

Ethical and Loving Relationships

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Family norms guide relationships. Beyond setting rules, norms facilitate the flow of love, first in the family, and then in society. Family norms structure the order of love and regulate sexual relationships. The collapse of sexual norms has resulted in promiscuity, pornography, incest, and sexual abuse.

Vertical and Horizontal Axes

One way to represent relations in the family is through a sphere with three different axes.

Marriage is a vital axis in the family sphere. The vertical axis represents the sequence of generations: grandparents, parents, children, and grandchildren. These are vertical relationships. There are two horizontal axes, one representing relationships among elder and younger siblings, and the other representing the relationship between husband and wife.

Marriage is a unique and exclusive relationship, not meant to be shared with anyone else. Relationships on the husband/wife axis are complementary and equal. The husband/wife axis is the only proper context for sexual love. When introduced into other relationships, sex releases destructive forces. Victims of incest and child sexual abuse testify to the long-term devastating psychological effects, showing that sex outside of its proper axis is destructive. Sexual relations are reserved exclusively for the horizontal axis of two equal counterparts of the opposite sex who are totally committed to one another. Their responsibilities are not merely horizontal but extend vertically toward the previous and future generations.

With true love in the center, people in all six positions (parents, children, elder sibling, younger sibling, husband, and wife) live for their counterparts. Equality in the family is realized as each person receives the optimal love according to his or her role in the family.

The ability to love and invest in another person with a sacrificial spirit does not arise from a vacuum but from the core of our being, which we call heart. We grow through four interrelated realms of heart. Marriage is the third realm, building on the experiences in the child's realm of heart and sibling's realm of heart. Relationships among siblings and peers help prepare for the development of conjugal love. The arrival of a child transforms husband and wife into father and mother; it opens the parent's realm of heart and accelerates the perfection of conjugal love.

We can experience the intersection of all four realms of heart within the marriage relationship and fill in any areas that were not developed in childhood. Sometimes the husband will show a fatherly love to his wife, while at other times he may act as a child to receive her motherly love. Like brother and sister, they may have fun together and support each other. Marriage has the potential to be a psychologically healing and transforming experience.

Parenthood puts husband and wife in the position of primary moral educators of their children. A child needs both paternal and maternal love for healthy spiritual and mental development. Husband and wife are their children's first teachers in matters of love and relationships. As husband and wife grow in love for each other, their capacity to love their children is enriched. Children learn from their parents what it means to be a man and a woman. Children observe the exchanges of emotions between husband and wife and model their future marriages on what they learned at home from their mother and father. Children watch the dynamics of how their parents solve problems, relate with each other, socialize, manage situations, and express their emotions. Ideally, they learn how to respect other's viewpoints and preferences as well as how to process several possibilities and consider consequences when making decisions.

Realms of Heart

Through marriage, people become part of a grand and magnificent design in life. There is a mystical dimension to our impulse for building a marriage that makes us uniquely human. Around the world, a wedding is considered a sacred event and is marked, like birth and death, with ceremony. The new couple is considered a source of blessing to those around them, and the nobility of their dress and demeanor makes everyone happy and proud to be a human being.

Marriage is love in its royal form. In a sense, our wedding is the coronation day of our life. It is the

fruition of youth, when the flower blooms fragrant, radiant, and pure, ready to bear fruit.

In marriage, the hearts of husband and wife expand as smaller, private concerns give way to greater and more public concerns. Profound lessons are learned when we can delay immediate gratification for the sake of serving others. This results in a deep sense of fulfillment and happiness.

Sexual Behaviors in Society

Anthropologist J. D. Unwin studied the sexual behaviors of eighty-six cultures through four thousand years of history. He observed that when cultures believed that sex outside of marriage, either premarital sex or extramarital sex, was wrong and did not practice it, those cultures prospered and were strong. The societies that were more sexually loose declined and eventually faded away. Unwin theorized that it was a matter of energy. Energy dispersed carelessly through promiscuity resulted in a dying society.

How we handle our sexuality in a society determines a great deal about the stability of marriage and family life in that society. The quality of family life is enormously important to society. Children who do not experience respect and love in the family will not know how to show respect and love to people in society. In an atmosphere of love, children can learn to love and trust, to apologize for mistakes, to forgive others for their mistakes, to resolve conflicts, to be conscientious and courageous, to respect the rights of others, to postpone gratification, and to be both free and responsible. They can gain the inner confidence to develop healthy relationships with many kinds of people.

The Individual, Family, and Society Intertwine

Growing up in the 60s, it was common for our friends' parents to tell us what or what not to do. We knew if we misbehaved, our parents would hear about it. Holidays were more special because we'd do things in the neighborhood together with other families. On Halloween some neighbors would have a special treat for the kids they knew. On the fourth of July, we had a picnic in the park and watched fireworks together. At Christmastime, we'd do the "Las Posadas" in different families' neighborhoods. For nine days before Christmas, we'd follow two people dressed up like Mary and Joseph around a neighborhood. We'd approach different houses (arranged prior by the host family) and reenact Mary and Joseph going from inn to inn looking for a place to stay but the occupants would say they have no room. The last house (host family's house) would say they only had a stable but were welcome. We all went inside that house and had refreshments. It was a lot of fun and made us consider how we'd treat strangers.

The family is the basis of society. When we find problems in society, they can usually be traced back to problems in the family. It is in the family that our personality and character are formed. We do not inherit just our parents' genes; we also inherit their attitudes towards life, their way of dealing with problems, and their patterns of human relationships. These are passed on from generation to generation.

The relationships we experience in the family are the models for our social relationships. Our societies reflect our families, and our families reflect the moral choices made by the individuals within them. In these ways the fates of the individual, the family, and society intertwine.

Contemplation

What are the relationships like in your family?

How was the environment of your community when you were growing up?

How were you educated about morals?

How did you prepare (or are you preparing) for marriage?

Does your family influence your society?

What kind of traditions do your family and community have?