and I let go of believing that if he didn't give me more money, he didn't love or appreciate me.

I have learned that money often brings with it other "baggage," but that baggage can be turned into "gifts," if one has that intention. My family made the effort to understand each other better. I made the effort to understand my grandfather. In doing so, I learned to accept the money that came to me as the gift that it really was. Accepting both the gift and the giver "as is," gave me a closer relationship with my grandfather. Talking about the feelings that occurred because of the money allowed us, as a family, to discover common values and work together to achieve our family mission: to make the world a better place for those who have been hurt by the economic system that has so benefited us.

Molly Stranahan's great-grandfather co-founded, with his brother, Champion Spark Plug Company, which went public in the 1950s and was sold in 1989. Ms. Stranahan has served on the board of the family's foundation, the Needmor Fund, for more than 20 years. She is also a psychologist and originator of the program, "The Path to Happiness." Her volunteer service to charitable and personal growth organizations includes acting as a coordinator for the Summer Institute, an annual program for inheritors.

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