

Siblings by Choice

Siblings by Choice

**Race,
Gender,
and
Violence**

Archie Smith Jr.
Ursula Riedel-Pfaefflin



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Dedicated to our parents & grandparents
Amos & Callie; Archie Sr. & Beatrice; Clara and Paula; and Erika
To siblings Marjorie, Leonard, Joyce and Geraldine
To children Tycho and Vincent
To the memory of Dennis Hunter Jr. and Rosalie June Potter

Contents

Preface by Mary Donovan Turner	ix
1. Siblings in Struggle—Siblings by Choice?	1
2. Autobiographical Perspectives <i>Narrative Agency, Systemic Thinking, Intercultural Realities</i>	14
3. Transcending Barriers Alien to Community	24
4. Moral Vision in a Climate of Diminishing Trust	35
5. Invisible Forces Determining Human Existence	48
6. Gender Change and Cultural Traditions	75
7. <i>Death and the Maiden</i> <i>The Complexity of Trauma and Ways of Healing</i>	96
8. Complexity and Simplicity in Pastoral Care <i>The Case of Forgiveness</i>	110
9. Resources for Becoming Siblings by Choice	138
Notes	169
Index of Names	175
Index of Topics	177

Preface

Rarely does a volume embody so clearly the invitation it sets forth to the world. *Siblings by Choice: Gender, Race, Violence* is the exception. In its pages the authors ask us to consider a life where we who have been enemies work together as brothers and sisters intent on mending the world. As the authors paint for us the portraits of their own social locations, we realize that they themselves represent the differences about which they speak—one an African American male who has known the systemic oppression of life in a White privileged society; the other a German female who has known privilege because of race, but oppression because she is woman. Being of different genders, races, and nationalities, they write together in the midst of a world broken and scarred by fear and violence.

It is not only from their own perspectives that they speak, however. Realizing that their own understandings are limited, they call on their many conversations with colleagues, women and men around the globe, in an effort to understand the myriad ways that gender and race, and other differences as well, create tensions and provoke violence among us. The volume is shockingly and brutally honest as it puts before us the raw realities of life. We would be overwhelmed if there were not a persistent, sometimes latent and sometimes explicit, hope that undergirds its writing. It is obviously not a naive hope that blinds itself to the grimness of war, fear, and the mistrust so prevalent across our borders. It is a God-given hope that is born in the imaginations of those who are willing to risk investment in a new way of being.

How, then, shall we live? That is the perennial question addressed here, but the volume shakes us from any answers that are limited to the personal, the individual, the internal. These are too narrow. Consistently, the volume demands that we look at the many ways that the personal is political and the political is personal, to consider the ways that the historical, social, political, economic, and ecological dimensions of the world form and fashion what we want to do, what we can do, what we hope to do in the world around us. It acknowledges that we are guided by what we see and the historical, invisible forces that we cannot. Thus, the volume is systemic to its

core. We cannot help but realize through its reading that, whether we like it or realize it, the struggle must be ours—together. We are bound together in a “mutual garment of destiny.”

Siblings by Choice returns again and again to three major themes or strategies that can be used as lenses for our study and consideration: systemic thinking, intercultural realities, and narrative agency. Over and over again they are used by the authors as the lenses through which they analyze case studies and life situations that they, and we, encounter. Each return to them bears new insight, so that their repetition is not stagnant or purposeless. Rather, with each engagement a new layer of understanding is unleashed, and the interplay between the three grows organically and in geometric proportion. One begins to sense how much there is to observe, describe, and interpret in a world that is complex and ever changing.

Staggering are the many arenas for conversation that are brought to the fore in this volume. Smith and Pfaefflin call on the worlds of film, art, myth, history, the social sciences, and scripture to help us see. They call on the theological giants of our past—Thurman, Heschel, Tillich, and Niebuhr, to name just a few. We are served a veritable feast of words from those who have thought about justice, love, and power for us. And they bring us not only their own life experiences but also a multitude of teaching tools and group exercises that will enable us to call forth our own experiences for mutual exploration and elucidation. In this way the volume is a pedagogical gem. It is a culmination of important themes of relationality, metaphor, and systems thinking that have been integral to the authors’ previous research and writings. But in other ways, it is a prelude to their research to come. That is what we hope; we want more.

