

The Family by Anne Deveson

This passage, by ANNE DEVESON, comes from a volume edited by 'Terty Lane, one of Australia's top interviewers. In it, sixteen famous Australians talk frankly about their childhood. The volume is called As the Twig Is Bent.

During my childhood we moved from comparative wealth to extreme penury. My father was ill for a very long time after he arrived in Western Australia. He was in hospital and there was a long period when we had no money at all and were dependent on the Red Cross, who fed us, housed us and generally looked after us. When he came out of hospital and got a job teaching Malay in the army we had enough money, but only just enough, because we'd incurred so many debts the earlier period when nobody was earning anything and we were always paying back. We were very much watching what we ate and we didn't have the money to have shoes mended. I remember wanting to go to the pictures and not being able to afford it. We were never literally starving but we were very broke. From then on and for quite a long period of my adolescence I was very conscious of money and the fact that we didn't have it. When we were repatriated to England when I was fifteen, and until I left home, we were extremely poor because neither my father nor mother could get a job. There were always tremendous worries, moving from one grotty rented house to another. My father had the habit putting the bills that came in under the carpet because he was a tremendous escapist. So from about eleven years of age on lack of money figured enormously in my life. I know that there were times when bills came in and people felt sick inside because they didn't have the money and didn't know how they were going to pay them. I remember really suffering because of not having the money to buy clothes and to do the things that other kids my age were doing. For example, I can recall a dance – the first dance that I went to – and we were living in a reasonably prosperous suburb and everybody was buying their first long dresses to go to the dance. We just couldn't and this also affected the other two girls about my age who were living in a sort of extended family with us. We either had our mothers' cut-down dresses or we made them ourselves and we didn't have any sandals to wear, and I remember my mother made sandals for all of the three of us out of felt. Felt soles that she cut out and tied coloured tape around. They were great except that when we got to the dance they all fell to pieces! I felt different and I resented it. I can remember talking to a woman from the Brotherhood of St Laurence and hearing her tell of the damaging effect it can have on family relationships to not have enough money to live on adequately and to be constantly worried about money. It erodes family relationships if you are worried about the hole in the roof or whether you've got any money to buy shoes for your kids or pay the school bills. Unless you 've been through a period like that I think it's difficult to appreciate. It can be very frightening to feel there's a big draught coming up your back door.

I can remember when we were living in Sheffield when I was fifteen or sixteen and our penury was such that my mother went to work in London, my father wasn't working and the family was scattered. My younger brother, who was two, went to stay with relations in Bradford and my older brother had joined the army. My father went into a boarding house in Sheffield and I went to stay with school friends to finish schooling. I used to see my father at weekends and it was agonizing, because I couldn't talk to him and he couldn't talk to me. I came across a letter he had written to

my mother expressing extreme disappointment in this doltish daughter who never opened her mouth. It wasn't until I was grown up and could appreciate the reasons for his withdrawal and moods and he felt freer in his old age to reach out that we then began to establish a very good relationship.

The fact that my mother, from early childhood, worked and was independent and laid great stress upon economic independence affected the way I saw male and female roles. She had been through a period of economic dependency and it was obviously very important to her when she began to earn her own money. She and my father always kept separate bank accounts, which is something I've never felt the need to do, but I didn't grow up with the feeling that life depended on getting married. I grew up really conscious of the fact that you could take hold of your own destiny and do what you want with it and if you didn't like what you were in, well, too bad, you got out and moved on to something else. On the other hand I can recall my mother saying to me, after I'd been doing science at university for a year and hating it and not knowing what to do, 'Why don't you go and take a secretarial course so you can be secretary to some man with an interesting job.' I felt very angry and I can remember thinking, 'I want the interesting job.'

I don't mean that my mother never worried and didn't get frightened; she did. But she had this extreme courage and confidence in herself. She was the kind of person who, if something went wrong, wasn't going to sit back and let that swamp her whole life, because life was meant to be enjoyed, not lived in misery. She would literally up and change what was happening. She tended to be mildly intolerant of people who were not as resilient. And she was also very restless, which is a characteristic I can see in myself sometimes and I don't really want to be as consumed as she was by always having to do things. She was never a contemplative person but was constantly active. She'd be moving furniture at midnight, or sewing loose covers for chairs and making clothes and hats for people at all times. She did this when both she and father were out of work and sometimes she made a martyr of herself when she needn't have done.

