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My Rivals, My Solace . . . My Sisters

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By Deborah Tannen
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"We're like sisters," women say of their friends, meaning they're very close and completely for each other, like the friends in "The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants." But then there's the moment in Edward Albee's play "A Delicate Balance" when a husband says that his wife and her sister "are at each other like a couple of . . ." and his daughter finishes his sentence: "Sisters?"

For each other, at each other: Sisters can be either or both. The same could be said of people in any close relationship. Yet there is something special about sisters -- specially gratifying and specially fraught.

I am a linguist who studies how conversation shapes relationships. I am also the youngest of three sisters -- a defining aspect of my identity. So I decided to study the relationships among sisters, not only because I have two, but because sisters typically talk a lot. They tend to talk to each other more than they talk to their brothers and more than brothers talk to each other, and they tend to get more personal in their conversations. I interviewed more than 100 women about their sisters -- and I couldn't help steering many casual conversations to this topic as well.

Once, at a party, a woman enthusiastically extolled her relationship with her sister. "When we meet we can't get enough of each other," she said. "She's my lifeline. I'm her lifeline." I wanted to learn more about this wonderful relationship, so I arranged to include this woman in my study.

To my surprise, when we later met for the interview, she began by telling me that she'd recently gone a year without speaking to her sister.

She and her sister had inherited a two-apartment building from their parents; each owned one unit. She had wanted to sell hers but had tabled the idea because her sister wasn't ready to sell, and she knew that the value of her sister's apartment would fall if she sold hers separately. Soon after, she left for an extended trip abroad. When she returned, she discovered that her sister had changed her mind -- and sold her apartment. Now her own apartment had plummeted in value. Her anger and hurt were so great, she could not bear to speak to her sister. But after a year she decided to let it go. She had only one sister and did not want to lose her.

The ideal I had heard about at the party was real, but it wasn't the whole story. A sister owns part of what you own -- a house, perhaps, or a less tangible legacy such as memories of your childhood. The way she manages that shared inheritance can raise or lower its value for you, or call its value into question.

A sister is the one person you can call in the middle of the night when you can't sleep, or the one who doesn't want to hear about your problems unless you're ready to do something about them. She's the one who is there when you need her, or the one whose absence when you need her hurts the most. She's the one you can brag to, or the one you'll never tell about your triumphs because she'd be jealous.

Among the many women I interviewed, I heard about a vast range of sister relationships, from best friends to worst enemies, but most were a combination of closeness and competition -- and the balance evolves over time. The one constant was comparison.

Renee and Jill are sisters who grew up in Washington. Renee, the older, had attended Spelman College in Atlanta, whereas Jill had attended Howard University and had lived at home. Though her sister and an older brother had gone to college out of town, when Jill's turn came, their mother lamented, "I'm not going to have anybody here!" She promised Jill a new car if she stayed home. Howard University was fine, Jill said, but she envied her sister and brother because "they got to go away." Renee pointed out that their mother had been the one who suggested that Renee apply to Spelman.

It's not that their mother capriciously encouraged one and discouraged the other from following the same path. The order of their birth made going to college a different act for each of them. There is no equal protection clause in the family constitution.

We all feel wistfulness or regret about roads not taken. But if a sister took the road we rejected, or a road we never had the chance to travel, we are continually reminded of the destination to which it led. Differences in where you end up or in the opportunities you had may seem unfair, because you were born into the same family. But that's an illusion; it's a different family when each child is born. A sister is like yourself in a different movie, a movie that stars you in a different life.

Some differences flow from choice, not chance. A woman asked her older sister, "Did you ever wonder why I played the bagpipes?" "No," her sister answered, "why did you?" The younger replied, "Because you didn't."

Sometimes it's the older one who wants to distinguish herself. When I was small, I was often dressed the same as my sister Mimi, who is two years older. I liked that, but Mimi didn't. When she saw that I had on the same clothes that she was wearing, she'd change into something different. If I changed my clothes to match hers, she'd change again.

