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How to Handle Inheritance Blues

By Dr. Kathleen Begley, Book Author and Professional Speaker

Note to Readers: *This free e-newsletter, sent only upon request, comes from Dr. Kathleen Begley, owner of Write Company Plus communications training in suburban Philadelphia. She writes weekly on topics connected to business and personal success. Dr. Begley this week launched a new blog called "Offline." Click onto the website address at the end of this article to read her 50-word musings on politics, business, and anything else that strikes her meandering fancy.*

Death is not pretty. But what comes after, in my opinion, is even worse. No, I'm not talking about rigor mortis. Nor the obituary. Nor the cremation. Nor the funeral. Nor the burial. I'm talking about the dead person's money – and who gets it.

In my opinion, few things other than marital infidelity stir up more jealousy and rage than divvying up a deceased person's assets. During the past week, typical emotions have sprung front and center following the demise of legendary rock star Michael Jackson. Although many news reports indicated that he died without a penny to his name, that quasi-rumor failed to stop a long list of people from salivating over a potential windfall from his estate, apparently from future sales of recordings and property.

Almost before the megastar was cold in the morgue, his father Joe Jackson began talking about a new label for his son's music. His mother filed to become executor of the estate, a job that normally pays a sizable percentage of the overall value. Jackson's sister LaToya was reported to be scrounging around for cash thought to be hidden in the star's rented home. And these are blood relatives who you would presume to have loved him more than to have lusted after his money. As I understand it, the entire American Bar Association (ABA), which represents the nation's lawyers, also went into a tailspin of delight in anticipation of many decades of legal maneuvers about the estate.

Considering the Jackson example, which I think is far from unusual, most experts recommend that, while you're still above the grass, you should go to great pains to ward off such blatant displays of greediness after your death. Understand estate law. Make a will. Get it notarized. Name an executor. Organize your records. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Frankly, I think the dead person can do only so much to minimize inheritance squabbles. The real burden, in my view, lies with the living. In his online book "Lessons in Lifemanship," Bryan Bell agrees. "One of the ugliest displays of human behavior takes place when heirs start fighting over an estate," Bell writes. "Old sibling rivalries and antagonisms often erupt, and greed enters the picture. Perhaps spouses of the heirs join the fray, and other in-laws. Finally, the trouble starts if they all begin to hire lawyers, and one attorney says, 'Don't let them get away with that. We can beat them.'"

Here are some tips from Bell and me on coping with post-mortem money wars. I learned my ideas from driving myself berserk over the years with anger toward perfect strangers, unlike me, who presumably are heirs and heiresses to major fortunes. Think hotel airhead Paris Hilton, Vanderbilt-related newsman Anderson Cooper, Kennedy family member Maria Shriver. I used to turn green just thinking about their cushy lives.

Show respect. In the first few days after the death of a loved one, try to focus on the person's nonmonetary contributions to the world: joy, serenity, humor. If you find yourself wondering about

1 of 2

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the value of a house or stock portfolio, don't beat yourself up. Curiosity is human. But force yourself, possibly by slapping yourself silly, to get your thoughts back on a spiritual rather than material path.

Forget formal notification. Fortunately or unfortunately, if you've been left out of the will, you're unlikely to receive a letter containing the no-news. You'll probably discover the upsetting fact almost accidentally when your niece mentions that the deceased left everything to her father, who abandoned your sister years ago for a brazen 20-year-old hussy. What was the dead guy thinking?

Admit your jealousy. If your mother leaves \$500,000 to your brother and \$5 to you, you'd be crazy not to feel envious and, possibly, half crazed. You are human, after all. But don't take your bitter disappointment out on the living. If you must, put your mother's photo on a punching bag and beat the crap out of her. I know it sounds harsh. But come on, now. She'll never know. Besides, if she had only admitted years ago she really did like your brother better, maybe you wouldn't feel so shell shocked right now.

Examine your heart. In my mind, money is inextricably linked with being cared about in the deepest sense. So, on the few occasions when I felt left out of an inheritance, I sensed the loss far more emotionally than materially. To be excluded, in a portion of my so-called mind, is to be unloved and, worse, to be unlovable.

Let go. If I continue to hold tenaciously onto my money-is-love model, I'm doomed to despair. No one can cherish me from the grave. So an important step for me is to recognize the source of my angst: scars from painful past events. At this point in life, no inheritance is going to resolve issues arising from family miscommunication, neighborhood bullies, overly strict teachers, abusive bosses, failed relationships – the stuff most human trauma comes from. On the other hand, a pile of Exxon Mobil stock would enable me to pay for decades of therapy. Oh, wait a minute. I already had therapy.

Celebrate your independence. Although I probably will never be able to completely abandon the dream that some long-lost cousin will die and live me \$50 million, the truth is that I am perfectly capable of supporting myself. I have done so since age 20, no small feat at a time when women were encouraged to get married shortly after high school and live off their husband's salaries. Someone or other, I've pulled off self-sufficiency for decades, often despite myself. I knew from an early age that Prince Charming was a figment of a fairytale writer's imagination.

Remember your true values. In his book, author Bell makes an outright plea to survivors arguing over estates. "It isn't worth it," he writes. "Relationships are more important than money or possessions."

Dr. Kathleen Begley has written seven books and gives corporate seminars on topics such as writing persuasively, presenting confidently, and managing positively. You can call her at 610-429-1562 or e-mail her at KBegley@writecompanyplus.com. Her new blog "Offline" is available by clicking the icon on the lower right of her homepage at www.writecompanyplus.com. She responds to everybody.