In this volume we are called both to confession and to a determination to transcend the seemingly insurmountable barriers that divide us. Can we choose to be siblings by choice? Can we somehow choose to do the will, the “pleasure,” of God? Can we, in a world where fear breeds violence and violence breeds fear, choose to heal the “breaches” that divide our landscapes? Can we exchange life for death? We are reminded in stark and challenging ways that we do, indeed, have a choice, that we and those who call the church home have at our disposal redemptive forces that can be unleashed on a fragmented world.

An easy task? No, certainly not. The authors never maintain that it will be. But they invite us on an adventure-filled odyssey—one in

which we can see the journey's end only in brief glimpses. *Siblings by Choice* is one glimpse into a world of conversation and convergence where the ladder we are given is as high as the obstacles we are invited to transcend.

Thanks be.

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Siblings in Struggle—Siblings by Choice?

“I have cried because of hunger.” “Ich habe geweint vor Hunger.”
“Naan Pasiyinal Azuhiren.” “Meefo Ke Homo.” “Jk heb gehuild van
honger.” “Ekse’gtol Sirtam.” “Ila nutsin haljast.” “Tenho chorafo por
causa da fome.” “Tengo ihorado por la hambre.” “Je crier pour la faim.”

“Who are my mother and my brothers?”
“Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

Mark 3:33, 35

As I watch my friends, students, and colleagues dropping off around me, I am struck by how completely vulnerable we are as humans, and how interdependent and connected we all really are.

Janice Giteck, 21 August 1992

I

Who are my true siblings and family?

The purpose of this introductory chapter is to state the questions that guide the book’s inquiry and identify its organizing metaphor. We explore two questions: How is it possible for women, men, and children from different cultural and spiritual backgrounds to come together and struggle against common forms of oppression, and in that process become siblings by choice? How can we create

2 *Siblings by Choice*

relationships of resistance, safety, holding, and trust and make connections as teachers and practitioners of pastoral care and counseling while we acknowledge and find value in differences? These are urgent questions in a world torn by war, international terrorism, religious intolerance, corporate greed, poverty and hunger, duplicity and lies. In such a world we may not have a vision of “how interdependent and connected we all really are”—our fundamental relatedness. We may not perceive that we come from a thread of common human experiences and that we need one another in order to survive or live well.

The term *sibling*, or kindred, is used metaphorically. It means belonging together, in a human family. We all have the same beginning—birth—and we all have the same end—death.¹ Between our births and deaths we need one another to create and sustain loving relationships, trust, community, meaning and purpose, food, shelter, a sense of security, and well-being. True, we are differently situated. We evolve through different cultural, economic, social, political, and personal circumstances. We are dependent on one another, the natural environment, and caring relationships to sustain the one world we share with all living things. Ideally, we may come to recognize that our diverse yet mutual interdependency weaves a richly textured and common thread of human experience. We are challenged to listen, learn, care for, and help one another in the process of maturing in the one world we share.

II

The world as we know it is changing rapidly as its population is shifting due to war, famine, drought, flooding, economic collapse, political upheaval, persecution and suffering, and technological innovations. Cultures that once appeared fixed in a geographical location are no longer stable, and societies, especially urban centers, are changing intercultural realities. What we know to be true becomes obsolete, and one’s own cultural story is eclipsed by another or soon becomes one among many. Intrigue, conflict, confusion, misunderstanding, xenophobia, prejudice, and the temptation to retreat or fight are bound to arise. These dynamics of cultural change both repel and attract. We can decide whether to struggle against one another as predators and as enemies or to struggle together as siblings facing unprecedented change. The decision to struggle together we call “siblings by choice.”

Definitions and concepts of family and siblings vary according to context and historical development. The term *sib* means related

by blood. It generally refers to a sister or brother or to a group of people recognized by an individual or group as her or his kindred.² The root of the term *sibling*, *sib* is connected to *sippe*, meaning kin, kindred. This rendering of the term *sib* may be limiting. We explore this idea of sibling, first in the context of early Israel, and then in the context of Mark's gospel.

