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**The Ups and Downs of Brothers**  
**A Study in Shifts -- Displacement and Replacement**  
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*Brothers* was released two years ago, in 2009. It is directed by Jim Sheridan and stars Tobey Maguire as Sam; Jake Gyllenhaal as his brother Tommy; and Natalie Portman as Sam's wife Grace. *Brothers* is an American remake of a 2004 Danish film, *Brødre*, which was directed by Susanne Bier. Her name – Susanne Bier -- may be familiar to you since she won the 2010 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film -- *In a Better World*. The director of our version, Jim Sheridan, also directed *In the Name of the Father* which was nominated for 7 Academy Awards in 1993.

*Brothers* is a story which touches on many themes: war and its effects on its participants; coping with loss and grief at the death of a father – husband – brother - son; family dynamics with the love/hate relationship between father and one of the sons (Tommy); psychological distress and especially post traumatic stress disorder; deeply embedded secrets too painful to reveal; and the dark side of human nature, what humans are capable of when driven to extremes.

It's also about siblings and there are three sibling relationships in this film. Yes, three sibling relationships -- did you miss one? Stay tuned. And of all the themes I've mentioned, I'll focus only on shifting relationships -- one person displacing or replacing another.<sup>1</sup> I've entitled this paper, the Ups and Downs of Brothers.

### **The Two Sisters**

We begin with the two sisters -- Isabelle and Maggie. Isabelle is about 8 or 9; Maggie about 6. They are apprehensive about their father's imminent departure for Afghanistan, in four days' time. Isabelle is reading *Black Beauty* and she resents her father going away again. Perhaps resentment or anger is an easier emotion to deal with than sadness or a sense of imminent abandonment. She is soon cajoled out of this funk and when her younger sister enters the bedroom, she engages in some horse play. The book, *Black Beauty*, was an apt choice for Isabelle's reading. That, after all, is a moving tale about a horse who endures many hardships and challenges in life .... just what Isabelle is about to face in her own life.

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<sup>1</sup> Displacement has to do with a shift in position, getting ahead of someone else, for instance. If I displace you in line at a check-out counter, you're still there but I'm also there, in front of you. Replacement, on the other hand, has to do with eliminating someone else entirely. If I replace you at the check-out line, you're not there anymore: just me. Replacement is a stronger shift than displacement. *Brothers* offers examples of both types of shifts.

While *we* may begin with the two sisters, the film itself doesn't start there. The movie begins with military exercises. The girls' father, Sam, is in the Marine corps. The story begins very quickly – we see the military base with Sam getting his re-deployment papers; then a quick exposure to the sisters; and then Sam's visit to the prison. The sisters are very quickly upstaged by their father's preoccupation with his brother. In fact, at the outset, there isn't much attention paid to the sisters – they are shown very little warmth by their father. Basically we see a needy father who wants a hug and who pleads for one, two or three kisses. He doesn't provide them with much in the way of fatherly reassurance and his needs outweigh theirs.

Sam goes to the prison to fetch his brother, Tommy, who has been incarcerated for a bank robbery. Later he apologizes to the bank teller, who forgives him and gets him, ironically, to open up a bank account. There is little warmth evidenced between the brothers. Why is Sam picking up Tommy, we wonder, especially when he could have been providing reassurance to his daughters? A sense of brotherly love? A sense of duty? No one else to do it? Just expected? The motivation is left ambiguous.

Tommy shows up at Sam and his wife Grace's house for dinner. Maggie, the younger child, greets him at the door and says, honestly, "my mother doesn't like you." And, as it turns out, neither does Hank. Hank is Tommy and Sam's father, the girls' grandfather. He doesn't like Tommy either, constantly praising Sam the military hero and running down Tommy the ne'er do well, the family failure. The "welcome home" or "welcome out of prison" dinner is very awkward and tense as Hank goads Tommy, the reject. The girls just sit wondering what is happening to their family. A dichotomy is quickly established: Sam's family (his wife, his daughters, his father) *versus* the outsider, the bad brother, Tommy. Sam seems somewhere in the middle and tries to calm criticism. Tommy is clearly at loose ends with no plans for the future. The girls are witnesses to this dysfunctionality.

So they – the sisters -- are faced with several anxieties: why does their daddy have to go back to Afghanistan so soon? Will he return safely? Why does their mother dislike Tommy? Why does their grandfather put down Tommy so consistently? And, I guess, why is their father so silent about everything? So far, their mother has remained beautiful but also distant -- a part of the household landscape, not a player. Mute for the most part. Indeed the viewer might well wonder why the talented Natalie Portman is cooped up in a house with this emotionally repressed marine!

