



The Family as a System

Both of my parents (Paddy) grew up as "only children." They often seemed baffled by the reality of their marriage and their very-different-from-them children. Before bedtime, they would sometimes tell us humorous family stories about their ineptitude in merging their expectations and dreams into their newly-consecrated marriage, the merging of two family systems. As children we laughed heartily at the thought of their mistakes, not aware that at the time they were for them major crises. Mom and Dad often tripped over "they way it should be." Both expected that the other would serve their unexamined personal and marital ambitions. They did not talk much-- they missed being part of the communication generation that began in the 1950s. Both seemed often frustrated and exasperated, unsure of the rules. Drinking (and other distancing maneuvers) was the accepted way of coping with stress, patterns they had learned from their growing up years. As kids, we were often anxious within the over-all atmosphere of uneasiness.

Many years later, when I married into a well-connected, church-going family, with traditional rules and roles, I felt almost as excited about them as I did about my new wife. I felt like I was finally "at home." Life was planned and wonderfully predictable. Yet issues from my own family of origin often upset the balance of our new family dyad (my wife and I) and I never felt completely accepted nor understood in my extended family. They also felt that I never fully accepted their values of what family life was to be. When families of different kinds merge in marriage, there is the potential for change-- this is what I call "good trouble"! My early marriage and family had lots of good trouble.

In this article, family life is understood as a system — as a whole composed of interconnected and interdependent members which are all the time influencing one another. No one lives entirely by himself or herself. This is true not only within the smallest family unit, sometimes called the nuclear family (see Family), but also between generations as family systems influence each other. Family of origin refers to the family or families in which one is raised. Virginia Satir stressed the importance of the family of origin as "the main base against and around which most family blueprints are designed." She suggests that "it is easy to duplicate in your family the same things that happened in your growing up. This is true whether your family was a nurturing or a troubled one" (Conjoint Family Therapy, p.124). This foundational insight, so often observed by psychiatrists and family counsellors, was expressed centuries ago in the Bible where God says: "I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations..." (Deut. 5:9-10). The promise of inter-generational grace in this last phrase is restated in Deuteronomy 6:29 indicating that people are to live in harmony with God's ways "so that it might go well with them and their children forever." While family systems theory is less than fifty years old it is essentially in harmony with the biblical revelation of how families, communities and the people of God function (see chap 6, Collins and Stevens). Four systems principles are developed in this article: family of origin, wholeness, crises, subsystems and boundaries.

1. Family of Origin

The problem with us as people is that we had parents-- and, of course, so did they. While parents are sometimes a problem for us, it is a good thing that we had parents-- and a good thing that they did as well. In our families we not only duplicate the lives from our families of origin, we sometimes "potentiate" (increase the intensity of) the problems. To be a healthy member of a family we need to learn to be grateful for the theology of forgiveness that permits us to let our parents be free from our resentments that we have accumulated about them. Forgiveness also frees us to determine our own way of living without the burden of the demands from our family of origin. This is a key to growth and maturity in thinking about the family as a "system." We can view through our family histories the relationship dynamics and values transmitted through generations. Virtues and values can be embraced and curses and criticisms can be challenged. This is the understanding of covenant-making. Throughout our growing up years we learned about how to make and keep covenants and the value of promises. We learned this from our parents, or we noticed the lack of this and promised to ourselves that we would be promise-keepers. Through forgiveness, promise-keeping and covenant-making we are empowered to bring health and grace to the next generation.

As already mentioned we did not choose our parents and they did not choose us. Further, none of us had the opportunity to choose how to live in our families of origin. We adapted to "pressing circumstances" as best we could with the skills and experiences we had, just as they did. However, all of us can choose how we will live in our current families and interact within our various systems or communities. We do not need to replicate the unhealthy patterns of our families of origin, nor do we need to over-adapt and do the opposite.

2. Wholeness.

Virginia Satir uses a child mobile analogy when explaining how a system works. In the family mobile, every part of the family is understood in terms of the whole family and how individual parts affect the whole. Each part is considered to be interdependent, not autonomous. A movement or change in one part of the mobile affects the system throughout. Picture the mobile that hangs over the infant's crib as having people instead of animals or parts of the planetary system hanging from it. Envisioned in this way events that touch one member of the family mobile cause other family members to reverberate in relationship to the change in the "wafted" member. Thus, if members of the family graduate from medical school, marry a distant cousin or a person from another race, contract the Aids virus, the surrounding family system is affected and not just the individual member. The winds of change reverberate throughout the family mobile.

