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Is love lost among siblings so horrible?

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Reader comments: "That one really hit a nerve with me. It was nice to hear someone write that it was OK to admit that we don't have to love, or even like our siblings and relatives. Sometimes there are reasons why relatives don't get along, and forcing the issue only makes it worse." -- Bernice Benedict, Warren

At dusk on his screened porch overlooking a mountain lake, we exchange news, as friends do, of our families.

He doesn't have much family left. His dad is long gone, and he hasn't seen his three sisters since their mother's funeral three years ago.

Once or twice he has spoken, briefly and stiffly, to a sister who lives 1,000 miles away. All he can report about his relationship to the others is silence.

None have ever visited his mountain retreat, or his new home in the city. He's not invited them. They've not invited themselves.

He's angry and hurt by things they said to him while their mother was dying.

Nobody has offered an apology.

So, he's done with them.

Nearly 60 years old, he says to us, "My friends are my family now."

A mind made up

For a few minutes, my husband and I try to turn his heart, to persuade him to give his sisters another chance. "Invite them here," I say. "Or invite them to lunch. Or go visit them and sit down and talk openly."

He starts listing reasons why none of that will work.

So, finally, we give up.

That night in our bed in his guest room, I feel sad for him, and all families split by indifference or old wounds.

But I can tell I feel more sad than our friend does. And I begin to wonder what's so important, really, about trying to stay close to siblings who may seem more like strangers.

After a certain age, most of us are better known and understood by our friends than our families. With our brothers and sisters we shared only the pencil sketch of what our lives would become, vividly splattered by the paint of experience.

At weddings and funerals, sibs will drag out the same, tired 40-year-old stories that define us as the family clown, or the mama's boy, or the bookworm. We smile, and cringe, and sigh.

Then we hug, and part for another long while. On the phone, when we take the time to check in, we tell stories about our own kids, or our stock portfolios, or chew over what to do about our aging parents.

But we do not open ourselves, as we do with our friends. There isn't time. There isn't trust. And -- it's hard to admit -- there isn't the desire. Some of us would never choose our siblings as our friends.

And yet, who else knew us when? Who else can get at what influence our parents really had on who we are? Who else knows the early valleys we passed through?

No one else. No one else can touch the early end of the thread that runs through each of our lives.

Part of a whole

I remember the day I read it, but I cannot remember who wrote it about siblings, or even the author's exact words. But they came close to these:

In our dreams, we wander the same street in search of the same house. In our anxieties and our reveries and our most primal insecurities, we are our brother's sister, our sister's sister, our sister's brother, our brother's brother, the scattered children of our parents.

Together, we can make more sense of ourselves than we can aloof and alone.