Skeletons In the Closet: Let Them Out and Watch Them Dance

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Every family has secrets and difficult stories that they would rather not share.

One of the most frequent comments people make about my role as Ascent’s family historian is, “I bet you dig up some pretty interesting stories on your client families, ones they’d probably like to keep to themselves.” The topic of family secrets and unsavory stories runs through genealogy and family history books, articles, websites and blogs. Several themes dominate these discussions: 1) Every family has secrets and difficult stories that they would rather not share. 2) To outsiders, the stories are almost invariably intriguing, but that often salacious appeal can be the very thing that makes skeletons a delicate topic to broach. 3) And while most professional and amateur historians agree that exposing skeletons to daylight is a good thing, one must be sensitive to the potential emotional impact of these stories on individuals within a family—particularly if a story took place during a surviving family member’s lifetime or involves someone that person once knew—and proceed tactfully.

This paper takes the discussion further. It examines why it might be important to let the skeletons out of the closet and what might happen if and when you and your family decide to let them dance.

“If you cannot get rid of the family skeleton, you may as well make it dance.”

– George Bernard Shaw
“Immaturity,” 1931
Many skeletons are already dancing in the streets.

**WHAT ARE SKELETONS?**

This may seem like an easy question to answer, but we first need to agree on what “skeletons in the closet” means. “Skeletons in the closet” are those hidden details of the past that evoke shame, embarrassment, pain, sadness, anger or other negative connotations when they first come to light. Sociologists Aysan Sev’er and Jan Trost define skeletons more generally as “family conflict that is not publicly divulged.” These stories may have become skeletons when family members deliberately and consciously buried them, but that is not always the case. An inability to communicate effectively about the incident, why it happened, and the implications of its impact on the family in the short- and long-term can lead to silence and passive neglect. Over time, the stories might be forgotten and consigned to a crowded closet of old bones, but the consequences of the incidents can shape a family for generations. Some skeletons are embedded in grand narratives of national and international history, such as associations with the Atlantic slave trade or the Nazi regime. More common skeletons often include crime, substance abuse, psychiatric disorders, suicide, parent-child strife, domestic violence and adultery. Still other skeletons emerge from less tangible causes, such as a traumatic accident for which nobody can be blamed, but which lead to family fragmentation.

**WHY LET THEM OUT OF THE CLOSET?**

For one thing, many skeletons are already dancing in the streets, and more will continue to emerge as access to information improves. The digital age can provide anybody with access to a wide range of primary sources that reveal some aspects of these family stories, and the number of digital records is growing every day. Fifteen years ago, mining through newspaper and media records, the manuscript census, vital statistics, immigration and military records, books, journals and periodicals was a long, tedious, sometimes expensive and often frustrating process. These obstacles meant that secrets were pretty safely squirreled away for the ages. Today, however, the same documents can be found for free or for a minimal fee on just about any device with Internet capabilities, and they can be searched by specific words and phrases. Although only a fraction of records have been digitized—especially if they post-date 1922 and still fall under copyright protections—and rarely offer the rich and nuanced detail contained in archival collections of letters and diaries, an enormous amount of information is easily accessible to just about anybody who has the time and desire to look for it. This begs the question: Are your skeletons already out of the closet anyway?

And are those skeletons even skeletons anymore? One thing that history reveals is that change is inevitable. For example, within the past century, divorce, children born out of wedlock and mixed-race marriages may not have become universally accepted norms, but

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they have lost much of their stigma. If she were around today, Ellen, the protagonist in Edith Wharton’s “Age of Innocence” (1920), would no longer be forced to remain in her loveless, unhappy marriage to Count Olenski just to save the Welland family from the scandal of divorce. Similarly, the unmarried Lady Edith Crawley in the PBS series “Downton Abbey” would probably not have to secrete herself away to Switzerland to give birth to her child and then be forced to give her up for adoption or hide her with another family who lives on the estate near the manor house. And Edith’s rebellious cousin Rose might be able to go through with her marriage to the African American jazz singer, Terence Sampson. These fictional scenarios are all based in a historical reality that would have crowded a closet with skeletons less than a hundred years ago, but are far less likely to do so today.

Exhuming a family’s tragic past might also foster a glimmer of hope in the present. For example, in one family, a person who suffered from depression found comfort in the suicide note of an ancestor because he no longer felt like an anomaly and outcast in his family. Instead, he began to understand his psychological challenges as part of a continuum that shaped the family. This knowledge gave him strength to persevere in life and to avoid his ancestor’s fate. Another family might be able to broach the subject of addiction by sharing stories about an early twentieth-century ancestor who was prescribed morphine and then became addicted to it, a not-uncommon consequence of medical practices of that time. Such discussions can defuse tensions over blame and move a discussion toward acknowledging the existing problem and seeking solutions to overcome it.