The idea of "siblings by choice" has roots in Israel's early history. We learn of sibling rivalries, betrayal, peace-making, and cooperation among siblings in the biblical text. Early Israel was a complex social totality called out by common responses to the vicissitudes of certain historical developments. Israel comprised different aggregates of landless people, bound together in a many-pronged struggle for a just and peaceful world. According to Prof. Norman Gottwald, there is considerable evidence that earliest Israel was formed out of disparate people with common interests amid all their differences.³ In this light, the terms, *family*, *clan*, *household*, *kinship*, or *tribe* were not limited to blood relations. The term *family* had a broad application. It was applied to "an amazingly varied array of kinship and socio-political arrangements. The specific terms [family, clan, kinship, tribe, household] really only make sense in some larger analytic system."⁴ The idea of siblings, then, would fit into this broad understanding of family or kinship. *Family* was a unit, a subdivision of a wider social totality, that pointed to "the peculiar identity of the community as a collectivity..." known as the people, or tribes, of Yahweh.⁵

There is precedence in the Hebrew Scriptures for the idea of siblings by choice. Terms such as *family* and *kinship* as applied to early Israel or groups within Israel appear to attest to a matter of choice. Joshua "gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem." (Josh. 24:1) He summoned them to "put away" the foreign gods that their ancestors had served in Egypt and turn their hearts to Yahweh (24:14, 23). He challenged them to choose which gods they would serve, if they were unwilling to serve Yahweh (24:15); "But as for me [Joshua] and my *bayrith* [household, family, clan, or tribe], we will serve the LORD" (24:15b). Joshua then leads the gathered people in renewing their covenant with Yahweh (24:23–25).

This rendering of the term *sib* may also be limiting. We turn to the words from Mark's gospel for a more expansive view. "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." Mark's gospel offers a unified and transcultural metaphor for our project. Siblings are not limited to blood ties or household or tribe, but are related in doing the will of God. The phrase "will of God" occurs sixteen times in the New Testament, but only once in Mark's gospel,

4 *Siblings by Choice*

where it appears in the plural form.⁶ The Greek term for *will*, in Mark's gospel, is *thelema*. It means "desire" or "pleasure." Doing the divine will or pleasure is decisive for following Jesus. Therefore, these words "Whoever does the will of God" are addressed to those who follow Jesus, the doer of the divine will.

The gospel of Mark, according to Prof. Mary Ann Tolbert, is "an apocalyptic story, promising those presently in suffering and degradation that the much desired end is coming when all of God's enemies, human and demonic, will be defeated and the present cruel world of suffering for God's chosen will be no more."⁷ It is in this context of suffering and persecution that we read Jesus' words about sibling relations and family. We are his sister, mother, brother, and members of his family when we join with him in doing the will of God. "Jesus defines his new family over against any kind of blood relations clan or tribal loyalty. The only requirement to be a member of this new family of Jesus' is to do the will of God."⁸

To follow Jesus is to move beyond thought and into action and to become a doer of the divine will. Doing the will or pleasure of God implies nonconformity with convention and openness to the new age that God is bringing about. The *New Revised Standard Version* reads: "And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother'" (Mk. 3:34–35). The *Jerusalem Bible* reads: "And looking round at those sitting in a circle about him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother'" (Mk. 3:34–35, *Jerusalem Bible*). Jesus' constant openness to the will or pleasure of God places the same demand for openness on the followers. The true relatives of Jesus are not those who are physically related to him through blood ties, but *Whoever does the will of God*. Faithful performance of God's wills of healing, clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned and infirm, feeding the hungry, and setting captives free are characteristic of those who belong to the eschatological family of God.