At any rate, we find that the two young sisters are quickly plunged into adult interpersonal dynamics without anyone paying attention to *their* anxieties. They are practically orphaned psychologically with their uncle and the war upstaging them and their needs. No one is giving them the time of day.

The kids' lives change for the better after their father has died. Tommy begins to hang around the house. Their loss is balanced by a *replacement*. With their father presumed dead, their uncle gradually becomes part of their lives. Tommy involves them in painting the kitchen and no one gets really mad at them for some accidentally spilled paint. They play outside ... skating for instance. Life

seems much better as they become more a focus of attention. They gain a sense of a father-like figure involved their lives, all with the approving glances of their mother. Their mother, Grace, while having some initial reservations about her kitchen being renovated without any forewarning, quickly -- and perhaps unconvincingly -- acquiesces. The sisters smile, laugh and play. Life is good. Their father has been *replaced* by Uncle Tommy and a new family configuration seems to be in the works.

All that is disrupted by their father's return from the dead. This is not welcomed, for their new routine and relationships are abruptly interrupted. Their father reappears and he is detached, distant, disturbed, zombie-like in his emotional responses. He is "the walking dead" and seems more a voyeur of what goes on around him rather than someone who is involved or engaged. There is little sense that he is making any effort to reintegrate himself into a family that had clearly and legitimately moved on with their lives. He watches from the sidelines as Tommy skates with the kids and is obsessed with his own anxieties ... did his wife, Grace, sleep with Tommy? That's his focus. It's not providing reassurances to his kids or offering emotional support to his wife whose life has been deeply shaken by his sudden death and equally sudden reappearance.

People returning from the dead cause huge problems. It happens in wars when supposedly 'missing in action' individuals reappear. It happens to those who are marooned. The 2000 film *Cast Away*, directed by Robert Zemeckis, stars Tom Hanks as Chuck, a FedEx employee who survives a crash landing on a deserted island. Presumed dead, his girl friend, Kelly, has married and has children. Chuck was *replaced*. After 4 years, Chuck returns, meets Kelly and faces up to the fact that she has moved on.

Dead messiahs who return also pose a problem. In the New Testament, according to one tradition [Gospel of John], Jesus' disciples fled when he was arrested, presumably going back to their old occupations, fishing in the Sea of Galilee. Their three year sojourn with Jesus had been *replaced* by a return to their former lives. According to the New Testament, however, Jesus was believed to have come back in some fashion and so the disciples' return to ordinary life was disrupted by a new turn of events. Did they really want to shift back to the Jesus movement? Or did they perhaps choose to stay in the Galilee, content with their former occupations? Perhaps most did not return, getting on with their new lives, and that may account for why we know virtually nothing about most of Jesus' original disciples.

It was also true in Homer's *Odyssey*. Odysseus had been away for 10 years, presumed dead, although his wife, Penelope, clung to the hope that he had survived. When he returns -- disguised -- to his household at Ithaca he finds that it has been taken over by many suitors. They have been parasites, living off his wealth, literally eating him out of house and home. Furthermore, they have all been vying for the affections of his wife. He, too, had been *replaced*. He kills them all. It was a devastating return. But pandemonium is averted and order restored.

Returning dead people cause havoc in the lives of the living. Let's return to the sisters. Their father's return was devastating for their lives. He had been *replaced*; a new family configuration was

being formed; and now that was being upset. A vicious triangle emerges: the girls, Tommy, their father. The girls clearly prefer Tommy. Isabelle says to her father, “why didn’t you stay dead?” And she adds, “Mom would rather sleep with Uncle Tommy than with you.” Later on Isabelle tells her mother that she is sorry but both sisters agree that they’d rather have Uncle Tommy at the house than their father. Both clearly prefer the *replacement* family than their former one. In one of her rare moments of giving comfort to the sisters, Grace assures them that daddy will be better.

No sooner does she say this than Sam rampages through the kitchen, smashing everything that the girls and Uncle Tommy had created for their mother. The kitchen is highly symbolic, in several ways. First, the kitchen renovation was symbolic of the new life they were in the process of co-creating – Tommy, Grace, the girls. Sam smashes that kitchen violently just as he had repeatedly bashed the head of Joe Willis in Afghanistan. Secondly, the kitchen is also symbolic of his home life, the hearth, the centre of his family life. And he wrecks it. And this scene is followed by the scene on the lawn outside his house, where he dares the police to shoot him, puts a gun to his head, and only when he hears his wife say “Sam” does he put it down.