Exploring family skeletons may also dispel myths and uncover helpful truths. One family recently learned that a great-grandfather had not abandoned his young wife and left her with few resources to care for their baby: the great-grandfather had actually died. This revelation gave rise to even more pride in the great-grandmother’s sacrifices, as well as a new sympathy for the plight of the great-grandfather who died young.

Of course the truth may not always be easy to digest. No families will take pride in cases of spousal abuse (one of the most common skeletons I come across). Stories of raw avarice or blatant dishonesty are not likely to become causes célèbres either. Even unearthing stories like these, however, can help current family members clarify their values and recognize that serious mistakes can be made and overcome. Amends can be made.
Generational differences matter, too. Edward Ball recounted his family's history of slavery in the best-seller and National Book Award winner, “Slaves in the Family.” The fact that the Ball family owned slaves was not a secret—the family owned more than 20 plantations and 4,000 slaves in South Carolina over a 200-year period—but the nature of the history and its legacy was vague. How were the slaves treated? What kind of people were the slave owners? How are the descendants of slave owners and slaves doing today? And how did slavery shape either side's experience? Should the Ball descendants be held accountable for their ancestors' complicity in what is universally regarded as a national sin? And if so, how? These are just a few of the questions for which Ball sought answers in his years-long journey through the past.

His extended family greeted this odyssey with varied reactions. The granddaughter of a former plantation owner who grew up with former slaves feared that Ball's research would spoil the mythology that Ball slaves were universally content and well treated. Slavery was wrong, she conceded, but the Ball family was eminently decent, all things considered. She agreed to an interview to keep this version of the family legacy alive. One of Edward Ball's uncles, a World War II veteran, returned home to a country that was soon torn apart by the social upheavals of the 1950s and 1960s. The uncle (who reasoned that he had nothing to do with slavery) believed that Edward Ball's journey only threatened to unleash hatred against the family and foment further upheaval. He wanted nothing to do with discussions of race and refused to participate in the project. But for the other baby boomers who, like Edward Ball, came of age in the post-Civil Rights era, the truth of the family's past was vitally important to uncover precisely because they understood their ancestors' relationship to slavery as influential in shaping modern society.

Another family was digging into its relatively recent past and uncovered a second cousin of a great-great-uncle who held a senior position in Hitler's Nazi regime. Surviving elders who lived through the nightmare of World War II were horrified to discover this family connection to one of the greatest evils in history. The guilt was almost unbearable despite the distant relationship of the ancestor. Younger (post-baby boom) members of the family responded differently. Nobody entertained for one second that the ancestor's culpability could be justified or excused, but this unfortunate chapter in the family's history was far removed from the younger generation's life experience and world view. They let it go.

In short, the difficult stories of a family's past—like any good story—can serve as a platform to launch necessary, if perhaps difficult, discussions and foster a culture of open and honest communication. By understanding how time, place, age, gender, culture and any number of other variables created and shaped a skeleton in the first place, family members can gain a more complex and nuanced understanding of contemporary sources of conflict and tension. They might be able to avoid creating new skeletons out of old bones that have been collecting dust in the closet.
WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF A FAMILY LETS ITS SKELETONS DANCE?

Anything can happen. Each person is bound to have a slightly different response to and interpretation of a story because each individual brings his or her own life experience to the story and understands it through that particular lens. But that is true of any story. On the one hand, family members might just laugh at their scandalous past or shrug their shoulders and move on. Responses like these often signify how family values or circumstances and social expectations have changed over time, which can help families imagine a future that is different from today and then influence how they manage their wealth and legacy. On the other hand, resurfacing skeletons might reignite old conflicts or generate new ones. Rather than allow the conflicts to cause serious fractures or to fester away in the closet again, families can begin to address them immediately. Indeed, in perhaps the best situations, families will gain new insights into the present by exploring the difficult past, individuals will experience personal growth and these new perspectives will help keep future closets clutter free. By exploring their history, skeletons and all, families can better identify both the positive and negative patterns of behavior that have shaped them over time and begin to address how they will honor the good and overcome the bad as they strive to maintain family cohesion. They can reinforce and redefine their values and goals in light of the past: a real past that recognizes the full spectrum of human behavior in the constant and ever-changing interplay between opportunity, choice and historical context. Perhaps not every skeleton needs to be exposed, but it might be useful (and even fun) to let a few of them dance.

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