For example in a single parent family from my counselling practice, "Barry" (a 14 year old boy) stayed away from home for several weeks and made no contact with his understandably frantic mother. At a loss as to what to do, she became depressed and the younger kids began to suffer as she drank from morning till night, ignoring their basic care. When Barry finally came home he vowed to God that he would stay; his mother gave up the drinking and the family mood improved greatly. The siblings were delighted for this change and blessed their older brother for doing what was right in their eyes. As the mom became more functional and pleasant, Barry figured the family problem were solved and that he could now live his own life again without the presumed obligation to be the "designated father." (Barry's father had divorced his mother and them when he was just six years old.) Therefore, since life was now okay, Barry began to skip some school while staying out late at night. Of course, Barry's mother became upset and was

soon as depressed as before, precipitating a crisis in the younger children who began to display their own depression symptoms. Barry again saw the cost of his behaviors on the family and promised again that he would be a "good kid." The family resumed functioning as normal until the cycle recycles again. Barry's growing up affected both his mother and his siblings and he felt trapped into being the absentee father that all people long to have and resent not having. His feeling of being trapped is felt by each of the other members of the system.

In the mobile analogy, every time one part of the family mobile changes position, the entire mobile shifts. All parts are unbalanced until the changed part returns to its original place. Barry feels impelled to "do good" for the good of the family. When Barry eventually moves out permanently from his family and creates his own independent life, the other parts of the family will adjust themselves to a new form of stability and security. Until then, the family will require that he stay and function in ways that permit their stability and security. In family life each person is part of the whole. And the whole is more than the sum of the parts, as Aristotle said long ago. We are linked together invisibly in a relational, emotional and even a spiritual unity. But change within the system is not all bad.

3. Good Trouble

The Chinese word for crisis is composed of two pictorial characters, one meaning danger and the other opportunity. The shifts in the family mobile can be considered family crises and are potentially "good trouble" through which positive change comes. Think of the crisis that would be induced in the following examples. The middle son of a solid Jewish Orthodox family becomes a Christian; the workaholic father rolls the family mini-van over a cliff and nearly dies; the ultra-stable mother does not come home after work until 9pm and looks a "bit floozy"; another child is conceived when the couple agreed that "two is enough"; two families are blended resulting in their being two fifteen year old girls; a younger brother suffers a prolonged leukemia death while the older daughter does not feel understood; a middle-age dad buys a 240SX and wears a turquoise jogging suit. All of the changes caused by these events can result in greater satisfaction and security. It would be a shame to waste such terrific crises.

3. Boundaries and Sub-Systems.

Mother and father (husband and wife) together are a family subsystem. Their children are another family subsystem, as are the grandparents and other extended relatives. In our family, our cocker spaniel and two cats are a significant and too-often expensive subsystem that precipitates some growth-producing tension between father and daughter! We would not be the same family without each competing system within our larger system we call with much affection "our family." Our family dinner table is a cacophony of information about other systems that are impacting our family: what happened at school, what craziness Tim did on Home Improvements, the CD sale at the mall, and other families who are reported to be in greater crisis than ours. Some of this information enters into our family and impacts us; some stays out or is kept out. This has to do with how our family is defined and the values and structure of our family unit. In systems thinking this is referred to as family "boundaries", or the openness of the system to other systems.

The peer groups of both parents and children are systems that impact the experience of the family. Teenage kids may have friends who wear their caps carefully turned backward. Being their peers, they influence the kids and thus the family. The parent's peer group may be other

middle-agers on the sideline of a soccer game or prayerful Christian adults in a church fellowship group. When these peer groups interact, there is good chance of a crash at the intersection. Imagine the backward hat-wearing teen with his Bulls jacket coming to church one morning to meet a "suit" carrying a well-worn KJV who asks him to remove his hat out of respect. It should be said again that subsystem collision can result in growth for each subsystem. The issue of boundaries is whether we will permit what is outside of our understanding and experience to change us so as to help us grow.

4. Conclusions

This brief reflection on some of the basic dimensions of understanding the family as a system shows that family life "sets us up" to know God and gain Christian maturity right at home. We are built for relationship and family life helps us to see that isolated individuals simply do not exist. Further, we are built for covenant making and promise keeping-- two graces we may experience in our lives whether our family experience has been good or bad. Even very hard experiences in family life can be experienced as God's good invitation to make changes for the better, and to practice the grace of forgiveness. The influence of subsystems and other systems in our family system cause us continuously to define our family goals (see Family Goals) and family values (see Family Values)-- once more seeking God's mind in prayer and Scripture. Through it all the multigenerational impact of our behaviour-- negative and positive-- mentioned in Deuteronomy 5:9-10 is not just a curse but a blessing: God's love extends "to a thousand generations."

References and Resources

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