



THE DISTELFINK – Families of Affinity

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I truly enjoy writing about children and parents; the inspiration of sport; and the importance of feeling empowered. For me, the Olympic Games capture all these topics, and I have loved watching the myriad of spectacular events that have unfolded during the past two weeks. One athlete has risen above all others though to inspire me – Joannie Rochette of Canada. I adored her skating, of course, but even more I am filled with awe of her courage, her spirit and her love of family - her mother especially - whom she lost just days before she competed.

Two of the commentators covering the final free skate, talked about how as children, we hope we can take the best of our parents and apply it to our own lives. They observed that Joannie has caused us to think about our parents, and our children, and how she has brought all of us together with these incredibly courageous performances. And finally, Scott Hamilton noted that Joannie’s inspiration has caused us to turn inward and realize the fragility and vulnerability of life. She has empowered us to focus on everything these people, our parents, who have raised us and given us so much, mean in our lives.

For many things we experience in life, we don’t get “do-overs.” On some level, Joannie must have sensed this as she created a story that should last for generations in her family. She seized her moment and somehow found the strength and determination to do what she had dreamed of for so long with her Mother. She represented herself, her family and her country with dignity and grace, and a fierce competitive spirit that resulted in two extraordinarily beautiful performances and an Olympic medal around her neck. Even as I write, I can feel my heart beating faster and tears pricking at the edges of my eyes as I think about this incredible athlete, this glorious daughter.

Jay Hughes, in his book Family: The Compact Among Generations, talks about the significance of families sharing their stories as a way to instill values and pass on important qualities within that family. He introduces the idea of “Families of Affinity” and presents several definitions for the concept of affinity. The one I relate to most strongly suggests that families are not just connected through bloodlines, but also through bonds of emotion. Joannie’s bond to her mother was based on so much more than the blood they shared. Therefore it is the deliberate process of telling stories, giving examples, and living true to these stories that a family can sustain its beliefs and unique culture. As I have said before, money amplifies the complexity of doing this. So for families of wealth to be successful from one generation to the next – *success* being measured *only* by the family itself and the goals it has set amongst its members – affinity and open communication must remain at the core.

Joannie’s mother molded her, instilled the values she carried with her on the ice, and found a place in her heart while she skated. Joannie and her Mom talked about their shared dream, and Joannie somehow made it come true. And so, if this great athlete, under horribly adverse circumstance, can find the reserves to perform so brilliantly, why can’t we mere mortals overcome

the obstacles that too often prevent us from speaking more plainly to our children and with our parents? How can we find the moment to ask our parents to tell us their financial intentions when they are gone, which advisors and family members they will rely upon to carry out their plans, and why they have made the decisions they have? And shouldn't we tell our children what we are planning for their futures, what they can count on financially and what they can't?

Fear, pride or need for control should no longer get in our way. When none of us really knows what tomorrow might bring, we need to take advantage of windows of opportunity to talk together and discuss our shared dreams whether they relate to finances, education or athletic achievement. We must secure our bonds of affinity. We cannot delegate these responsibilities to others, and we cannot hope for "do-overs." We need to get this right, and I believe Joannie has given us beautiful inspiration to turn inward and focus on what's truly important - family and the emotional bonds we share.

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