There is another reference to brothers and sisters and mother in Mark's gospel:

Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brother or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses,

brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.” (Mk. 10:28–30)

Following Jesus is costly. It involves decision and purpose (to spread the “good news” of God’s reign), sacrifice (leave everything and follow), setting priorities, and commitment in persecution. There is the promise that when one gives up “everything”—which includes the priority of clan; tribe; blood ties to brother, sister, mother, and father—then one will find new connections again and again, a hundredfold—houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, and children in this age, and in the age to come, eternal life. “For Mark, Jesus...is the one sent by God to show everyone the way that must be followed for salvation and eternal life, a way that involves suffering persecutions, the cross, death, and then resurrection.”⁹

Followers of Jesus may live in hope and continue in faithful service amidst persecution as they share his healing ministry. But following Jesus is never easy. This call to be in new sibling relationships will challenge tradition. It will mark followers as nonconformists, deviants, and put them in conflict with more limited understandings of family based on blood ties, nationalism, race, gender, sexual orientation, or class. It may come into open conflict with programs of ethnic cleansing, for example. Doing God’s will is no insurance against persecution and suffering. It does not protect one from violence or misfortune. It is not a prophylactic against betrayal and estrangement. One may become fearful, faithless, or disillusioned or seek easy escape if one is looking for a guarantee against persecution and suffering. Jesus himself lives in the gap “between suffering and hope, the breakdown of the old and the promise of the new.”¹⁰ His followers failed to understand him, and in the end they deny knowing him. Disturbing is the idea that even Jesus’ *siblings*—his new family—abandoned him. They ran away in fear. “Judas, his disciple and supposed brother in the family of God”¹¹ betrayed him. We are presented with a complex picture. Positive and negative examples of membership in the new family of God arise. Followers are called. They leave their work behind to follow Jesus. They are entrusted with God’s power to do good work. The good work that challenges the members in the new family of God includes a critical engagement with religion, courage to face fear, and threats to one’s life. Doing God’s will, for Jesus, included the cross—that is, persecution, suffering, and physical death by the state. We are led to some critical questions: If membership in God’s new family is no

6 *Siblings by Choice*

guarantee against suffering and persecution, then how will contemporary followers of Jesus keep hope alive in doing God's will? How will this call to a new kind of family hold them together across cultures and different faith traditions, among gender differences and in the heated controversies over different sexual orientations, amidst ethnic hatreds, and through the evils of race and class divisions? How will this call help us to choose and fully embrace siblings who live with physical and mental disabilities? Mark's gospel is relevant to these questions because of its "dramatic portrayal of [the] fateful struggle between the forces of evil and the forces of good, between the persistence of fear and the possibility of faith."¹² Mark's gospel holds out this radical call to be siblings by choice amidst present suffering and seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Its only binding cord is to do God's will. And it is a binding cord that can stretch and hold across differences—gender, race, and sexual orientation, and cultural, national, and international boundaries. This call to be family is particularly relevant for communities of the poor and others living under persecution and seeking to keep their faith alive as they remain faithful and endure in the struggle for a new heaven and a new earth.

III

Family based on blood ties and tradition would reflect the established cultural arrangements of first-century Palestine. In this context, Jesus' words are revolutionary in that they are a fundamental challenge to conventional understandings of family relations. They present a vision of humankind as fundamentally interrelated, a new integrated whole. This enlarged vision of human relatedness is lost when sibling relations are limited to blood ties and when "will of God" becomes a euphemism for exclusive or self-righteous claims.

These words, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother," were uttered in a world where bloodline was very important. It was a world bound by tradition, cultural divisions, and ethnic loyalties. The question, "Who are my mother and brother?" and the answer, "Whoever does the will of God," were invitations to the ancient world to rethink the meaning of family and sibling relations. They are invitations to us as well. They invite us to question conventional understandings of family and sibling relations. These words from Mark's gospel invite us to a new vision of siblings that extends to all who do God's will.

Mark's vision of siblings relates to a deeper layer of awareness. Twentieth-century mystic Howard Thurman articulates this deeper layer. He believes that there is the "scent of the eternal" in every

living thing.¹³ This “scent of the eternal” is the ground for the kinship of all life and our sense of a shared humanity. Thurman expresses it this way:

It is my belief that in the Presence of God there is neither male nor female, white nor Black, Gentile nor Jew, Protestant nor Catholic, Hindu, Buddhist, nor Moslem, but a human spirit stripped to the literal substance of itself before God. Wherever man has this sense of the Eternal in his spirit, he hunts for it in his home, in his work, among his friends, in his pleasures, and in all the levels of his function. It is my simple faith that this is the kind of universe that sustains that kind of adventure, and what we see dimly now in the churning confusion and chaos of our tempestuous times will some day be the common experience of all the children of men everywhere.¹⁴

How can such a vision survive in a world marked by estrangement, where fear, violence and destruction, deceit and betrayal, revenge, and despair appear to reign, a world that does not know the way to peace or have a vision of how to exist in harmony with justice? In short, does this vision have a future?

