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The Family in Our Changing Society

FROM BIRTH TO GRAVE there is scarcely any action of an individual that is not guided and coloured by family relations.

The family is concerned with all the great crises of life. It is the centre of the most intimate relationships. In it are enacted the greatest events imaginable to mankind: birth, marriage, death, and the initiation of children into society.

This key association is being subjected to strain and stress in a changing world. Suddenly, it seems, our assured and comfortable stroll through time has been shatteringly interrupted. As Alfred North Whitehead said in *Dialogues*: "The conditions of our lives have been basically more altered in the past fifty years than they were in the previous two thousand — I might say three thousand."

The mobility given us by science in space, on land, and in work, has brought with it mobility of thought and desire, with consequent fragility of assurance and loss of safe anchorage.

More important than these results of science has been the surge toward democracy. In the old time family the father was the sole economic provider, the religious leader, the ruler, protector and lawgiver. As we have tended toward political democracy there has grown up a desire for democracy in the home, and democracy is a very difficult way of life. It requires not only rules of behaviour but unselfishness, good temper, forgiveness, tolerance and humour.

Old ways are hard to forget: the ways that included masters and servants, the patriarch and his family.

The prominent factors in the companionship family of today are: demonstration of affection, the sharing of experiences, mutual confiding, sharing in the making of decisions, and gradual but quick growth of children into acceptance of adult responsibilities. Throughout all this the family must try to maintain the ideals, standards and sanctions which the past has found to be good and which the present believes valid.

So important is the family in Canadian society, and so pressing are the problems confronting it, that Their Excellencies the Governor General and Mrs. Vanier

are sponsoring a national conference on the family to be held in 1964.

Husband and wife

The man and woman who marry in the hope of forming a permanent partnership require certain skills and attitudes of mind. They must be skilful in adapting themselves to each other, they need capacity to work out their mutual problems, they need willingness to give and take in the search for harmony, and they need unselfishness of the highest sort — thought for their partners taking the place of desire for themselves.

People do not come to marriage like newly-hatched chickens. Each one has a history which colours life. A marriage counsellor said wisely that if he had only thirty seconds in which to give a couple advice he would say: "Get to know each other." There has never been a successful marriage which was not based upon mutual understanding.

Some years ago Chief Justice J. C. McRuer of Ontario was chairman of a Commission on Christian Marriage and the Christian Home. His report said: "The complete identification of each life with the other is the crowning experience of the husband and wife relation."

Every human relationship has problems, and marriage is no exception. For example, on this continent today many families might with truth be called child-centred. As Dr. Stuart E. Rosenberg, Rabbi of Beth Tzedec Congregation in Toronto, wrote in *The Road to Confidence*: "The 'cult of the child' has reached such proportions that in many ways our children are no longer children. They are wilful dictators, pint-sized Caesars, little Napoleons, who have become the important decision-makers of family life."

It is, of course, easy to poke fun at earnest mothers and fathers who come together to study the psychology of the child, but it is not right to do so unless they lose their sense of proportion. People who have a healthy respect for themselves, who think sensibly about themselves, are quite right in seeking to extend their knowledge so as to encompass the needs of their children in this new sort of world.

They need to do it co-operatively. Whenever the part of either parent is undervalued, or the claims of the children overvalued, the harmony of the family is destroyed and effective training is marred.

The woman's part

Up until not so very long ago women walked in very narrow paths set for them in remote ages. Their revelation to themselves as persons has done more than the Industrial Revolution and automation to give a new aspect to all their relations. Today, they are pulled in many different directions, free to make choices about many important things formerly decided for them by others.

Victorian age men thought they were flattering their wives as well as wriggling free from a duty they did not like when they made their wives subcontractors for cultural activities. Suburban wives of this age resent being regarded as merely decorative additions in the home or cultural representatives in the community. The Carnegie Corporation report for 1960 declared: "Many studies indicate that the greatest wastage of human resources in the United States today is the under-utilization of intelligent women."

There is a widespread idea that labour-saving devices have relieved women from the laborious treadmill of housekeeping, and that women should be content with their new-found leisure. Despite the aids to housework provided by inventors, there remain a thousand trivial tasks quite unworthy of an educated woman's ability and training.

This raises two important points: there is a split between what a wife is capable of doing and what society has made available for her to do; and at the same time the change raises a great problem in the training of children because the discipline of working together in household tasks and of playing together in the family circle have been lost.

