

WHAT'S A FAMILY?

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper
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[Insert excerpts from "Angels Among Us," by Chris Graham, Augusta Free Press, 12/4/09]

What a fine counterbalance this heartwarming story is to this week's leading national story about Tiger Woods and his alleged marital infidelity. The coincidence of these two real-life family dramas illustrates the dilemmas faced by American families every day, and the confusion we share about just **what it means to be a family**. The profiles of American families have evolved to the point where you could argue that there is no such thing as a "typical" American family. Americans are marrying at a later age **if** they are marrying at all. The number of unmarried couples living together has increased by 500 percent in the last three decades. Those who do marry are having fewer children and later in life. The proportion of children in two-parent families continues to decline, so that nearly one out of every three children is living with only one parent. [Lifelong Faith Associates, "Thirteen Trends and Forces Affecting the Future of Faith Formation in a Changing Church and World," *Faith Formation 2010*, p. 5]

As one sociologist observes, "What is significant about American families, compared with other nations, is their combination of 'frequent marriage, frequent divorce' and the high number of 'short-term co-habiting relationships.' Taken together, these forces 'create a great turbulence in American family life, a family flux, a coming and going of partners on a scale seen nowhere else. There are more partners in the personal lives of Americans than in the lives of people of any other Western country.'" [Andrew Cherlin quoted by Caitlin Flanagan, "Why Marriage Matters," *Time*, 7/13/09, p. 47]

In the face of all this chaos and confusion, it is not surprising that there are those who would call us backward to a supposed golden era when family life was simpler and lines of authority were clearer. The most high-profile organization is James Dobson's Focus on the Family, which supports the teaching of what it considers to be traditional family values. It

advocates [school sponsored prayer](#) and supports [corporal punishment](#). It strongly opposes [abortion](#), so-called militant feminism, homosexuality, and pre-marital and extramarital [sexual activity](#). Focus on the Family actively opposes same-sex marriage or civil unions. James Dobson regards same-sex marriage as "...a stepping-stone on the road to eliminating all societal restrictions and on marriage and sexuality." Focus on the Family asserts that the Bible lays out the correct plan for marriage and family. Dobson explains that God created Eve to complement Adam physically, spiritually, and emotionally.[source: Wikipedia]

Focus on the Family is reacting against what many Americans feel is our overly **permissive** culture, in which parents set no standards for their children and tolerate irresponsible behavior. In the words of one critic, "children love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they allow disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children now are tyrants, not the servants of their households." What I just said is a quote from Socrates complaining about the youth of his day in the 6th Century B.C.E. Likewise, what Tom Brokaw has labeled as America's "Greatest Generation" were criticized by the Surgeon General of the Army at the time as lacking "the ability to face life, live with others, think for themselves, and stand on their own two feet." [quoted by Debra W. Haffner, *What Every 21st-Century Parent Needs to Know*, p. 3] These disparaging comments serve as reminders of adults' perennial disrespect for younger generations throughout history.

The solution to permissiveness offered by Focus on the Family and similar organizations is a return to an **authoritarian** model of family life, in which the father is the head of the household, the mother is second in command, and the role of children is to obey their parents. Authoritarian Parents reverse the permissive approach. They set strict standards for their children and punish non-compliance. They rely on slogans such as "I told you not to do that," "Because I said so," and "Just say no." Unfortunately, this approach to parenting becomes ineffective if the parents are inconsistent in their discipline or when the children are no longer under their direct control. During adolescence, the authoritarian approach leads to constant power struggles and showdowns. Ultimately, it fails to teach children how to make responsible decisions on their own.

So what is the alternative to both the permissive and authoritarian models of family life? I want to recommend two books in particular which I have listed on the back of your yellow order of service and placed for borrowing on the back table. *Raising a Responsible Child*, which was first published back in the 1970s, continues to offer an excellent guide to parenting preschool and elementary school-age children. The cornerstone of this approach is to allow children to learn from the **consequences** of their actions. Many well-intentioned parents rob their children of valuable lessons of life by shielding them from the negative consequences of their decisions. **Natural consequences** are the result of the laws of nature. A child who doesn't remember to wear gloves on a cold day will learn first-hand how important that decision can be. **Logical consequences** are based on the social expectations of the real world. A teenager who refuses to get out of bed in time for school must either walk to school or pay for a taxi ride out of their own funds, and then face the consequences when they arrive late for school. Having used this approach with my own children, I can tell you that there are some stressful moments along the way, but overall it works in teaching children how to become responsible decision-makers.