Thurman believes it does. He believes in the kinship of all life, the interrelatedness of all things, and that when we are stripped to the literal substance of our being, we might discover the oneness of humankind. This is a vision hidden deep within the mystery of an unrecorded past and rooted in the primordial stirrings of the human spirit.¹⁵

The vision of the interrelatedness of all things resists the idea that fear, violence and destruction, betrayal and deceit, greed, and despair have final say. This vision of our shared humanity points the way to possibilities for “transcending all barriers alien to community.”¹⁶ The ideal of familial and sibling relations of care is where this sense of the eternal and self-other-consciousness first emerges. Caring acts such as love, kindness, repentance, and forgiveness are learned and practiced in the family. Such acts can make a difference and bring renewal in everyday life. But this ideal way is not apparent in persecution and suffering and in situations of deceit, oppression, injustice, violence, fear, and despair.

We chose the metaphor of sibling relations in order to develop an intergender and interethnic vision for the teaching and practice of pastoral care and counseling. This vision struggles to respect difference and make connections in a world that is often hostile to

8 *Siblings by Choice*

the stranger and shuns differences. In light of this sibling metaphor we explore the questions, *How is it possible for women and men from different cultural backgrounds and religious traditions to recognize, come together, and struggle against common forms of oppression? How can they become siblings by choice?*

Our guiding questions are made urgent by the forces of oppression that derive from histories of religious intolerance and conflict, international tensions, racism, class divisions, gender inequality, and violence and discrimination against those living with physical and mental disabilities. Such forces work against the recognition of our common humanity. They work against efforts to build sibling relationships of safety, holding, and trust where differences are apparent. Such forces make the achievement of human communities difficult and perhaps impossible. Caregivers struggle in the light of this challenge and in the freedom that Christ gives to work for a new kind of sibling relationship, with changed and empowered relations.

When people are thrown together by external circumstances, they may discover themselves as siblings in a common struggle against whatever it is that oppresses them. They are siblings in struggle, perhaps, but not yet siblings by conscious choice. Siblings in struggle have not yet explored spiritual resources and biographical connections that might fortify them against internal sources that can erode trust, call forth fear and hatred, create new forms of tyranny, and destroy people and movements from within. We believe there is an opportunity today for women and men struggling together to recognize that they are joined as siblings, not by happenstance nor sightlessly pitted against one another as natural enemies. They can face the forces of oppression and take a next step. They can *choose* to be siblings and spiritual allies who recognize, name, and struggle against common forms and patterns of oppression in order to achieve a better, safer world. In this way, they participate now in the eschatological family of God. Through self-conscious decision-making they can work together on those issues that divide while acknowledging that their differences represent unique ways of seeing. Their differences can provide alternative approaches to solving complex problems. Such differences can also contribute toward misunderstandings, especially where trust is lacking and narrow self-interest prevails. When people choose to be siblings across hostile divisions, they can learn and work together for the transformation of self and society and their immediate situation. Hence, it is possible to be siblings by choice, rather than siblings by default. But this path

is never easy. It may be like entering a labyrinth—a maze of bewildering experiences.

We believe that spiritual experience and faith communities operate in the background and sometimes serve to contradict, and at other times provide challenge to, our taken-for-granted view of the world. We argue that patterns of gender and race relations are always already embedded in a larger complex narrative, from which specific patterns of gender and race relations emerge. The patterns that underlie our relations are often obscured and limited by prevailing interests, knowledge, and practices. Such knowledge, which often serves as an unquestioned premise for thinking and acting, needs to be made visible. To search for the origin and historical development of specific patterns of gender and race is a way to unveil certain power interests. The purposes and power interests they serve must be acknowledged.

