

## A Fuzzy Focus on the Family

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**Opening Words** – (#649, Antoine de St.-Exupéry, Responsive Reading)

In a house which becomes a home, one hands down and another takes up the heritage of mind and heart, laughter and tears, musings and deeds.

*Love, like a carefully loaded ship, crosses the gulf between the generations.*

Therefore we do not neglect the ceremonies of our passage; when we wed, when we die, and when we are blessed with a child;

*When we depart and when we return; when we plant and when we harvest.*

Let us bring up our children. It is not the place of some official to hand to them their heritage.

*If others impart to our children our knowledge and ideals, they will lose all of us that is wordless and full of wonder.*

Let us build memories in our children, lest they drag out joyless lives, lest they allow treasures to be lost because they have not been given the keys.

*We live, not by things, but by the meanings of things. It is needful to transmit the passwords from generation to generation.*

**Reading**

excerpt from "[Suitable for Framing: A Family of Experts](#)," by David Sedaris, published in *The New Yorker*, February 27, 2006:

Before they started collecting art, my parents bought some pretty great things, the best being a concrete lawn ornament they picked up in the early nineteen-sixties. It's a toadstool, maybe three feet tall, with a red spotted cap and a benevolent little troll relaxing at its base. My father placed it just beyond the patio in our back yard, and what struck my sisters and me then, and still does, is the troll's expression of complete acceptance. Others might cry or get bent out of shape when their personal tastes are denounced and ridiculed, but not him. Icicles hanging off his beard, slugs cleaving to the tops of his pointed shoes: "Oh, well," he seems to say. "These things happen."

Even when we reached our teens, and developed a sense of irony, it never occurred to us to think of the troll as tacky. No one ever stuck a lit cigarette in his mouth, or disgraced him with sexual organs, the way we did with...my mother's Kitchen Witch. One by one, my sisters and I left home, and the back yard became a dumping ground. Snakes nested beneath broken bicycles and piles of unused building supplies, but on return visits we would each screw up our courage and step onto the patio for an audience with Mr. Toadstool. "You and that lawn ornament," my mom would say. "Honest to God, you'd think you'd been raised in a trailer."

Standing in her living room, surrounded by her art collection, my mother frequently warned us that death brought out the worst in people. "You kids might think you're close, but just wait until your father and I are gone, and you're left to divide up our property. Then you'll see what savages you really are."

My sisters and I had always imagined that, when the time came, we would calmly move through the house, putting our names on this or that. Lisa would get the dessert plates, Amy the mixer, and so on, without dissent. It was distressing, then, to discover that the one thing we all want is that toadstool. It's a symbol of the people our parents used to be, and, more than anything in the house itself, it looks like art to us. When my father dies, I envision a mad dash through the front door...where we'll push one another down the stairs, six connoisseurs, all with gray hair, charging toward a concrete toadstool.

## Sermon

Families are important. I think we might agree on that(?) Families--for whatever our own experience has been and for the myriad of ways that individuals here today might define the word--families are important. "The family," [said philosopher George Santayana](#), "is nature's masterpiece." "The family," [wrote Will and Ariel Durant](#), the famous historians, "[the family] is the nucleus of civilization."

These are just a sample of strong words from strong and thoughtful minds that would lead us to reflect on the state of the family in this society today. It should be noted, however, that not everyone has the same unequivocal view of the family. While the concept of a family, with all of its benefits, may lead us to sing its praises, our experiences can vary. "Objects in the mirror are closer than they appear," in other words...Leading Italian dramatist and poet, [Ugo Betti, to say](#), "I think the family is the place where the most ridiculous and least respectable things in the world go on." And leading comedian [George Burns to say](#), "Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city."

In all seriousness, I give you this range of quotations to point toward a general agreement on the importance of family as ground for human development and learning, and as a seemingly fundamental organization of human experience. "As the family goes, so goes the nation and so goes the whole world in which we live," said Pope John Paul II, and a concern that has spread across a wide portion of today's society is precisely regarding where the family is going...

Divorce rates are climbing still; single parent households are increasing; children moving between two or more homes is common; step-families of nearly infinite varieties are homes to yours, mine, ours...and sometimes even theirs. Parents are absent from their homes because of work or separation or simple unconcern and children are left to raise themselves in a society that is, quite frankly, very lax on promoting self-respect, integrity, compassion, self-worth, or the slightest concern for the common good.

