Step by Step
Our First Family Meeting

By Sue Gilbert

Sue Gilbert is the great granddaughter of a famous industrialist. Here, she gives a practical, step-by-step account of her branch of the family's first meeting about issues of wealth. For additional resources for planning and conducting your own family meeting, please see Resources, p. 34.

When my five siblings ("the Sibs") and I received our inheritance 22 years ago, there was no guidance available from our elders. In an effort to make it easier for the next generation ("the Cousins," ages 16 to 33), we Sibs recently hosted a family discussion called "The Power of Money." Our goals were to address issues surrounding wealth, to share our varied perspectives with our children, and to exchange resources. We requested that all topics be generated by the Cousins. Invitations were e-mailed a month in advance. For convenience, the meeting was held in the New York hotel where we gather annually on family business. Two weeks ahead, we called for topics, inviting Cousins to contribute whether they could attend or not. The subject of wealth began to crisscross the Web.

We met in my suite on a Friday evening, serving food buffet style. Out of a possible 22 of us, 11 attended and two others participated by e-mail and telephone—pretty good for the first time. As we formed a large circle in the living room, I welcomed everyone, focusing on our purpose in gathering. We began with three minutes of silence, setting the intention to leave the day's cares behind. A tape recorder and microphone were set up on the coffee table. We agreed to use the microphone as a "talking stick," a technique borrowed from Native American ceremonies. Anyone holding the mike could speak without interruption. This made for more effective listening.

The topics were written on a white board as the Cousins called them out. These served as a discussion guideline. To allow everyone a chance to talk, we established a limit of three minutes per person per topic. Our first topic was: Why do we hide our famous family name and how does this hiding affect how we feel about it? Other topics included how we feel about our wealth, having more than our friends, and lending or giving friends money. The Cousins were very open about their anxieties. It was gratifying to hear how the Sibs have come to terms with these issues, each in our own way.

We also discussed giving back—through tithing, philanthropy, and gifts of time. My newly-married niece observed that most of the Sibs have been divorced. What part did unequal money play in the demise of our marriages? The Sibs rose heartfully to answer her question. The last topic of the evening concerned the issue of "proving oneself" by working before being allowed into a trust fund. I distributed copies of *More Than Money Journal* as a resource. After three hours, we ended the meeting as we had begun: standing together in a circle.

Afterward, I sent a shortened transcript to all 22 family members. I hope it will stimulate further discussion, though it is too soon to tell. Without question, we have deepened our relationship to one another. As we have returned to our lives, the circle we established in the room that night continues to nourish and enfold us. ■

"Before we begin this family meeting, how about we go around and say our names and a little something about ourselves."