

**Born to Rebel**  
**by the Rev. Ann Schranz**  
**Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation**  
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How about those Lakers?! [The Lakers won the basketball championship.] I watched Game 7 on Thursday evening and felt jubilant at the Lakers' win over the Boston Celtics. When the television news reporters interviewed fans afterward, I was startled to see an image which ties into this morning's theme – the importance of birth order in our lives.

Of the three brothers interviewed, the eldest had on a Lakers shirt, the middle brother wore a Celtics shirt, and the youngest brother had on a Lakers shirt. Having just immersed myself in Frank Sulloway's book *Born to Rebel: Birth Order, Family Dynamics, and Creative Lives*, I thought to myself: "Of course! That middle brother is likely to emphasize his difference from the older brother, and one way to do that is by *not* being a Lakers fan."

Then I found myself returning to a memory from my childhood. I am sitting at the top of the basement stairs, with now cold broccoli on the plate next to me. I would be sitting at the top of the stairs until I ate my broccoli. Yes, it seemed to me an abuse of parental power at the time, but what really got me upset is that my younger sister made a big show about eating broccoli and how much she liked it. Ha! I doubt it. Nobody could like this smelly, green, chewy, funny looking food. I was sure Mary only pretended to like broccoli to curry favor with our parents.

Sibling rivalry plays itself out in households, congregations, and nations. It is worthwhile to consider the impact of birth order on our lives and on the lives of

others because we need all the help we can get in understanding possible causes of friction among us and in understanding possible ways to use friction productively as a mechanism for finding “win-win” outcomes. We need all the help we can get in working together more effectively and in playing together more often.

Here are the basics: Generally speaking, firstborns identify more strongly with power and authority.<sup>1</sup> Firstborns are generally sympathetic to preserving the status quo, and those born later are more inclined to innovation. “Over time, the strategies perfected by firstborns have spawned counterstrategies by laterborns,” according to Frank Sulloway.

Who is Frank Sulloway, and why should we believe him? He has a Ph.D. in the history or science from Harvard University and is a former MacArthur Fellow. He was a research scholar at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He has written about the nature of scientific creativity and has published extensively on the life and ideas of Charles Darwin. To look at the impact of birth order, he studied 6,000 lives in Western history, and he computerized more than half a million biographical data points about these lives. Statistical computer models allowed him to look the impact of birth order relative to other factors in people’s lives. He looked at what actually happened in history and then built models that predicted it.

To delve a bit deeper into the subject, let us consider the role of birth order in the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Sulloway used computer models that allowed him to assess the influence of each potential predictor of Reformation loyalties while controlling for the influence of the other variables. “Reformation

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<sup>1</sup> *Born to Rebel: Birth Order, Family Dynamics, and Creative Lives* by Frank Sulloway, Pantheon Books, New York, 1996, pages xiv and xvii.

loyalties” means loyalty to Catholicism or to Protestantism. “Regardless of the statistical approach that we take,” he concludes, “birth order emerges as the best predictor of confessional [religious] choice. Firstborns typically defended the Catholic faith. Laterborns generally endorsed Protestantism.”<sup>2</sup>

“Hold your horses! I’m not so sure about that,” we might say. Since northern Europe generally accepted the Protestant faith, and southern Europe rejected it, maybe what happened has more to do with geography than with birth order.” Here is where things get interesting. Birth order and geography come together in terms of how land gets passed from one generation to another. There are two main forms of inheritance. One form is called “primogeniture,” where an entire piece of property is inherited by the oldest son. The other form is where each son receives a part of the property. (That form of inheritance is called “partible inheritance.”) Alas, women did not inherit under either system.

“During the early years of the Reformation, partible inheritance was more common among Protestant than Catholic princes . . . The teachings of Luther and other reformers specifically advocated partible inheritance as a manifestation of brotherly equality. The leading Catholic dynasties, by contrast, remained strongly committed to primogeniture. In lending support to partible inheritance, Protestantism protected the interests of its laterborn backers, just as Catholicism tended to protect the interests of firstborns.”<sup>3</sup>

Sulloway continues, “German soil presented an ideal region for the triumph of Protestantism . . . The more that principalities were subdivided, and hence

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<sup>2</sup> Page 262.

