

Family Relations

By David Beagan

I tend to think of historical figures as solitary beings who accomplished things out of the context of the cares of everyday life. One of those aspects of everyday life is family. Take, for example, Albert Einstein, the greatest intellect of the 20th century. So much has been written about his theory of relativity and the stunning impact that it has had on physics, that investigating his personal relations hardly seemed necessary. However, as new personal correspondence and has been released, more complete biographies of the man have been released, such as the book, *Einstein: His Life and Universe*. The man's personal life was less than admirable, often cruel or indifferent to those close to him, but he felt deeply, particularly later in life, moral obligations to humanity at large.

Dava Sobel brilliantly personalized the great Galileo Galilei in her book "Galileo's Daughter" by detailing his fatherly relationship. Galileo's achievements have been recounted endlessly, but this relationship with a daughter gave us insight into the very human side of Galileo. Interestingly, this book is based on the 120 or so letters between the two that have survived – all written by the daughter. None of Galileo's letters to her are known.

Isaac Newton's father died before he was born and was given by his mother to her parents to raise. Newton never married and had no children. How could this have affected his prodigious life's work? Was the isolation and drive that he possessed a result of these family issues, or did he reach the heights of mathematical and scientific achievement in spite of these?

Of all family relationships, siblings are the longest lasting. In fact, for many of us, the longest lasting relationships of our lives. The sibling relationship therefore can be the closest and most intense, while also being fraught with intense rivalry.

Consider Wilbur and Orville Wright. Their historic breakthrough in aviation, was really many small breakthroughs including wing design, engine design, propeller design. No doubt that their special relationship allowed them to be the first in flight. Consider this from an article Orville wrote about their struggles with propeller design:

Contemplation of it was confusing. After long arguments we often found ourselves in the ludicrous position of each having been converted to the other's side, with no more agreement than when the discussion began.

The results speak for themselves, the Wright brothers incredible achievement was only possible through their combined and collaborative efforts.

Another fascinating relationship, the Williams sisters in tennis. In any given tournament they can be each others supports as well as rivals if they have to play one another. Furthermore, as doubles partners they can be a formidable force for years to come. They took the doubles title at Wimbledon this year. Their relationship truly embodies the concept of cooperation. As African American women in a sport that does not find many minorities in America, it seems certain that much of their developmental years were bolstered by each others support, encouragement, as well as rivalry.

In the world of Art, consider the Leyendecker brothers. Both talented illustrators in the early twentieth century, one was prolific and successful, the other Frank worked with his brother in their studio, but descended into addiction, produced sparingly, and sadly died of a drug overdose before the age of fifty. Did he fail because of his brother or was his brother the one who kept him going longer than he would have on his own?

Most all of us would agree that we are who we are because of our family. Nevertheless, in the United States, in job interview situations, most of us would use a solid family biography only as incidental support for our qualification for a job. I remember an interesting story not too long ago in this very publication about an Indian American going back to India to take a position of responsibility. One of those responsibilities involved interviewing in order to hire for positions in the company. The interviewees invariably felt it to be of the utmost importance to recount their familial resume – the firm family foundation on which they had built. They seemed rather perplexed that the interviewer pushed them to recount their qualifications beyond this. What a telling perspective on the role of family in success and life.