

Acknowledgements

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I

Introduction

The world is a source of revelation, not a problem to be solved.

— *W. B. Yeats*

A healing journey is dependent on four factors:

Telling the truth (builds a foundation of trust);

Listening to another (builds a bridge of understanding);

Developing supportive relationships (builds a sense of belonging);

Regaining a sense of personal dignity (rooted in forgiveness).

— *Author Unknown*

Families are facing overwhelming challenges in our post-modern age. Children are exposed through TV and the Internet to issues and realities that they may be too young to process, and to role models that are inappropriate for them. Aging elders require more care, but no one has time for the slower pace of life needed by both the very young and the very old. Family members of all ages increasingly suffer inroads on family time, with a resulting loss of intimacy and connectedness. There is often no extended family to offer support — no wise uncle or aunt to consult and little neighbourhood support or other help for overworked parents.

Many families are often hard-pressed and at the point of crisis. At times it can seem as if “things fall apart; the centre cannot hold” [*The Second Coming*, W. B. Yeats]. In an age of uncertainty, questions of faith — the meaning and living out of hopefulness, patience, and love; of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation — require that Christians re-examine the meaning of our journey, as we face life passages and are challenged to grow.

The particular question of *how* we, as Christians should, respond to social and personal issues, and to complex changes, is a controversial subject. Churches have been known to divide not only over how doctrine should be understood, but also over how faith should manifest itself in works. Growing cultural pluralism in the global village and in Canada requires that we widen our lens and broaden our worldview.

Ultimately we must focus on Jesus himself. Many people seem to compartmentalize life, keeping their faith separate from the lives they are actually leading. But Jesus always did the unusual, and never ignoring anyone, he responded to diverse needs. He responded to the needs of people by teaching and healing publicly and privately. He preached the good news of liberation — of sins forgiven, of new life — to prostitutes and religious leaders alike, often reserving his harshest criticisms for the latter. He healed the lepers who were shunned, and the mentally ill who were outcast.

Jesus’ birth, death, and resurrection proclaim to all the earth that there is no separation between body and spirit, that we are enfleshed and embodied persons, created to bear witness in all areas of our life and work to God in whose image we are made. We are not to be subdivided and compartmentalized but are called to be new creatures in Christ, through whom “all things hold together” [Colossians 1:17].

What does this mean for families? We live in a time of immense change in the structure and purpose of family life without the familiar resources and supports. As a result, it is difficult for many Christians to discern the opportunities for their faith to transform family relationships.

Opportunities for growth

Living within a great variety of family forms and emotional systems, family members are challenged to learn to accept one another as having differing needs. Learning communication skills is an essential component of family healing and growth. Developing cooperative rules for resolving conflicts, and fair fighting rules to manage anger in non-destructive ways, are all part of the process.

It is important for parents to understand the developmental stages of their children, for adolescents to understand their own biological changes, and for couples to understand the socialization into gender roles that can inhibit their relationship. And it is important for family members simply to learn to *listen* to one another.

When racism, sexism, homophobia, or some other prejudice wounds a family member's self-esteem, the family needs to *become a place* of healing and hope. When drugs, alcohol, gambling, pornography, or affairs threaten to tear apart the fabric of family relationships, the family needs to *find a path* for healing. When depression, mental illness, physical illness, or accidents impede the functioning of the family, responsible family members need to *seek the help* of others, often including a professional, to ensure appropriate medical treatment and emotional and physical safety for all members of the family.

Likewise, when individuals, couples, parts of families, or whole families consult professional therapists — often referred by a doctor, clergy person, or social worker — they can be aided in their growth and recovery by understanding how their family of origin operated, how their current family relationships are functioning, and how they have come to see themselves as individuals within their family system. This enables people to make conscious and loving choices for change.

Those associated with the family, such as relatives, friends, neighbours, co-workers, and other supporters, can help during challenging times. They cannot formally give professional expertise, but they can be compassionate listeners, encouraging families to seek help if needed. They can also ensure the safety of children, and if need be, report to child welfare authorities when children are at risk or being abused. But most of all they can be a loving and supportive presence, upholding in prayer families who are in crisis and finding concrete ways to show care.

What are “healthy” families?

Healthy families require both flexibility and structure, where core issues of power, control, and intimacy can be resolved in constructive ways. Such families enable openness of discussion, cooperative problem solving, and the freedom for each member to grow and flourish, and to be respected in his or her differences.