For families with adolescents, I recommend a more recent book titled *What Every 21st-Century Parent Should Know* by Debra Haffner, who is not only a widely respected author on parent education, but also an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister. She is probably best known for her face-off with radio talk show host Bill O'Reilly on the need for sex education in public schools. In her book, she describes a third alternative to either permissive or authoritarian parenting. She calls it Affirmative Parenting. "Affirming Parents are both nurturing and firm. They run their families as a 'limited democracy.' They love their children extravagantly, but it is clear that they are in charge. They are equally demanding and responsive. They set clear standards for their children, but offer explanations for these standards and are open to give-and-take with their children about what the standards for present and future conduct should be. . . . Rather than using psychological control, they seek to give their children opportunities to develop their own thoughts and feelings and the skills to express them. One might call these Goldilocks parents: neither too strict nor too permissive, they seek to get it 'just right.'" [Haffner, pp. 27-28] Her book is filled with practical advice and examples about how to apply this approach to issues ranging from sexuality to alcohol and drugs. Her motto is "Just say **know**."

Strong and healthy families are **not** immune to troubles. Many families face crises for which they are not responsible: financial hardship, severe health problems, sudden tragedy. What enables them to overcome the inevitable challenges of life is a cluster of qualities based not on who they are but on **how they support one another**. One of the best discussions I've seen is a little book titled *Secrets of Strong Families*, which is based on a comprehensive study by researchers at the University of Nebraska [Nick Stinnett and John DeFrain] I want to highlight two of these qualities: **commitment and connection**.

First, **commitment**. This leads me back to the Tiger Woods story. Apparently, still another alpha male has succumbed to the same temptation as so many other alpha males: Bill Clinton, John Edwards, two state governors, members of Congress . . . The list of names keeps changing, but the story is both familiar and timeless. Recall the story of King David in the Bible, who fell in love at first sight with an attractive woman (Bathsheba), slept with her and got her pregnant, and then completed his transgression by arranging to have her military husband killed in battle. What are these men thinking? Certainly not about their betrayed partners. Governor Sanford professed his desire for being reconciled with his wife while also proclaiming that in his new love he had finally satisfied his lifelong quest for a "soul mate." What could possibly inspire such self-indulgent insensitivity? The simple answer is that even powerful men are natural-born suckers for an attractive young woman who can stoke their insatiable egos yet one more time. **And**, I might add, that some young women are strongly attracted to powerful men.

True enough, but I think there is a deeper and more unsettling truth below the surface: that these highly successful people have learned all too well how to **disconnect the dots** that make up their lives and **distance** themselves emotionally from the consequences of their actions. In a culture that rewards the ability to compartmentalize one's life, a sexual affair on the side is just one more multi-task to manage. In contrast, members of strong families are committed to **connecting the dots** of their lives, and when necessary they are willing to sacrifice their personal desires for the sake of the greater good of their family. William Doherty, who is director of the marriage and family therapy program at the University of Minnesota, puts it bluntly: "I believe every good parent must unconditionally be committed and loving. Like 'there is nothing this kid could ever do that would make me exit this child's life. **Period**. . . . Now there are times when I

have to say, ‘You’ve got to change what you’re doing; I don’t accept this behavior.’ But the commitment—the loving commitment—is always there.” [“Reclaiming the Best of Fatherhood: A Roundtable Discussion,” *UU World*, January/February 2001]

Finally, I want to mention the importance of being **connected** to a wider community that includes but also transcends the family. Debra Haffner says, “For those of us who belong to faith communities, that means attending family church, mosque, or synagogue regularly, saying prayers regularly before meals and bedtime, participating in service projects as a family, and discussing our faith. These simple behaviors set a foundation for the role of religion in family life and give our children a solid religious home.” [p. 180] The families who participated in the *Strong Families* research project represented many different faiths, including Unitarian Universalism. “Members of strong families would agree: the challenges and trials of life are bearable and surmountable because of the spiritual resources they can tap. Without the spiritual dimension to give lasting meaning, life would lack purpose and direction; they would suffer alienation and depression. Instead they feel a part of something bigger than self (a part of an eternal spirit or of humanity) and that gives them perspective, hope, optimism, and confidence.”

The amazing story of the Martin family illustrates just how much the support of a caring community can mean in meeting enormous challenges. Jeff Fife says, “Mary is so focused on taking care of her family. This is just something small we can do to her and help these wonderful children get a new lease on life.” Mary Martin says her daughter Holly recently asked “Why are so many people so nice to us?” “I said, I don’t know. There are just a lot of amazing people in this world.” [“Angels Among Us,” *Augusta Free Press*, 12/4/09]

DISCUSSION

HYMN # 131 “Love Will Guide Us”

CLOSING WORDS # 456 [led by lay leader Jody Grogan]