If I wanted to be like my older sister, she wanted to be like . . . herself. We all seek to figure out and show the world who we are. Having a sister adds an extra image in the mirror. Understanding who you are means discovering who you are in relation to her. And to find your place in the world, you need to know how close to or far from your sister you want to stand.

Closeness is the holy grail of sister relationships. I frequently heard, "I wish we were closer," but never, "I wish we weren't so close."

When her older sister Jeanne was in her 80s, Colleen Miller and her husband had her come live with them so they could take care of her. Colleen described a scene: "George would get up and he's out getting breakfast, and Jeannie would poke her head in the door, and I'd say, 'Come on in here.' She'd say, 'No I'll just --' 'Jeannie, come over here.' Then I'd pull her down in the bed, and she'd lie down beside me and I'd hold her hand. We'd lie there and we'd start to talk and we'd laugh." This scene has remained with me as a symbol of closeness: two elderly sisters lying in bed holding hands, laughing and -- the bedrock of women's relationships -- talking.

In the spirit of eternal comparison among sisters, each one's character or personality is often contrasted with the other's: the outgoing one and the shy one, the scholar and the athlete. And comparison is never far from competition.

Among the many categories by which sisters are sorted, most regrettable are "the pretty one" and "the smart one." And by some strange alchemy, a compliment to one sister can feel like a slight to the other.

"My mom will often tell me or my sister that we are beautiful," my student Genesee Herzberg wrote in an essay. She added that when she hears her mother say this to her sister, "I immediately feel like I must look ugly."

And when her parents praised Genesee for her grades, her sister would later complain Genesee was "the smarter, better sister -- and more loved." That is what all the comparisons come down to: Who is more deserving of love?

"When I'm around my sister I feel like a child again," many women told me, "and I act like one too!" No matter how old you are, it can hurt to be hurled back to a time when you felt inadequate because your sister was smarter or prettier, or when you felt invisible because she was older and more capable or younger and more adorable. As one woman put it: "When I'm with my sister, every insecurity comes back. It's hard to feel the strength of my light in the glow of hers."

But feeling like a child again can be one of the joys of being around sisters. It's a delight to be called by your childhood nickname and be silly together like when you were kids -- because somewhere inside, that kid is who you really still are. With a sister, you can drop the mask of adulthood that you show the rest of the world.

Talking to so many women from so many different ethnic and regional backgrounds, ranging in age from the teens to the 90s, helped me see that there are as many ways to be sisters as there are ways to be. That insight comes alive to me with my own two sisters. I adore them both, though they are very different from each other and from me.

I sent copies of the draft of my last book to both my sisters. Naomi, the oldest, read it and sent me detailed and helpful comments. Mimi kept it awhile, then told me that she had begun reading it but hadn't gotten very far. She realized that she'd rather make lampwork beads, so how about if she instead gave me a necklace of glass beads that she made? I couldn't have been more thrilled. The necklace is beautiful, and wearing it reminds me of Mimi's loving support, as well as her talents, so different from mine.

I have another reminder of Mimi's support: an e-mail message that I have posted over my writing desk. It ends: "Stop reading this, and go back to writing your book. Love, Mim." This advice makes me smile -- and get back to work -- whenever I glance at it.

Naomi is always with me, too, in her different way. When each of my books was published, I appeared on television, and my parents would be sure to watch. I always knew that when I arrived home, the light on my answering machine would be blinking, and when I pressed "play" I'd hear my mother's voice saying something like: "I loved watching you, you were wonderful, I'm so proud of you!" My mother died while I was writing my previous book. The first time I arrived home after a television appearance, I dreaded walking past the dark, silent answering machine. But the message light was flashing. I pushed "play" -- and heard Naomi's voice: "I loved watching you, you were great, I'm so proud of you."

I show my sisters everything I write about them before it goes to press. Naomi confessed that when she read in my new book that I had Mimi's e-mail posted above my desk, she felt a pang of hurt: It sounded as though Mimi is more important to me than she is. So she was relieved to read about her answering machine message.

Naomi's confession made me smile. It was one more reminder that sisterhood can be a unique blend of lifelong support and inescapable rivalry.

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