In highly functional families, members of the family are able to be comfortable with both their loving feelings and their feelings of annoyance and frustration. As members of an intimate group, each one takes personal responsibility for his or her ambivalent thoughts and feelings. A deep sense of emotional security allows these families to resolve conflicts because they have a sense that “we can work it out.” There is a sense of respect that

the needs of the self, and the needs of the group, can be resolved in a cooperative way.

“Instead of using emotionally coercive tactics such as intimidation and guilt, healthy families share power and allow for the expression of a wide range of feelings and thoughts. Differences are welcomed as enriching to everyone. As a result, intimacy is safe. Members are free to be both separate and connected” [Philip Classen, *IFL Reflections*, Fall 2003, Institute of Family Living. I am indebted to my colleague, Dr. Classen, for his articulate understanding of what constitutes healthy families and what promotes the healing of families].

Unhealthy families usually display both turmoil and rigidity, where chaotic or authoritarian structures prevent healthy emotional functioning. In such families rules are either non-existent or fixed and non-negotiable. Trust is broken, boundaries of the soul are invaded, and (in violent families) fear and terror reign. Some families are chaotic, lacking rules or clear structure. Others are authoritarian, applying rules that can never be challenged. In both instances, because of the fear that change and loss will prove intolerably painful, the family tends to lack the flexibility or capacity to adapt creatively to new situations.

There are several issues that may develop into crises but that can provide occasions for growth:

- *Narrow definitions of “family” or “marriage”* may constrict how people become intimate partners and raise children, without taking seriously the wide range of intimate connections and family forms that can be understood as mutual commitments.
- *Rigid gender roles* may keep partners from growing in their marriages, and slot children into roles that may not reflect their God-given gifts as persons.

- *Unique personality types* may not be given their due respect if they differ from the family “style” — for example, an extraverted couple may not understand or appreciate their introverted child’s need for privacy; an introverted couple may not understand the needs of an extraverted child for a wide range of friends and external activities.
- *Volatile anger and conflict* may be uncontrolled, making everyone emotionally and even physically unsafe; with no “fair fighting rules” and no ability to work through problems, relationships break down and no one can see a way to reconciliation.

How can families find healing?

We are all members of families, and we learn to become social beings through our early experiences of family. Even the most isolated individual can still be understood as a family member. Family ties and the influence of family structures are powerful, even when remote in time and distance. Some people may see themselves as living in splendid (or not so splendid) isolation from a supporting community. An increased awareness of the power and importance of relationships can help such alienated people to achieve hope, healing, and reconciliation, and to gain deeper understanding and more responsible control of our lives.

There are myriad factors that influence our lives. People act and react within larger structures such as partnerships, marriages, families of origin, families of choice, faith communities, socio-economic classes, workplaces, and so on. When such broader circles are added to the potent influences of gender, ethnicity, and genetic, environmental, and medical factors, we can see that the texture and variety of each person’s experience forms a complex human tapestry.

Many people suffer from various forms of depression, anxiety, ongoing conflict in relationships, and stress from either severe trauma or the small traumas of everyday life. Many of these difficulties can be helped by discovering how they originated, and how intimacy and respect, power and control have been experienced throughout the various stages of a person's life. So we need to ask questions. During the years of growing up, what strategies did a person learn in order to cope with the many joys and terrors of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood? How did their families, friends, church community, and neighbourhoods help or hinder their growing into mature adults?

Sometimes people seek healing because they are in pain and because denial of that pain is no longer an option. They deserve a lot of credit for survival, for coping, and for the courage to face their own truths despite the difficulty of doing so. It is healing when people gain insight, recapture joy, decide to make changes, and then actually make them. It is healing when people gain (or regain) self-respect, a sense of competence, a sense of adventure in living, and spiritual connection.

A faith journey

It is my hope in writing this book to raise some questions and to share some of my own learnings through thirty years of working with families (and many more of living in family!). Perhaps I may be able to help you, the reader, to identify a range of problems and some possible approaches for healing and restoring family life, so that the experience of others may be a source of Christian hope and inspiration on your own journey.