In step organizations like Focus on the Family and the American Family Association and individuals like Dr. James Dobson and Dr. Laura Schlessinger who are bemoaning this state of affairs and offering their own religion and value-based solutions. What is interesting to me is that, faced with this situation, the diagnosis of the problem and the solutions offered most prominently by an organization like Focus on the Family seem to be so widely off the mark. Asked what factors are contributing to the breakdown of the family, [Dr. James Dobson says](#): "That's a complex question, but generally, a great deal of external pressure is being placed on the traditional family. Radical feminists, abortion zealots, liberal politicians and haters of the Judeo-Christian ethic have in their own ways ushered in a new era devoid of religion, gender distinctions and traditional family relationships. In addition, the hostile media, the entertainment industry, the ACLU, People for the American Way, the National Education Association and especially liberal judges are busily opposing moral principles at every turn. Together, they have brought the institution of marriage to its knees. I have been most concerned about the anti-family agenda being pushed forward by radical homosexual activists."

This is the same logic that brought up the recently-failed Federal Marriage Amendment and the soon-to-be-voted-on proposition in this state, measures that supporters claim are meant to save marriage and the family.

"The president firmly believes that marriage is an enduring and sacred institution between men and women and has supported measures to protect the sanctity of marriage," [White House spokesman Ken Lisaius said](#).

Protecting *the sanctity of marriage* by banning gay marriage? Oh, please! It's like supporting a constitutional amendment in 1920 barring women from voting to *protect the sanctity* of elections. Constitutional amendments have traditionally been used—thank God—to broaden our perspectives rather than narrow them; to expand citizens' rights rather than restrict them; to dismantle discrimination rather than institutionalize it.

I have met with many couples who are planning to get married, and one of the things I ask them to explore in these pre-wedding meetings is what they fear could happen in their marriage. What could endanger their commitment to one another? What could threaten their ability to keep the promises they so desperately wish to make to one another at this point in their lives?

These couples say they don't want to ever take each other for granted. They want to work on communicating well. They want to be kind and forgiving. They want to be there for each other and also give each other the space to grow into the individuals they will become. They don't want to grow apart through apathy or anger or inattention, making themselves vulnerable to the sometimes-tempting obsessions of work, or alcohol and drugs, or the empty enticements of extramarital affairs.

When I ask them to name a couple that supplies a model of the kind of marriage they want to have, they sometimes fidget uncomfortably and look to each other in bewilderment. All too often, they cannot name any promising models of what they believe marriage should be. Their parents are on second or third marriages, friends' relationships are broken or in trouble, and even the lasting marital unions in their wider circle of friends and family seem to continue from inertia rather than passion and commitment.

Once given the opportunity to voice their fears, it becomes evident that there are plenty of things that can threaten a marriage...Yet, not one of these individuals, on the brink of making what they believe will be a life-long commitment; not one of these lovestruck men and women, awakening to the task they have set before themselves; not one of these idealistic people, standing bravely against the odds; not one of these loving, determined souls, who have so courageously named what they most feared could happen in a marriage; not one of them has mentioned the specter of two people of the same sex getting married as a threat to their own relationship. I have never heard anything like: "I am afraid that, once we get married, gay marriage will be legalized, and thus our marriage will no longer be sacred...our union will no longer be sanctified...our stated commitment in front of our God and our family and friends will no longer endure." Never...

And I know that people will say that the people who come to me to get married already have liberal views on this issue. That may be true...However, I think this has less to do with liberal or conservative *views* and more to do with *experience*. The couples are very clear about where the pressures come from that could threaten their sincere desire to commit themselves to each other, and it is not from another couple who shares the same desire, no matter if that couple is gay or straight. Nor would anyone's marriage be strengthened by having the Federal or State Government deny certain Americans and their families of the benefits of marriage, such as health care, hospital visitation, and family medical leave.

As a religious community, in keeping with our principles, and *in support of families*, I think we need to be clear and unequivocal in our opposition to these actions that claim to protect marriage while denying civil rights.

And when I say *in support of families*, I mean it. As we work to transform individuals and society, we are in the business of transforming and strengthening families...*and*, in a decided difference from the religious right, we are willing to live with the complexities of a wide variety of definitions of family. The assumption on their part, I believe, is that if we can just define what a family is, once and for all, we can build them stronger. If we can just identify the key positions that are needed and define their roles and responsibilities...if we can just find the recipe that creates a loving home...everything will become so simple and straightforward. It is the murkiness of our family structures that is the problem, the constant pushing of boundaries, the new permutations of family that are arising and complicating everything..

