**The Story that Needn’t Have Happened**

**By Nancy J. Ross, LCSW, BCD**

Only a few months ago I sat by my son while he wavered back and forth between helpless anger and grief. He had recently received the message that his father had suddenly died. Like any of us who lose a parent, his grief was deep and wrenching. The anger came in spurts as he expressed his loss and frustration over his father’s bitter legacy. His father had left nothing for his four adult children. Instead all his money went to his second wife with a message in the will that if they were to contest this decision, they would be left with nothing in the future.

None of my children are well-off, but the money that their father would normally have left them, would have conveyed a sense of on-going caring; a leaving behind a sense of their importance to him. Instead, they were left with a sense of emptiness compounded with the loss of a parent who would never be able to tell them “why?”

How could this happen? My former husband was a millionaire. Some even said a billionaire. There was no lack of money to leave to his second family. I think what sometimes happens, particularly with families of divorce where a remarriage occurs, new alliances are formed, assumptions about the ‘old’ family are made, and loyalties shift to align with the new family. Add to that the difficulty of discussing money and one’s own demise, it’s easy to see how a wall of denial is created that avoids the topic altogether.

It didn’t have to be this way. Every day I see families who might otherwise start down this destructive road, make decisions that instead, create a positive, lasting legacy. I’m reminded of a family that I met with a few months ago. Their Trusts and Estates lawyer, whom I’ve worked with before, called me in to meet with a couple who were planning to disinherit their children. Both parents were angry and disillusioned at what they perceived were adult children who didn’t value their parents, and only ‘used them’ when they needed money. They planned instead to leave their money to charity.

As a licensed mental health professional, mediator, Collaborative Practitioner, and family therapist, I see many families who have essentially given-up on their children. Often, they have lost touch, don’t really know or understand each other, and over the years have begun to assume the worst about each other.

Because we work together as a team, the lawyer and I discussed how to help the couple in their decision-making and give them the best possible chance to understand the implications of their decision. Sometimes, we also have a Financial Specialist help the family understand the finances, and come up with creative solutions. In this case, the parents were open to our meeting with each of their children (separately). Far from the picture the parents had painted, the children both expressed a need and a want to ‘make something better of their lives’ and forge a closer, more enduring relationship with their parents. In the end, the parents along with their lawyer, created an ‘incentive trust’ that challenged their son to complete his education and helped their daughter earn her first home. We only met for two sessions, yet the family was changed dramatically forever.

A different outcome is created when families make the decision to enlist skilled professionals to facilitate their dialogue and look for creative solutions. Sometimes that takes a team.