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My last column dealt with the labels we tend to affix on other people. Today, I want us to think about the things we tell ourselves about our own existence. I once read about a man, adopted as a baby, who thought of himself as a “thrown-away” child. He became a physician like the man who adopted him. It didn't help. He still lacerated himself with the “thrown-away” label. He knew his adoptive parents loved him; they told him so in word and deed. It seems to have made little difference.

Where did he get the idea of a “thrown-away” child? Did he make it up himself? Did he read or hear the concept in another context and picked it for his own use? It's unlikely his adoptive parents ever used the term.

My husband mentioned early in our marriage that he evolved from an unwanted pregnancy. He heard his mother complain to his dad, whom she blamed for it. His parents had two sons, 15 and 7 years old, when Darold was born. To give the devil his due, raising a baby would have been a lot of work at a time when you washed diapers and cooked pablum with no daughter to help babysit and a husband who distanced himself from domestic chores. Still, their youngest never got over the notion that he was unloved. He died in 2003, leaving behind conflicted adult children whose mother never remarried.

All his life Darold drove himself, ever striving, ever achieving, as if that might change his fate. He drove our children also, worried that, if he didn't find things for them to do, they'd stray from the straight and narrow. He was enamored of Ronald Reagan when Reagan was governor of California and more so when he became US President. Every time we went on an outing to Santa Barbara, we drove by the Reagan ranch and, although we never caught a glimpse of the former actor on horseback, Darold insisted his sons learn to horseback ride. He saw to it that they enrolled in 4H and FFA. Ever more animals crowded our few acres. Besides the horses, there were calves, Barbedo sheep, a sow and her piglets, chickens. One time we owned a few gorgeous Japanese silkies, miniature chickens that roamed free but, to the chagrin of our boys, were carried off by neighbors' dogs.

The brother two years younger than I told me in adulthood he wanted to learn to play the guitar as an adolescent but figured it was “useless.” In his view, I, his sister, had usurped the territory of parental approval for guitar playing. He'd have to figure out something else to get our parents' attention.

I was astonished and dismayed. Karl had opted to forego a learning experience he might have enjoyed because he anticipated parental indifference. In truth, our parents rarely involved themselves in their children's doings, preoccupied as they were with running their business. Further, they were likely haunted in childhood by the terror of the First World War. Terror repeated itself twenty years later when it threw their young-adult lives into panic, disorder, and confusion.

Individuals who are depressed or suicidal may tell themselves very damaging things about themselves. My mother, who lost her mother at sixteen, convinced herself that she would die young, of cancer, as had been the fate of her mother. And she did, leaving behind the same number of immature children as her mother had. Today I suppose her obsession with her mother's death may have been an inadequate or misguided form of grieving but at the time, her forecast loomed large in her children's assortment of fears.

My aunt, *Tante Anna*, lost her mother when she was nine. Unlike my mother, my aunt lived to be almost ninety, yet in her lifetime she was similarly preoccupied. Sometime after her funeral my cousin, whom she had named after me, confided that her mother never was truly present for her children. *Tante Anna* sought relief in keeping herself busy, "keeping her nose to the grindstone," as the saying goes, but she, too, imparted a story of yearning for death.

"All her life Mother looked forward to being reunited with her mother in heaven," said Cousin Edith.

When I was close to fourteen, I came face to face with another aunt who seemed to have labeled herself as helpless. She needed to to change a dependency relationship she'd gotten herself into.

Aunt Lilo had fled Communist East Germany (as my parents did with their children some years earlier) but my mother's half-sister did so on promises of a man who, it turned out, had no intention of leaving his wife to marry her. She wrote Mother that she and her beau would arrive Sunday afternoon for a visit. From overhearing my parents' talk, I passed sketchy details to my brother Karl. "She is the kept woman of that man," I said, not knowing what it meant. "She lives in a cheap hotel."

A week later the beau, much older than she, brought her in his automobile. He sat by her side, nodding eagerly as Lilo pleaded her case. The adults sipped their Sunday coffee and nibbled the bread-like concoction we called *Kuchen*, while we children ate our cakelets on the stairwell, four-year-old Helmut skipping his nap to be with his brother and sister.

Lilo wanted to join our family. "I don't want charity. I'll work for my keep," she said.

"I hope they let her stay," I whispered to Karl. "Then I can keep going to school." Dad had alerted me that my parents planned to take me out of school when I reached fourteen. Under guild regulations, Dad the Master Baker had the right to apprentice me even if I rarely set foot in his bakehouse.

What with Mother's scorn at her sister's lax morals, denying Lilo must have been a foregone conclusion. Our had no say in the matter; Lilo was Mother's relations.

A week after their visit, Lilo's beau wrote my aunt had killed herself. Aunt Lilo's death crushed what hopes I held to stay distanced from Mother's domain.

“We need your help at home,” said my dad. “Your mother, you know, is not well,” said Dad.

Lilo, I learned later, had arrived in West Germany without her birth certificate, afraid to secure the document lest East German officials get suspicious. Why did she not plead for asylum in West Germany? Why did she stake her hopes, first on a man who lied to her, then on an older sister who, she must have known, held childhood grudges against a youngster she deemed privileged? Lilo’s dad was my mother’s stepdad, her own father having perished in the First World War. I remember Mother telling me anecdotes that featured Lilo as a selfish child—yet Lilo was barely six when their mother perished. The upshot is, Mother was unwilling to extend charity toward her sister.

People who are depressed or suicidal have little awareness of how their black moods may distress those around them. The weight of a mother’s too-early demise surely affected my mother, my *Tante Anna*, and Aunt Lilo, in the worst possible way. My brothers and I, and my cousins, had a shadow darkening our young lives that left us depressed in turn. As adults, did we act the “good-enough parent” our children surely craved? I’m afraid we did not.