The girls do not see all this self-destructive behavior – the kitchen or the front lawn incidents. But they can hear the rage and they are rightfully terrified. No one comforts them.

So they are left in a vicious triangle: them, Tommy, their father. Their world upturned – their growing relationship with Tommy threatened; their relationship with their father badly impaired; two vying father-figures. Their mother is, for the most part, an inept bystander. Their feelings are summed up by Maggie who has a toy turtle. She notes that the turtle, when scared, hides, drawing his body into the shell. Then the scary things go away.

But, in this case, will they go away? How will that triangle be resolved?

### **The Brothers: Sam and Tommy**

Let’s look at the Hank – Sam – Tommy triangle. Hank, at the funeral, attacks Tommy by saying, “who’s going to stand up for you when you’re dead?” So Tommy gets verbally abused. Just as an aside, we may wonder about the other brother, the good son Sam and his choice of career. To what extent was that the result of his own career preferences or was it shaped more by Hank’s dominating personality, a man who had served in Viet Nam and who himself suffered as a result of that experience? We hear references to alcoholism and to silent treatment of his wife upon return. Tommy is the bad son who has been *displaced* in his father’s affections by the good son Sam.

There are many stories dealing with just such a shift. There’s the story of Eve *displacing* the original Lilith in the story of creation in the Bible. Cain murdering his brother Abel and so *replacing* him. And, of course there’s the parable of the prodigal son in the New Testament. The good son, the one who does what is expected, the faithful and righteous one, is *displaced* by the reprobate, the unrighteous son

who goes off, lives a dissolute life, but who eventually returns. He's the one who is welcomed and rewarded and the good son gets ignored.

With Sam's supposed death, Tommy has a rare opportunity to forge a new life for himself, and he does so. He turns out to be the one who can make the kids laugh and Grace smile. He is the one who helps out in the house, plays with the kids and knows what to do. He has *replaced* Sam. He's where the future likely lies -- that is, until all that is shattered with Sam's return. Just as he was getting his life together, helping out, learning how to be a friend, possibly a father and possibly a husband. All that comes to an end. Shattered by forces outside of his control. What will happen to Tommy's recovery now that Sam has returned?

Another shift. Sam's image as the good, noble, heroic son becomes tarnished. Returning home we see that he has suffered psychological trauma as a result of what he endured in the war in Afghanistan. He is damaged. He is destructive of his home, of his relationships with his kids and his wife. Furthermore he is potentially suicidal. The returning Sam differs from the pre-deployment Sam. He is no longer the one everyone looks up to with respect. Will the returning Sam ever become like the pre-war Sam? Will he become reintegrated with his family?

Now for the third sibling relationship.

### **Sam and the Marines**

The Marine corps represents a band of brothers and this story is, in part, about that bonding. That bonding, in fact, seems stronger in this film than those of family ties -- whether brother to brother, husband to wife, husband to children or son to father. The film begins on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2007, 4 days prior to Sam's deployment to Afghanistan. We surmise that is a re-deployment since Grace says that she didn't expect him to leave so soon. Back in Afghanistan, Sam takes photos and says that it "almost feels like home." The film pits Sam's use of the phrase "my girls" referring to his two daughters and his wife versus "my men," the members of the Marine corps in which he serves.

Sam has done something he cannot bring himself to say, except at the end of the film. Under extreme pressure, he killed Joe, bashing him violently with a pipe, a kill-or-be-killed situation. But it is done with such ferocity, and it leaves him with such shame that he is scarred psychologically. He has not just killed Joe, he has, in fact, killed a brother -- a brother Marine -- and this haunts him. We wonder: Will he recover from this fratricide? Can he ever forgive himself? Can he ever come to grips with the fact that he lived and Joe did not? Can he come to terms with Joe's widow? She, after all, comes to beg forgiveness for a dream she had had, resenting that Sam had lived and Joe had not.

Note the constant shifts:

- Tommy -- *displaced* in Hank's affections by his brother Sam.
- Sam -- *replaced* by Tommy after he was presumed dead
- Tommy -- *displaced* when Sam returns from the dead
- Sam's image as the military hero -- damaged by his rampage.

*Brothers* is a timely film. The cover story of the November 21, 2011 issue of *Time Magazine* was "45,000 troops are coming home to a country that doesn't know them." The Sam situation.

We see Sam at the end of the film, unable to re-enter his former life, returning to the military base, asking to be redeployed once again. The marines are his brothers, his real family. It is his home, just as it was, likely, for his father, Hank. That's the final shift: his home life has been *displaced* by the marine corps.