<sup>3</sup> Page 264.

available for political control by younger sons, the more those territories tended to adopt the Protestant cause. As a result, today's religious map of Europe still reflects the psychological influence of the birth order of rulers more than four centuries ago.”<sup>4</sup>

The Reformation era was very bloody. On all sides, people were killed for their religious beliefs. “Throughout Europe, most Catholic martyrs were firstborns . . . Compared with firstborns, laterborns were 46 times more likely to suffer martyrdom for the Protestant faith! Taking into account the local religious context, birth order correctly predicts the religious cause for which 86 percent of martyrs gave their lives. Laterborns were martyred for their religious radicalism, whereas firstborns were martyred for their continued adherence to the old faith.”<sup>5</sup>

The Reformation era was a long time ago and far, far away. What does any of it matter on this fine day in southern California? Thankfully, Unitarian Universalists do not, as a rule, kill each other for being too liberal or too conservative. However, as individuals and as a congregation, we do grapple with how to be in the world, how to act in the world. Inside and outside this congregation, wherever decisions are made, whenever we attempt to sway opinions, right there we find a tension between holding onto the familiar and risking the new. There we find echoes and reverberations of birth order.

As children, we are dependent upon parents or other adults, and we develop strategies for gaining access to the benefits that they can provide. Siblings create different roles for themselves in an attempt to curry parental favor. “Eldest

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<sup>4</sup> p. 266.

<sup>5</sup> p. 268

children, for example, are likely to seek parental favor by acting as surrogate parents toward their younger siblings,” says Sulloway. “Younger siblings are not in a position to ingratiate themselves with parents in the same manner. Their niche is typically less parent identified, less driven by conscientious behavior, and more inclined toward sociability.”<sup>6</sup>

Firstborns tend to be ambitious, conscientious, achievement oriented, conforming, conventional, and defensive. Laterborns tend to be more imaginative, flexible, creative, independent, and liberal.<sup>7</sup> “Change favors the underdog,” and laterborns tend to be the underdogs in a family system. How does this play out in Unitarian Universalist ministry? Firstborns tend to be overrepresented in Unitarian Universalist ministry (and possibly in the ministry of other denominations, as well.) On several occasions, I have been with ministerial colleagues and birth order comes up. Each time this happened, over three-fourths of each group said they were the eldest child or only child.

What are we to make of this? Should laterborns be aggressively recruited for ministry, perhaps in a kind of affirmative action program? ;) Whose perspective, if any, deserves to be privileged -- underdog or the “top dog”? How do we know whether a particular change is good? My view is this: There are all sorts of people in the world, with all sorts of expectations, hopes, gifts, and prickliness.

To make the world a better place and to make ourselves better people, we need a mixture of conscientiousness and creativity, conservation and innovation, ambition and flexibility. We are not likely to find the optimum mixture within ourselves at

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<sup>6</sup> Page 21.

<sup>7</sup> Page 20.

any given point in time, so we need each other. It may be too much for *children* in the throes of sibling rivalry to realize that their niche in the family is not the only niche, and that, in fact, their siblings' approaches offer valuable insights.

However, what is impossible for children is possible for those of us who are adults. It is human nature to paint ourselves in a glowing light and to shade the truth in the other direction when describing those with whom we struggle. Fortunately, human nature is somewhat malleable, somewhat changeable. Not infinitely malleable, but sufficiently malleable. We can step back from demonizing opponents. We can bring to awareness those times when we put only our best foot forward, reluctant to admit to ourselves that motion usually requires both of our feet, not just our best foot.

As the July 1 start of the congregation's new fiscal year approaches, changes in committee leadership are upon us. We will work with some of the same people, though perhaps in different ways. New relationships of mutual trust will have to be nurtured with intention. We will have to find our way between conserving what is best about the status quo and opening ourselves to new ways of doing things, new ways of being together.

We can expect moments of awkwardness. Now and then, we can expect to say (and can expect to hear) words that go "clunk" instead of soaring. We can find ourselves defending niches whose very existence had been beneath our conscious awareness. All this is part of congregational life. Here in the congregation we can practice letting go of knee jerk reactions that may have more to do with birth order or other artifacts from our past than they do with our aspirations for treating one

another with respect. Here in the congregation we can practice being gentle with each other, except when the greater good is served by being tough with each other.

May we be conscious of complexity – our complexity and the complexity of others. May we have the courage to be tough. May we have the courage to be gentle. May it be so!