There is a strong interface between what emerges in doing family therapy and the political and broader social issues of our day. As Christians, we are all called to love justice and to

show mercy, especially toward the vulnerable, the wounded, the marginalized. Clergy, pastoral counsellors, social workers, and therapists are among those whose professional calling is to bind up the broken-hearted and to comfort the afflicted. But all of us — friends, relatives, neighbours, teachers, youth workers, co-workers — are called as Christians to “bear one another’s burdens” and to support and care for one another, and this includes caring for one another’s families.

Many issues that we encounter as ordinary Christians require us to take a prophetic stance, one that challenges oppressive and corrupt power relations. As Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement, once put it, as followers of Jesus we will often find ourselves “comforting the afflicted, and afflicting the comfortable.” Often in our everyday lives we find that what we experience initially as being individual, private, and personal is in fact profoundly linked with the collective, public, and communal. And so there is always a dimension of public justice to our Christian calling to be salt and light. What we often see in microcosm at the personal, family, and relational level is but a reflection of the macro level of faith community, neighbourhood, social institutions, law, and politics.

At a centre such as the Institute for Family Living, where I am the clinical director, psychotherapy is a family affair. We meet a great variety of clients — individuals, couples, families; Christian, Jewish, Muslim, of other faiths, and of no faith community. At first glance, they seem to have little in common except a desire to improve their relationships through therapy. But our clients have a lot more in common than that. No matter what their issues, background, social class, culture, race, gender, or sexual orientation, they all have families of which they are, or have been, a part.

I recognize that, in choosing certain topics, I have had to limit the discussion of others that are equally worthy. I have not looked at some other challenging issues — for example, parenting

children with disabilities, dealing with chronic illness and aging, or the increasingly complicated ethical issues surrounding birth and death (when families are confronted with the possibilities of genetic testing and new reproductive technologies, or with questions of assisted suicide or euthanasia). In drawing on my experience as a therapist, I have sought to address topics such as work and leisure, justice issues and family life, conflict resolution and mediated breakup, child and adolescent problems, addiction and recovery, and trauma and healing.

Building healthy families

Listed below are some essential qualities that help build healthy families, enabling members to be both close (“near”) and separate (“far”) — and to live with integrity within themselves and with others, respecting differences and responding with love.

1. Connectedness (*opposite: alienation*)

a feeling of closeness, of being an integral part of the family, of being cared for in the family

2. Acceptance (*opposite: rejected/judged*)

a sense of being acknowledged, respected, and honoured as a unique member of the family, with one’s own thoughts and feelings, gifts and talents, weaknesses and vulnerability

3. Appreciation (*opposite: discounted*)

being acknowledged for our own personal successes, for our contributions to the family

4. Trust (*opposite: fear/mistrust*)

a sense of consistent, predictable attitudes with an emotional foundation of love, respect, and forgiveness among family members

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... Building healthy families continued

5. **Truthfulness** (*opposite: denial*)

ability to be open and honest with feelings and information about events in the family

6. **Commitment** (*opposite: indifference*)

members have chosen to make the family a priority in their lives

7. **Flexible rules** (*opposite: rigidity/legalism*)

rules are built on clear values, allowing the family to be collaborative and problem-solving in its approach to change and to life events

8. **Problem solving skills** (*opposite: emotional reactivity*)

good thinking skills are modelled, allowing for members to be proactive

9. **Safety** (*opposite: violation*)

emotional, physical, and sexual security for each member of the family, communicated both verbally and non-verbally

10. **Boundaries** (*opposite: fusion/enmeshment*)

an invisible line between ourselves and others in the family, affirming each one's uniqueness and separateness physically, verbally, emotionally, and spiritually

Rate each of the following ten qualities on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the least present and 5 being the most present. Use column one for your family of origin (the family you grew up in) and column two for the family you currently live with.

Quality	Family of Origin	Current Family
Connectedness		
Acceptance		
Appreciation		
Trust		
Truthfulness		
Commitment		
Flexible rules		
Problem solving skills		
Safety		
Boundaries		

Diane Marshall, 1990

Scattered throughout the book are charts that family members can use to consider important characteristics of their families. At the end of each chapter are references to resources that may help parents and other family members. There are prayers and meditations that may be used for family devotions. And there are some “helpful suggestions” that may spark some discussion and stimulate some movement for change.

It is my hope that this book will provide real encouragement in the complex journey of growing — as members of families — in the love of Christ.