Dominant knowledge must also be socially and spiritually located. For instance, who defines differences and common interest? How does such knowledge enable and/or limit care for one another? How does it help us to discern and do God's pleasure and enable a right or just relationship with God *and* world? It is this process of questioning conventional wisdom and practices, locating us, and uncovering historical, social, and spiritual resources that provides foundations for social and personal transformation.

In the situation of everyday life, siblings cry for hunger; that is, they cry for food, water, and nurturing relationships of justice, love, power, and freedom. This cry can be heard around the world in every culture and in every language. Homelessness, hunger, and poverty continue to be significant problems in a developed nation such as the United States—where approximately 4 million low-income children under the age of twelve experience hunger each year and an additional 9.6 million children are at risk of hunger.¹⁷ Hunger persists in the developing countries of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and poorer countries of Eastern Europe. In many of these countries half of the people do not have access to safe water or basic sanitation. In some places—such as Afghanistan, Botswana, the Sahara, Somalia, and Rwanda—children, women, and men are dying of AIDS and are dying for lack of food, clean water, and adequate medical care. In other places, such as Guatemala during the 1970s, tens of thousands of children and men disappeared, and women were widowed, raped, and killed without redress. Siblings, often pitted against one another as informers, were hungry for the cessation of violence, wanting instead justice and healing. Their cry for hunger and the words from Mark's gospel challenge us to rethink the meaning of family and

10 *Siblings by Choice*

sibling relations that are based on blood ties alone. Words from Mark's gospel and a more ancient vision are invitations to become brothers and sisters and to develop nurturing sibling relations around the world. Who were the real kinfolk of Jesus? Jesus' kinfolk were those who did the will of God. Through faithful action, they continue to announce the in-breaking realm of God.

The challenge to be siblings by choice and across cultures will not be easy because we live in a world that fears differences. It is a world marked by cries of hunger, terrorism and torture, betrayal, revenge, intergenerational trauma, and ever increasing levels of domestic violence. The world at large may not know how to have cross-cultural families. More importantly, we may not have a vision for such families and a belief that they can exist in harmony. For example, few believe that Jews and Palestinians can share the ground they both claim. The world has given up on them. Separation and destruction are the models.

In the following pages we portray a complex picture that is marked by painful historical memory, duplicity and deceit, violence and need for healing and reconciliation, disappointment and promise, pain and hope, suffering and redemption. It is against such a background that we explore the significance of an intercultural sibling metaphor for the teaching and training of pastoral care and counseling. It is a metaphor about redemption amid deceit and suffering, rooted in Mark's gospel's new eschatological family of God. How is it possible for women and men and children to come together and struggle against common forms of oppression, and in that process become siblings by choice? The tools we use to explore our questions are narrative agency, systemic thinking, and intercultural realities.

IV

Narrative agency means that we are purposeful creatures, born into a particular society and culture at a particular point in its development. We act purposefully in the world by learning the language of our society and developing the capacity to cooperate. We internalize our society's values; develop a mind, an identity, and character; make moral commitments; and share a moral vision. These comprise a part of our assumptive world—an internalized set of assumptions that serve as blueprint and motive force for our actions or sense of agency. For better or worse, we are a part of the creation, maintenance, routine, and renewal of the world of everyday life. We make our contribution, grow older with others, and perhaps, if we're lucky, leave our trace. Narrative agency, then, is largely the story of

our experience with others and through time, that is, how we make our way through the society and historical period in which we live.

Another way to say this: Narrative agency is the story we live as we purposefully order our lives according to certain cultural norms and values, create meaning as we pursue our dreams, and interpret ourselves in relations with others.

