

When Conflict Takes Hold

Lessons can be learned from a classic novel about choices made during stressful times.

I recently finished reading what John Steinbeck considered his most significant novel, “East of Eden,” which traces two families in California’s Salinas Valley through the late-19th and early 20th centuries. As we follow the two groups through generations of family conflict and drama, success and failure, a central discussion emerges around one’s ability, when faced with difficult circumstances, to choose good over evil as our response.

The story is placed alongside the biblical story of Cain and Abel, more specifically the choice that Cain makes to kill his brother after God does not look favorably upon his sacrifice (Genesis 4: 5–8). By murdering his brother, Cain chooses the path of evil, and Steinbeck asks throughout the novel: Are we doomed to repeat Cain’s choice of violence, conflict and sin over the option of mercy, forgiveness and understanding?

Steinbeck focuses on the Hebrew word *timshel*, which he translates as “thou mayest,” meaning we may fall prey to sin and violence, or we may not: We have a choice. As situations unfold throughout the novel, characters are confronted with opportunities to make the choice between a negative, harmful response or a positive, redemptive one.

STEINBECK’S LESSON FOR TODAY. The contemporary family business provides an equally fascinating setting in which to ask whether families are destined to repeat the patterns of conflict that shaped prior generations. Sibling rivalry, unequal treatment or gifts, opportunities based on birth order, gender

bias, emotional and physical abuse—all of these difficulties entwine with shared economic and vocational interests to set the stage for major drama and conflict. How will family members respond to such difficult situations?

Consider your own family’s narrative. If you think hard about the events that have caused pain and suffering in your family, when and where are the critical junctures at which a family member made a choice about his or her response, and the family and business began to come apart? Can you pinpoint the decisions in the arc of your family’s development that set the stage for more difficulty?

OUR CHOICE. It seems many times in family conflicts people feel they must respond a certain way to a perceived injustice, that they really have no choice in their approach. The situation demands a confrontation; the slight from another requires an unequivocally forceful response. Do they have a choice in this response? Or has their fate been sealed, their course of action predetermined, and all are simply following the steps laid out before them?

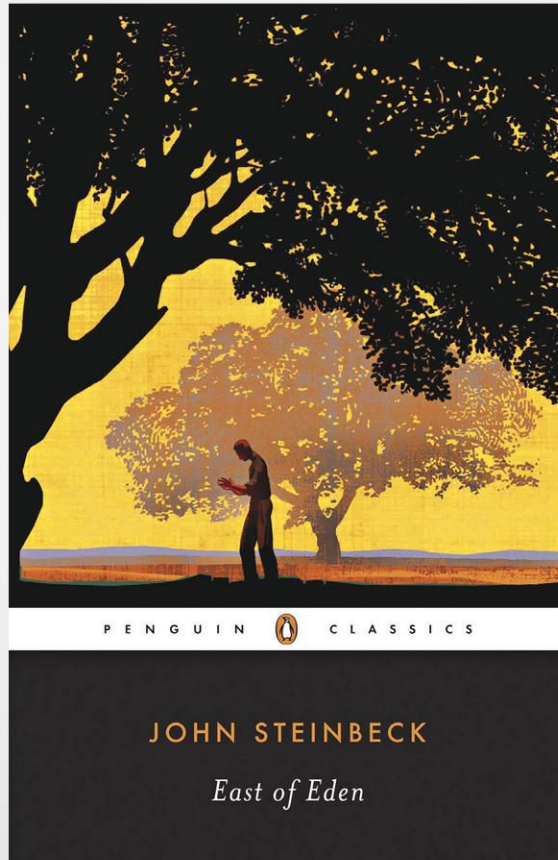
Yet, in other family situations, I’ve seen an unexpected apology set the stage for a renewed business partnership. I’ve witnessed how forgiveness has allowed family members to move forward. I’ve watched family members choose to listen—and really hear—the concerns of their loved ones, and relationships begin to heal. In other words, I’ve watched family members make a choice

in the direction of mercy, forgiveness and understanding.

As is so often said, our future has less to do with the things that happen to us and more to do with our response to difficulties, conflict and crises. Remembering that we have a choice—*timshel*—in how we respond to our family members is a most important lesson for us all. ●



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