And I think of Albert Einstein's words: Everything should be made as simple as possible...and no simpler. I think this attempt to define and restrict our understanding of family is making it simpler than possible, leading to understandable indignation by families that fall outside these boundaries, inspiring a bumper sticker I saw recently that said, "Focus on Your Own Damn Family." A further irony is that the restricted definition of family is said to be Biblically-based...really? I am hard-pressed to find a single example of the family structure

that the religious right upholds. The book of Genesis alone could serve as a textbook for "Dysfunctional Family 101." Jesus, himself, was presumably raised by a stepfather, right? In a letter attributed to Paul, it is advised that one is to marry only if lust is out of control...otherwise, don't do it. There's too much work to do.

Listen to this story from the Gospel of Mark (Mark 3: 31-35...and repeated in Matthew and Luke):

Early in Jesus' ministry, his family comes to take him away from the crowd that has gathered around him, as they are worried about his distinctly eccentric behavior and the attention that he's drawing. What is his reaction? He says, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at the crowd he says, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

He seems to be playing around a bit with the idea of what makes a family...he seems to be purposefully broadening the definition...

And, again, I understand that people have a fear of an ever-broadening definition. If family means anything, or everything, it means nothing, Dr. Dobson has pointed out. Though I will not, cannot, give you a comprehensive definition of family in this sermon (sorry to disappoint), I will say that it makes a difference how we go about *trying* to define it. As I said a few weeks ago, when we pledge allegiance to a flag, we run the risk of losing sight of the values that the flag is meant to represent. In just such a way, I would say that if we spend time trying to describe the perfect components of a family, the players, if you will, we run the risk of losing sight of the values that we hope that family displays and instills within its members. God knows, there are people here that have grown up in homes that fit the perceived "traditional" mold, (father, mother, children), yet failed to display the most positive traits that we associate with family; that some of you, within such a family, have suffered neglect, abandonment, and abuse. And, of course, some were raised in non-traditional families that were awash in love and humor and a healthy sense of responsibility. And between, and within, those quick and over-simplified definitions lies a whole spectrum of experiences that it would take days, years, to illuminate and examine. The point I'm making is

that the structure, the pre-determined recipe, the definition we seek to impose, does not seem to me to be the determining factor in the health of the family.

And one of the ways that we can think about family together is to think about ourselves together. Every Sunday, I introduce Joys and Concerns with the words "As a church family..." As a church family. Many have used that word when they talk about coming to this community: "I found a home here," they will say. "It's become like my family." Now, it may be dangerous to take this analogy too far. There are most likely important distinctions that we would make as we seek to be an effective religious community. But there are important similarities, too, and I see no reason to discourage the understanding of this congregation as *a type* of family.

How are we *like* a family? We are joined by a covenant of concern for one another, a spiritual connection that supersedes the momentary likes or dislikes of the moment, and that already includes those to come, whom we do not yet know. We are aware that we live not by things, but by the meaning of things. Though we do not presume to be able to discover the treasure that each of you hold on your behalf, we do believe that we can help each other find the keys that will open those treasures, the passwords that will provide access, and we seek not only to offer that to those seated here today but to pass that along to future generations. And, like any good family, we strive to understand what is important, we struggle to perfect the traits of a healthy community, but we often will pass along the most valuable lessons, the memorable events, the treasured experiences, unawares. Like David Sedaris' parents, we believe that we know serious art, we may spend a lot of time dusting our copy of the Mona Lisa, but the children may be enamored with the troll on the toadstool. We are serious in our endeavors to teach and instruct, but we don't take ourselves too seriously and we strive mostly to be the best people that we can be because most of the meanings, the keys, the passwords are transmitted when we're not looking.

A poem by Alice Walker, called "Sunday School, Circa 1950," illustrates the point:

*"Who made you" was always*

*The question  
The answer was always  
"God."  
Well, there we stood*

*Three feet high  
Heads bowed  
Leaning into  
Bosoms.*

*Now  
I no longer recall  
The Catechism  
Or brood on the Genesis  
Of life  
No.*

*I ponder the exchange  
Itself  
And salvage mostly  
the leaning.*

Families, maybe, are people we can lean on.\_

### **Closing Words** (#661, Ralph Waldo Emerson)

We have a great deal more kindness than is ever spoken.

*The whole human family is bathed with an element of love like a fine ether.*

How many persons we meet in houses, whom we scarcely speak to, whom yet we honor and who honor us!

*How many we see in the street, or sit with in church, whom though silently, we warmly rejoice to be with!*

Read the language of these wandering eye-beams.

*The heart knoweth.*