A wife cannot devote herself wholly to husband and children, but they are still her first and most important responsibility. She is still the hub of the family. She is still the centre of education. She must be patient, loving and understanding. She must be strong enough to bear the weight of family troubles, while retaining her glamour and attractiveness. Canada's first humourist, Thomas C. Haliburton, had one of his characters bring this proposition down to earth in *The Clock-maker*: "I let him think he is master in his own house, for when ladies wear the breeches, their petticoats ought to be long enough to hide them."

The man in the house

Most discussion of home-making seems to refer to wives, but husbands also have responsibilities in the home. In times of strain and uncertainty the husband's role takes on undoubted significance.

The "Old Man of the Tribe" idea entered into human affairs early. He was the chief, someone to be feared. He left sentiment to his wife.

In our western culture of today the patriarchal powers are largely dissipated, but the father still stands as the symbolic head of the family. One of his difficulties is that while he is still held responsible he is expected to share his authority among all members of the family.

If an executive is to be successful in business, it is an elementary rule that his authority must equal his responsibility. But a popular comic strip points up the present stature of many husbands and fathers. Dagwood is kind, dutiful, diligent, well-meaning, but he has completely given up any claim to authority.

A man's experience in the competitive world of business does not prepare him to participate in the home as husband and father. He does not enter readily into the children's world of fantasy. He finds difficulty in "make believe" games such as a tea party with imaginary cups and cookies. Because his realistic values cannot be carried into the home, he tries to develop the idea of the division of labour to the point where he earns the money and his wife brings up the family.

That does not work out well. A woman can provide the heart values in family life, but she cannot train her sons in the special male attitudes necessary to their success as men, nor can she provide the training for sons or daughters that provides a link between the oneness of the family and the gregariousness of the wide world.

There is another reason why husbands need to participate in family life: their emotional security is in the home. The contact with many sorts of people and events in factory or office makes a man wish for a haven where he may ease his mind and spirits. Here is a split equally worrisome as his wife's division between what she is capable of doing and the outlets provided for her. The husband has plenty of outlets, what he needs is a place to recuperate.

Adolescence

If parents have their troubles, so have their adolescent children. It is part of youth to be vigorous, flexible and enthusiastic, and sometimes these lead a boy or a girl into what has been labelled "adolescent rebellion."

As children reach adolescence the parents are charged with handling their changing status in such a way as to cope with the problems of individuals without allowing any open breach to occur in family solidarity.

Children should be helped to grow from stage to stage in confidence, skill, affection, responsibility and understanding, expanding their thoughts year by year and, during the crucial period, from month to month. Don't give them cut flowers instead of teaching them to grow their own plants.

Children are maturing when they begin to think through the tangle of their conflicting desires and the perplexity of conflicting advice toward a set of personal convictions of good and bad, right and wrong. Their

assumption of responsibility and freedom should be gradual. While pulling away from the close association of the family they should have at the same time a feeling of increased importance and significance in the family group.

How are children to be guided through the surges that accompany their search for independence, and into the age when they realize the need for interdependence, except by principles they have imbibed in the family circle? How are they to take over from their parents — as they must do — the duty of self observation and character training unless they are given gradually increasing responsibility? If you feed an infant who is already capable of feeding himself you are putting love of power before the child's welfare. Children who are not taught to assume responsibility will remain dependent until they are in a position to rebel.

In addition to the three R's traditionally taught in school, we need a fourth R — Relationships. This suggestion, made by Dr. S. R. Laycock, Dean of Education of the University of Saskatchewan, is based upon the belief that education has as its purpose to enable boys and girls to live happily and effectively in all aspects of their human relationships.

Human beings are social animals who could not exist at all without being in close relationship to one another. How they get knowledge of this necessity, and learn to use the knowledge so as to bring beauty into it, is a challenge to parents.

How one family handled this problem successfully is told by Dr. Laycock in his leaflet "Educating Teen-Agers for Family Living," published by the University of Saskatchewan.

Some needed qualities

If we are to lead young people into maturity in such a way that they bypass delinquency there are certain qualities that we must have and display. These include sincerity, shared experience, unselfishness, kindness, humour, gladness and courtesy.

The real core of family life lies in the sincerity of its members. When people are sincere in their relationships they can override many difficulties and their shared affection is one of the greatest sources of happiness.