There are some pluses from my unstable childhood. For instance, I enjoy travelling and it doesn't disturb me if I don't have anywhere to sleep at night. If I run out of money I always feel that I can find it again somewhere, or if I lose my bus ticket I feel it will be all right, it's not the end of the world. And I think that sort of ability to cope with change is a plus, for which I'm grateful. I think that another thing that comes having a lot of change in childhood, painful though it can be, is that you learn how to make friends and how to open up to people. You have to go into a new classroom, feeling sick inside, and you have to go up to the woman next door and ask her where the shops are—in other words, you have to be able to open up communication with people, and I think that's a plus. Another was growing up with other children around, firstly on the property out of Perth, where the three families were living together, and later in Perth itself, the three families moved into a two-bedroom bungalow house and the kids all slept in the sleepout. That was a very good period, because that kind of extended family is really very supportive. You learn how to live with other people and you learn that there are others beyond those who are closest to you who can give you love and in turn take love.

Two or three years ago I was talking with Margaret Mead and she was stressing the need for children to have people other than their mother and father around, and for people to be able to expand beyond the very tight confines of the so-called nuclear family. Children need someone who can take them fishing and show them the stars—and this was something that I appreciated in the early adolescent period. The fact that there were the other two women and that there were other children around me, some older and some younger, and the fact that the three families had other friends and relations, meant that the house was always full of people. Sometimes, if you wanted privacy, it could be hell. But on the other hand, I always had the feeling that there was someone I could turn to if I was feeling lonely, or if I'd had a blazing row with my mother. Children go through periods of being unable to talk with their parents, no matter how good the communication, just because of the fact that it is a parent-child relationship. It's very important that parents understand that and respect that need, and it's important for kids to have someone else – some other adult – with whom they are easy and friendly and can open up.

I would like to see both architecturally and in people's attitudes towards family life a recognition of the very positive things that can come from some sort of community living that means more sharing. It shouldn't preclude any kind of privacy, because privacy is important, but so is sharing. One of the things that concerned me when the Commission Report came out was the very hostile reaction to it that I think came about through people's fear of change. People criticised the Commission's definition of the family in which we talked about the need to recognise that a family can be many different groupings of people who are living together under one roof in a caring kind of environment. I don't think that's something we should be frightened of. We should be far more flexible and recognise that there are many different kinds of families and that families and children have different needs.

I have three children of my own and I think the values one imparts to children are not the things you say but the things you are. I think honesty is important between people, and I don't think I always have that. I was a very manipulative person, probably because of moving from one environment to another, and because I am the kind of person who wants everything to be happy and wants people to be joyous and life to be lovely. There's a very strong Pollyanna element, and I know for a long time I used to very much manipulate the environment in order to make it that way. I think that's a fool's paradise, so I think it's important with children to live with reality, which doesn't mean not enjoying fantasy, but learning to recognise that fantasy is fantasy. I think you can overprotect children from what's happening in a family. It's better to talk through problems and admit that they exist rather than try to cover them up and pretend they're not there or pretend that you're going to jump over them quite easily.

Warmth and affection and loving and touching are very important. I had that in my own childhood. I'm conscious of quite a lot of warmth and holding and demonstrativeness as a child and I feel that's very important. Unless you have that yourself you can't give it in return. I would like to think that I am free enough to express the feelings that I have, because otherwise you're a half-dead person and it's important with children to be able to show spontaneity with them so that they in turn are free to be spontaneous.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the meaning of the word 'penury'?
2. What were Anne's early years in Australia like?
3. In England, did the situation of the family improve or deteriorate? Explain with details.
4. How did Anne view her mother and father?
5. What was Anne's attitude towards all that her family went through?
6. How did Anne's attitude mould her perception of life? Explain.
7. What are Anne's views on family? Do you agree with them?
8. How important has the family been to Anne Deveson?
9. Does Anne achieve personal growth? Explain.
10. Pick out details that suggests:
 - a. The frankness and honesty of the author
 - b. Her balanced opinions