Family Feuds

Agnes Callard

April 30, 2020

If I compare my sons' childhood with my own, the biggest difference is how infrequently they fight. My sister and I were often left alone, and I, dictatorial by nature, was disastrously put in charge. Though I was strictly forbidden from physical aggression—only two years older, I was disproportionately larger—I nonetheless found ways to make my reign intolerable. My parents report coming home to find me covered in bite marks, whereas my sister would present them with written lists of ridiculous new regulations I had imposed that day. Once I made her so angry she raised my guitar over her head, smashed it on the ground, and then, for good measure, walked on it.

Games were our respite from fighting, so we played constantly—dice games, board games, card games, tennis, ping-pong. We would play any kind of game, so long as it was competitive. Of course the games also caused fighting: I was such a cheat that she had to take her cards with her into the bathroom, and she was a spoilsport who would quit as soon as the tide turned against her. (I held on to our childhood Risk box for many years, because inside the lid I had written "Agnes and Kata completed an entire game of Risk on such-and-such a date, and Kata lost"—and then forced her to sign her name.) And the games were also a *form* of fighting: we got along by "pretending" to be enemies; the cards, dices, tokens and balls were screams and bites in disguise.

Recently, my sixth-grader, Macabee, made an astute observation: "After this pandemic is over, we'll be so used to seeing each other all the time that it's going to be weird for anyone to be away from their family for more than five minutes. If you go to your office for the whole day, it will seem to me like you're dead." The pandemic has intensified family relations, and correspondingly intensified my own need to play competitive games—so much so that the past month feels like a throwback to childhood. Except now it's not my sister I want to vanquish, destroy and dominate—it's my children.

As soon as they could afford it, my parents moved into a house where my sister and I could have our own rooms. They were under the impression that we had, in effect, been begging for this separation for years—and so my mother was surprised when, on the first morning in the new house, she walked in to find my sister's bedroom empty. I had bribed her, with storytelling, to sleep on the floor of my room.

My sister was for most of my childhood my only companion; the darkness of my bedroom was unthinkably empty without her. We couldn't get along, but that didn't mean I could bear to be separated from the only person who was another me. Today, during the pandemic, a similar dynamic is visible in the divide between those quarantining alone, who feel lonely, and those quarantining with family, who feel suffocated. I don't actually think that this is a paradox, or the product of a "grass is always greener" illusion. It is a fact that people crave communicative interaction; and it is also a fact that they care about one another. But these two facts are not the same fact.

By interaction I refer to some sort of reciprocated communicative activity. Knowing the other well enough to anticipate their reaction, but not well enough to get it right

every time, makes every exchange an opportunity to fine-tune both your own thought and your model of theirs. This back-and-forth feedback loop is a powerful tool for the expression, testing and amplification of thought. And it is fun.

Caring means being in some way grown-together. It is a relation in which you stand to the welfare of a creature who need not be similar to you, or understand you, but who is in some sense part of you or connected to you. I do not always know where I end and my children begin. I flinch when they get hurt; their agitation agitates me; their fear terrifies me more than my own. To the naked eye, my child and I appear distinct, but the underlying reality—you may not be able to see it, they may not be able to see it, but I see it—is closer to that of two droplets of water coalesced into one. Unlike engagement, caring does not demand balance or perfect reciprocity: it is enough if one person can take the good of the other to heart.

Caring and interacting don't always go hand in hand. The internet offers up many more opportunities for reciprocal engagement than for genuine beneficence, which means that those quarantined alone have been relegated to a space not optimized for care. But group quarantine exposes the opposite imbalance: so much unity there is little room for engaged reciprocal interaction. The more my husband and I "team up" to deal with childcare and household maintenance, the less we have to say to one another. How much is there to talk about when no one has left the house for weeks? It is possible to feel loved, safe and cared for, and, at the same time, to experience a lockdown of the mind. This too is loneliness, though of a very different kind.

Often, when we were growing up, I told myself I was caring for—parenting and educating—my sister: that is what I thought I was supposed to do when I was left "in charge." I remember a particularly embarrassing incident at a swimming pool, when I was giving her instructions on how to do a complicated flip I had invented—and was nowhere close to being able to perform myself—and the lifeguard told my sister, "Do not listen to her, what she is telling you to do is dangerous!" Far into our teen years, I was still trying to educate her: I don't think anyone has ever been as angry at me as she was during the summer when I thought I could teach her German by only speaking to her in German. It is not surprising, in retrospect, that we ended up specializing in gameplay, the activity that is all interaction and no care.

While care is intrinsically friendly, interaction isn't. Indeed, the name for two people who interact intensely *without* caring about one another's good is "competitors." We place constraints on competition in almost every context: in athletics we make demands of sportsmanship; in business the defeat of one's competitor ought not be an end in itself; in academia, grad students try not to think of their fellow students as the people who might get preferred over them by advisors, fellowship committees and the job market. The category of "war crimes," operative from the twentieth century onwards, suggests that even in war there is some minimal requirement of care for the enemy.

Within a game—and perhaps only within a game—all demands of care are lifted. I can capture your pieces without apology, simply taking away what is yours, purely out of self-interest. I can put down my Scrabble word with the precise hope of taking

up the space you needed. I need not sympathize with your plight, even when it is only due to bad luck; in fact, I may rejoice in your misfortunes, actively wishing for the fates to curse your roll of the dice. Within the scope of the game, I want to eradicate you. You are another self—but not the kind of self I have to promote, or protect, or be considerate of. You are the kind of self that is an enemy.

Perhaps you think I am only *pretending* to see you as an enemy. But for those of us who get so into them we are tempted to cheat, or to overturn the board when losing, the experience of gameplay is very different from joking or playacting. We are not capturing pieces ironically.

There are people who play competitive games in the mode of "just pretending," but they are not much fun to play with. If you are the kind of person who gets real satisfaction out of competing—if it speaks to a real need of yours—my guess is that you are not pretending, though you might be telling yourself you are. You are pretending to pretend.

One of our family's running jokes is that we pretend to forget the younger children's names, running through a series of "guesses" that get only the first few letters right: "I know, you must be...Maddox? Marvin? Malcolm? No, wait, I've got it...Maximilian?" The child and the parent both enjoy the freeing fantasy of being unknown to one another.

As a child I did not know how to be a caregiver; now I do, but that doesn't mean I always like it. When you get to the point that it is "weird for anyone to be away from their family for more than five minutes," care has devolved into full-on fusion. The new, quarantined normal is that I am less a human than a lumbering, awkward beast with sixteen limbs and four brains. Setting myself against my children is a way to pry myself loose: sitting around the kitchen table, looking in their eyes as I plot to destroy them, I am briefly whole.

Agnes Callard
Family Feuds
April 30, 2020

The Point Magazine, Examined Life.
<www.thepointmag.com/examined-life/family-feuds-agnes-callard>