

Your  
**FAMILY**  
Revealed



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A Guide to Decoding  
the Patterns, Stories, and Belief Systems  
in Your Family

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Book Excerpt

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# Introduction

Our families can be a source of our greatest joys and our deepest struggles. This book is intended to help you decode your family so that you can understand your family dynamics by better understanding how family systems operate, which will allow you to more fully know yourself and anyone with whom you have relationships.

Family constellations have changed significantly in the twenty-first century. Our society began to accept and acknowledge multiracial and multicultural families, as well as single-parent families, blended families, and families with same-sex partners more fully. In addition, in past generations families tended to live in proximity, whereas in our current society, family members often live great distances from one another. This certainly alters the time spent together physically, which may have tremendous impact on individual members as well as the relationship among the members. The distance may also change the psychological impact that family relations have on the family members. But despite how families have changed, they still have enormous influence on our lives and on all of our relationships.

This book explains some of the fundamental concepts found in Family Systems Theory. My intention is to encourage readers to use the concepts presented here to more fully understand how their original families' functioning, patterns, and processing have impacted them in the past, and continue to impact them in the here and now. Also, to recognize how their current relationships impact their extended family system.

This book is a user-friendly guide that explains how a family profoundly impacts its members in a myriad of ways, including:

- Influencing an individual's values and beliefs
- Influencing an individual's sense of self and identity in the world
- Teaching relational skills and emotional/rational responses

The more understanding and awareness you have of these influences, the more power you have to choose who and how you want to be, as well as how you want to relate to others.

As I was completing my graduate studies in counseling psychology in 1973, I was introduced to a *new* way of thinking. Up until the 1950s, most psychology was focused on the individual. By the time I was in graduate school, a new therapy was bursting onto the mental health scene: Family Therapy (Relationship Therapy), which was born out of Family Systems Theory. I became enthralled with this new paradigm, and have remained so throughout the years.

I was fortunate to be one of the early practitioners in this new field of marriage and family therapy, or *relationship* therapy. Now, many years later, having seen hundreds of individuals, couples and families, and teaching graduate courses in Marriage and Family Therapy, I am still fascinated with the study of family systems theory and relationship therapy.

### **This Labyrinth Called Life**

As individuals, we travel this *Labyrinth Called Life*. As I imagine it, each person begins in the center of the labyrinth with one's birth mother and then one's family. We thus embark on our life's journey, traveling out from our families into the world.

Those of us who practice walking the Labyrinth of Life intentionally discover that in order to truly understand and know

ourselves, it is important that we occasionally spiral back to our origins. This journey through the labyrinth is primarily a psychological journey. As we return to examine the beginning of our experiences with our families, our perspectives and understandings alter and deepen at different ages and stages of our lives. How a twenty-year-old understands her experience in her family is deeper and broader than when she was ten. And when this twenty-year-old is forty, her understanding of her family can be even greater, particularly if she chooses to traverse the labyrinth—circling in, circling out.

Those who never truly move outward do not have the perspective to understand their family's dynamics. Those who spiral outward but are unwilling to circle back periodically to experience, contemplate, and deepen their understanding often find themselves feeling disconnected. This person might experience not only being disconnected from family but also not being connected to self. Traversing the labyrinth of the family—moving inward, moving outward, returning, and leaving over the course of our lives—is essential for a true understanding of who we are.

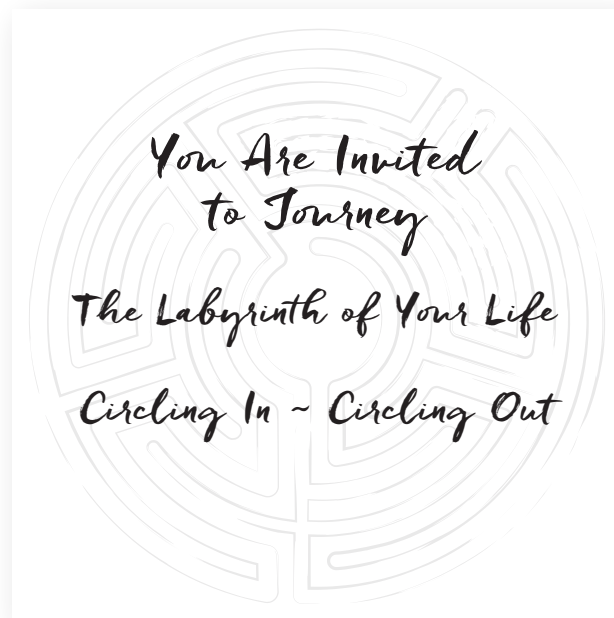
For some, the family was and is experienced positively. Returning to the family either physically and/or emotionally/mentally is like returning to a precious touchstone that imbues us with strength and love. For others, the family was and is experienced negatively. To return physically and/or emotionally/mentally is like diving into the abyss. Most of us would prefer to avoid experiencing the abyss. But as many a wise person has implied, the only way to true healing is to be willing to plunge into the darkness of the abyss and attempt to find the light.

For most of us, the family has impacted us both positively and negatively. That seems to be part and parcel of the human experience.

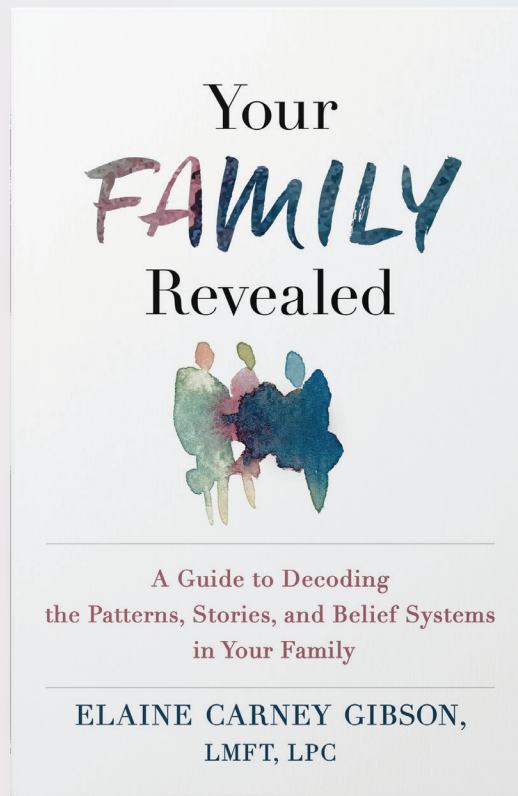
I want to be clear; I am not advocating living in the past. I wholeheartedly believe that being in the present is what allows

us to be fully alive and in touch with our power. However, one's past has a tremendous influence on one's present. I, therefore, advocate examining the past consciously, with intent, to give us knowledge and power in the present. If we avoid this conscious exploration, THE PAST will still be influencing us—we will simply be unconscious and unaware that it is doing so. Personally, I find conscious living to be preferable.

As is indicated in the table of contents, each chapter explains a concept pertinent to Family Systems Theory. At the end of each chapter is an inquiry that I encourage you to ponder. You may find it helpful to purchase a journal and record your responses to the questions. I also want to encourage you to consider discussing some of these inquiries, as well as your thoughts and concerns, with family members.



**May you accept this invitation and use this book as your guide.**



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