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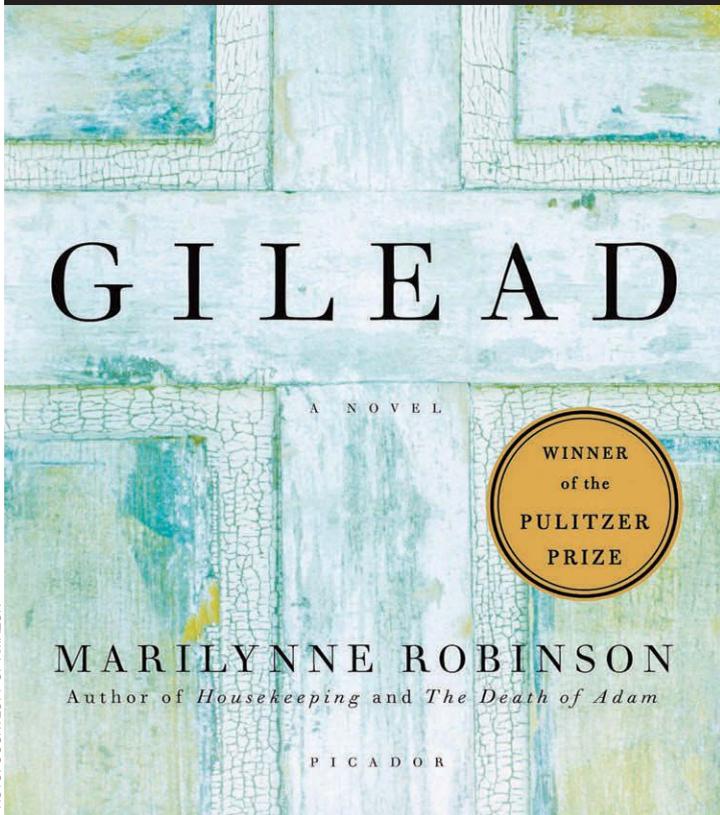


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Artists of Our BEHAVIOR

Here are three suggestions on how to respond to difficulties with family members.

In the award-winning 2004 novel “Gilead,” by Marilynne Robinson, a dying pastor in rural Iowa writes a series of letters to his young son. In one letter, the minister suggests how to respond to people with whom we struggle. He submits that as “artists of our behavior,” we have a choice to “participate in grace” and respond to difficult people in our lives “otherwise than as circumstances would seem to dictate ... freed ... of the impulse to hate or resent that person.”

His message is that when faced with people problems, or problem people, we should first “give grace” (as we have received) by considering how the troubled person is being used by God to impart a useful lesson or benefit. Seeing value in our interaction with the person thus frees us to consider a wider range of responses to their negativity than just playing defense or responding with knee-jerk criticism.

Regardless of your agreement with the theological underpinnings of this high-road approach, the idea that we

can always learn something or benefit from interaction with others is a powerful concept in family business, where tough interactions with loved ones go hand-in-hand with the benefits of working together. Here are a few responses you might consider when faced with difficult dealings with family.

RESPOND WITH QUESTIONS. Disputes in family business are often rooted in miscommunication or a lack of any communication. For example, in the absence of an agreed-upon plan for inheritance, transition timelines, management roles, in-law considerations or financial distributions (to name just a few), family members begin to assume what will or should happen, and are disappointed when their expectations are not fulfilled.

When someone is upset and lashes out, your first inclination may be to react by justifying why you’ve made certain decisions. But another option is to respond with questions. What led them to have those expectations? How do they envision the future? What do they want? Asking such questions moves the dialogue from reactionary to exploratory, and offers a chance to change the trajectory of the interaction.

RESPOND WITH SPACE. When you feel that someone is unfairly attacking you, a common tendency is to fight back. But instead of immediately responding, consider letting the other person fully vent their frustrations but with a request that you have a conversation the next day. This provides ample time for you to reflect on their concerns, for them to also reflect on what they’ve said, all while ensuring more dialogue. As Charlie Munger, Warren Buffett’s business partner, once said, “If telling a man to go to hell is such a good idea, you can always tell him tomorrow.”

RESPOND WITH COMMITMENT. People in conflict often do not feel heard by the other person, which is why active listening techniques are helpful in managing disputes. Beyond the immediate practices, however, consider expressing a commitment to further explore the issues, work on the relationship and improve your bond with a family member. A pledge to follow through on the issues in dispute, while not immediately resolving the conflict or ceding the other person’s point, suggests that you want to make the situation and the relationship better.

I’m often struck by the number of times people suggest they have no choice in how they respond to difficulties with family members. The reality is that there are always a range of choices in how we respond. Those choices are framed both by our ability to change how we see the other person and whether we can see ourselves as artists, or creators, of our conduct. ●

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