

Getting on the Same Page: The Boom or Bust of Family Reunions

Getting on the same page for a successful family reunion is one of life's great challenges. I should know because in the last 6 years, I have experienced four reunions with varying degrees of pleasure. To put it in baseball terms, one at-bat was a complete strike out, followed by a single, a double, and finally a home-run. The process taught me that great family reunions seldom just happen, but require a certain learned behavior, even among well-functioning families.

First the challenges. When it comes to family, there is always more than meets the eye. This was brought home to me in my first reunion. My husband and I thought we were proceeding according to marching orders by having our family ready on time, at the assigned location, to begin each day's activity. We noticed over the week that other family was running increasingly late as well as becoming quieter. My husband would bide his time and curb his anger at the delayed start by reading his novel as he waited outside our van. What we did not know, but were soon to discover, was a growing resentment about our "ease" and their "struggle" in keeping to schedule. They were the host family and had more responsibility though they hadn't shared these sentiments until, like a volcano, emotions erupted. Lesson learned: For family reunions in particular, have your 6th sense up and running, to detect a sour mood early. The addendum to this lesson: Silence is usually not golden when it comes to family reunions. People have stories to share, updates to be given, and children to engage. Final addendum: If there is a host family, no matter how gracious they appear, assume they shoulder a burden and try to relieve the pressure.

Another challenge that makes it hard to be on the same reunion page with others is the heightened expectations that some family members bring, especially when it has been a long time in planning. The reunion will probably not be utopia, but can be very meaningful. The image of adults and children alike enjoying everyone's company, festive meals, engaging activities, and a warmth that seeps through every moment of time together creates its own pressure. After all, who wouldn't want to lay claim to the "perfect family"?

Expectations were better managed for reunion number two which is why we hit a solid single. We learned from the first reunion that no one should feel the burden of being host family; that everyone needs their own space and fewer programmed activities; and one shared meal a day was excellent. All else was optional and at the discretion of individuals. Those who wanted to beach all day could. Those who needed to check in with work could. We built in freedom and lowered expectations. Some old wounds still needed healing, and some occasional raw moments still flared up based on the different ways we do life but we kept it a positive experience. The difference between the solid single and the double which occurred later was the way we dealt with momentary conflicts. In the third reunion, we were better able to put rough moments behind us and enjoy our time together.

So what was the home run reunion? Last summer my five siblings, spouses and children congregated for one week in Aspen to celebrate my Mother's 80th and sister's 60th birthday. The barometer of success was that no one wanted the week to end. We hadn't tired of each other and were still laughing on our last night together. I've spent time diagnosing what went right and here is my home-grown recipe:

1. **Create an attitude of flexibility:** Everyone needs to be accommodating, and to do so graciously.
2. **Build into the experience significant freedom:** Group activities are fun but not too many should be mandated. Some people move fast, others slow but it doesn't matter when you're not tethered.
3. **Be careful not to over-schedule the days:** No one needed a vacation after this vacation. We had down time, up time, reading time, exercise, and good wine.
4. **Provide an up-front understanding of the "big moments":** We knew the sacred moments where everyone was to participate. In Aspen, we celebrated my Mom and sister's birthdays with an elegant dinner and shared memories.

Everyone spoke – even the 10 and 11 year old children – and the laughter and tears flowed.

5. **Identify a logistical commander who is “in the know” but manages with a loose grip.** Group decisions will need to be made and troop movement will require finesse, especially when reunions are large. Find a person in the family who is happy to manage the details and is good at it.

Getting on the same page can make the difference between a boom or bust family reunion experience. From my four at-bats, I know there is much we can do to help shape the experience. Besides the tips already mentioned, I have one last caution that is not only critical for successful family reunions, but for life in total. It is what I call “getting rid of old data points.” We all have a repository of information about people and events that go back to childhood, and can be quite dated. In the case of reunions, rather than engaging our sibling as the irascible teenager or self-centered adolescent we remember, we can challenge ourselves to think anew. We can create a new set of data points where the only assumption we bring is that growth happens. Otherwise, we risk providing a kind of unconscious bait that may not only stir up unpleasant memories but be self-fulfilling. The process of rediscovery can be fun. Reunions are an opportunity to recast our thinking.