People may use words, gestures, and metaphors to frame and reframe, construct and deconstruct their experiences over time. They may draw on mythology and the construction of preferred knowledge to tell their personal and collective stories. Gender, race, sexual orientation, and class relations are often embedded in larger, complex narratives but have been limited by dominant knowledge and paradigms. Certain narratives from different cultures may inform the choices of women, children, and men, of gay, lesbian, transgendered, and questioning persons to struggle together and across class, ethnic, cultural, and religious differences for the transformation of society, gender relations, and the self. Hence, narrative agency is based in experience, and experience is inherently social, relational in nature. Experience is the fundamental datum of knowledge about reality. Narrative agency assumes that both *self* and *world* are woven together in the story of our lives. People tell about themselves and their environment in co-presence. Narrative thinking may be described as the many ways people bestow significance on their experiences through performance and by reflecting on them through language, belief or convictions, and activities. Narrative thinking derives from relations with others, our ancestors, the Divine Spirit, and in light of certain normative symbols that define and give shape and meaning to our thinking and living—and our world.

Systemic thinking is a way of thinking about multipersonal and reciprocal influences within certain contexts and making connections between our social location, immediate life situation, and the wider world of which we are a part. We may ask, When people from different cultures and systems of meaning meet, what happens to their beliefs and patterns of meaning making? What happens to their guiding truths, norms, and story? If their guiding story is one among many, are all stories reduced to “myth”? How can they make sense of their experiences? Systemic thinking can enable us to see the underlying patterns that connect one story with another when people from different cultures and systems of meaning meet. Systemic thinking can enable the discernment of a broader pattern of meaning. It involves recognition of a reciprocal relationship between inner self and public self, action and belief, social and cultural patterns, social

12 *Siblings by Choice*

worlds, past obligations, traditions, and meaning that continue to emerge from our ongoing interactions. Individuals and their relations are never static, but always negotiating, choosing, acting, emerging, and becoming in multiple contexts. Hence, in systemic thinking we track the evolution of thought and action and the newly emerging realities that arise from and are modified by the ongoing interactions people have with themselves and their environments.

Intercultural realities are the coming together of influences from many different streams of cultures and systems of meaning. We can be confused or informed and enriched by different ways of construing the world, different cultural practices and perspectives on those practices, and different ways of living in the world. We may ask, What in the world is going on, and what are the forces that are moving people around the global village? Many are being uprooted and displaced by famine, war, and violence. Some seek asylum in other countries. Others who are able to move may do so voluntarily. Societies are intercultural and transcultural realities. Their diversity will continue to increase. How do we live in a world of increased diversity with multiple realities and tensions? We will explore the influence of different international experiences, ethnicity and class, gender and religious differences, prejudice, discrimination, and segregation on practice, learning, and teaching. Our assumption is that practices such as teaching, psychotherapy, pastoral care, and counseling are culturally embedded, value laden, not neutral, and, therefore, not free of social and political ideologies and cultural bias. Intercultural realities are always a part of our one complex and interdependent world whether we recognize them or not. Therefore, intercultural realities imply an approach that takes seriously the cultural context.

In the chapters ahead, we use cases from different cultures to explore the influences of estrangement—trauma and suffering, terror and violence, deceit, betrayal and abandonment—on the call to be siblings. We will explore the obstacles to community and challenges that face people in their willingness to struggle together as siblings by choice. Narrative agency, systemic thinking, and intercultural realities are tools that shed light on our struggle. They can help us to uncover resources that point to our fundamental interrelatedness—resources that enable us to endure and to face estrangement with hope. We become siblings by choice when we struggle together to do the will or pleasure of God.

EXERCISE

In threesomes:

1. Share with other group members information about your siblings in your family of origin. How many brothers and sisters did you have? Are they living? Where do they reside? Where do you come in the birth order (for example, are you the oldest sister?)? If you were an only child, were there people close to you whom you thought of as siblings?
2. Read Mark 3:31–34 and 10:28–31. What does the phrase “will of God” mean to you?

Write down your thoughts. What questions do you have about these two texts? What problems or challenges do they present? What do these texts say about relationships? priorities? community?

Discuss your thoughts in your small group of three.

3. Jesus often tries to persuade the disciples to think in ways different from the prevailing ways of the world, different from the status quo. What is Jesus asking of his disciples in these two texts? What does the phrase “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mk. 3:35) mean to you? And how do you feel about the verse “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life” (Mk. 10:29). In your mind who is included or not included in the “hundredfold”?
4. What difference would it make if we considered *every* lonely, aging woman or old man we encountered as our “mother” or “father?” How would our world change? How would we?