

# Brother v brother: Lessons from Prince Harry

Sibling rivalry can be a bitter thing, as the tell-all memoir *Spare* reveals. Throw grief into the mix, and it can become toxic.



**Chong Siow Ann**

Many journalists, think-piece writers, and social and cultural commentators have pilloried British royal Prince Harry's tell-all memoir, *Spare*. Indeed, the BBC called the ghost-written chronicle of grievances against the House of Windsor by the younger son of King Charles "the weirdest book ever written by a royal".

However, I have read this memoir through the lens of a psychiatrist. Patients, in telling us their stories, often use images and metaphors – some who are depressed even refer to themselves as "rubbish" or a "burden" to others.

"Spare", the metaphor which Prince Harry used as the single-word title of his memoir, is telling in how he resentfully views his station in life.

Born second to a future king (his brother Prince William), he was assigned the status of "spare", and his importance and influence diminished even more once his brother, heir to the throne, started to have offspring.

Prince Harry has, on the one hand, called Prince William his "beloved brother" and on the other,

his "archnemesis". In the pettiness and triviality of complaints, especially, we get a sense of the extent of this conflict and resentment.

He gripes about the unfairness of their bedrooms. Their shared childhood bedroom, he tells us, was unequally divided: Prince William having the larger half, with a double bed and a splendid view, while he had a bed with a sagging mattress. His accommodation continued to be less luxurious than Prince William's: His Kensington Palace apartment has no light; at Balmoral, he is given a "mini room in a narrow back corridor, among the offices of Palace staff".

He even jokes that his existence came about in order to provide his own organs to Prince William, should the need arise.

**DOES ORDER OF BIRTH MATTER?**

Anyone looking for psychological insights into this sibling rivalry and jealousy would think of Dr Alfred Adler's theory of birth order. The 19th-century Austrian psychotherapist said birth order leads to differences in the personality of siblings and their life outcomes.

Proponents of this theory might point out that a firstborn like Prince William tends to grow up dutiful, conservative, has less reason to quarrel with the status quo, and hence identifies more with the world view of their



The pettiness and triviality of Prince Harry's (far left) complaints reveal the extent of his resentment towards Prince William. He gripes, for example, about his brother being given the larger half of a shared bedroom.  
PHOTO: AFP

parents.

Younger siblings are less sure of their parents' view and more likely to choose alternative paths in life. But this is too simplistic. Parents – try as they might – do not treat their children the same, regardless of birth rank. They instead react to the innate temperament of their children. The outcome may also depend on whether the parents are equipped – either by experience or the right instinct – to effectively respond to the varying needs of their different children, especially in difficult times.

In Prince Harry's case, there is that much-publicised trauma on the early morning of Aug 31, 1997. Harry, then aged 12, was awakened by his father Charles, then Prince of Wales, with the terrible news that the siblings' mother, Diana, Princess of Wales – divorced and estranged from their father – had died in a car crash in Paris.

Prince Harry remembers that his father didn't hug him then. "He wasn't great at showing emotions under normal circumstances, how could he be expected to show them in such a crisis? But his hand did fall once on my knee and he said: It's going to be okay. That was quite a lot for him. Fatherly, hopeful, kind. And so very untrue," Prince

Harry writes.

It was a shattering loss from which Prince Harry has not recovered. He writes that, for years, he believed that his mother had faked her death, was hiding, and would come back to get him.

**GRIEF POLICING**

British anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer argued that the English social practice of mourning was transformed in the early 20th century in the aftermath of World War I to the extent that, by the 1960s, grief was something to be kept "under complete control by strength of will and character, so that it need be given no public expression".

King Charles was a product of that English generation of that era with its vaunted ethos of maintaining a "stiff upper lip" – and the royal family at the top of the English class system has to have the stiffest upper lip of all.

People who do grief policing are, in fact, appointing themselves judge of the appropriateness of other people's grieving and whether it meets their expectations. Anything contrarian makes them uncomfortable or indignant.

But grief policing can complicate grief, because when we are judged, we don't feel safe and we don't just put a lid on everything; we seal it tight against the straining pressure. Perhaps that's why Prince Harry had not been able to cry over his mother's death. That accruing guilt and anger, and the mental health issues that came later, all had to come out in one way or another.

We can only guess at the reasons why he wanted to write this memoir, beyond the millions of dollars that he would purportedly get. The generous explanation would be that he wanted to put down his own feelings and his own truths (which he says is as valid as "so-called objective facts") out there for the world to read, and for his family to understand him better.

He did say that writing the book was cathartic and a way of reclaiming the narrative of his life, but he should have known that he does not own the facts of his own life at all. That ownership passes out of his hands at birth as a royal, and he has no control of the narrative of his life.

As a writer in *The New Yorker* puts it: "(The) royals get to be royal, with attendant benefits and status, and in return, they have to present

themselves for intimate public display."

And on that point about truth – in the complexity and messiness of our relationships with other people, there isn't just one truth. Other people who are part of the story have their version of truth as well.

As for catharsis? Yes, there is momentary relief. But for Prince Harry to move on with his grief, resentment and anger to some point of equanimity, more than that is needed. This is especially as his catharsis has been in such a public manner, with injurious words that cannot be called back, and amid a backlash of criticism, derision and mockery.

It is only behind the door of his therapist's consultation room where there is time, calm, safety of confidentiality and absence of judgment, that there is the possibility of arriving at some self-awareness, acceptance and forgiveness. This would enable Prince Harry to embrace his loss and grief, just as everyone has to move on with our lives amid our own private losses.

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