Sincerity in family living carries with it the best sort of sympathy, which is the quality of reproducing in our own minds the feelings of another person, whether of indignation, love or approbation. Genuine deep sympathy is characteristic of all that is noblest in human beings. Everywhere, but particularly in the family, it should go beyond "How can I show fellow-feeling?" to "How can I help?"

This leads to shared experiences. People in a family need some standards in common, some shared habits of mind, belief in persuasion, a willingness to think the best of fellow members even when differing.

Communicating our experiences doubles our joys and cuts our griefs in half. From the very beginning of life, the human being seeks to belong, to be accepted, to be made a member of. Good morale results when all in the family feel that they are enfolded. Queen Victoria once wrote to Prince Albert: "You will find in that a proof of my love, because I must share with you everything that rejoices me, everything that vexes or grieves me, and I am certain you will take your part in it."

Another quality needed is unselfishness. People should learn from childhood that to be dubbed selfish is the worst thing possible. A self-centred person is conscious only of his own unsatisfied needs, whereas the unselfish member of the family expands through all other members to touch life at a multitude of points.

The home is a place for gladness. It isn't enough to feed and clothe the children and send them to school. They need some poetry in their lives, some inspiration. If parents have been effective in coping with the ills of the family, they are equally obligated to show joy on joyous occasions and to think smiling thoughts as the background of their actions.

This may seem to some to be flimsy counsel, but it is pertinent because its acceptance will put us in the mood to meet even unexpected challenges serenely. Everyone, young and old, is plagued by the conflict of two generations. We need to realize — hard though it may be — that customs which were right twenty or fifty years ago do not fit the young people of today. The environment has changed.

There are few gifts that one person can give to another as rich as friendly understanding. This sometimes entails, but does not always demand, the giving of advice. It is necessary to take into account the point of view, the motives, and the prevailing folkways of young people. Adolescents are likely to be bored by their grandparents' tales of how they got up at four o'clock in the morning to milk the cows and how they squeezed nickels so as to buy a book. It is trying enough to be laughed at, but much more afflicting to be yawned at.

Courtesy, of course, would require the children to listen patiently, but it also requires grown-ups to talk in terms of the children's interests. Their superior knowledge should be blended with gentleness and free of arrogance.

Responsibility

There are few prerogatives in family life, prerogative meaning a right without corresponding duty. To learn of the obligation to be useful and to bear one's share of the load is one of life's great lessons.

There are many possible changes in the family circumstances which may make it necessary for individual members to alter their own ways of life. There may be a change in the place of residence; a change in the father's employment; a change due to the mother's taking employment outside the home; unemployment

of any member, particularly the father; sickness or disability; death; additions to the household; delinquency of a family member.

All of these call for the utmost expression of loyalty from every person in the family, not only in words but in deeds. There needs to be a spirit of give and take, of rallying round, with readiness to make adjustments in personal habits.

Living together

It is necessary to have general rules for living together, and special rules for individuals according to their ages and the necessities of the family, but it is also necessary to have unwritten things, like family rituals.

As Bossard and Boll say in *Ritual in Family Living* "Ritual concerns everyday things from washing hair and eating eggs to seating arrangements and doing the dishes. These pedestrian processes transmit culture and values and control character and personality. In these ritualistic common things basic values and results of family experience are transmitted into the unconscious mind."

Family rituals tend to unify the diverse elements of a family group into a harmonious unit. They reflect and promote the common interests of the members of the family as a group, foster family pride and encourage refinements in personal relations.

They need not be big occasional productions, but only simple things done habitually. As Amy Vanderbilt wrote in the introductory chapter to her 1963 edition of the *Complete Book of Etiquette*: "We observe small ceremonies when we say 'good morning' and 'good night', when we celebrate a birthday or attend a graduation."

There is no more effectual way of clearing one's mind on any subject than by talking it over, and in the family council everyone has the opportunity to talk through problems to a decision. Without the ebb and flow of conflicting opinions and tensions there would be no progress made toward eradicating old evils or opening up new frontiers. The function of the family council is to make possible the orderly management of tensions, and to assure dissenters of a hearing and sincere consideration of their points of view.

Emotionally, the family council gives everyone a sense of security. He has his say and he gives his cooperation. There will be differences of opinion, but these are resolved by friendly discussion and compromise and the avoidance of acute angles. It makes a big difference when the family evening is this sort of conference rather than an occasion to give orders, pass judgments and impose punishment.

Readiness to change

Being a family is a full-time job. It is not a task for men and women who would like what Sir John

Lubbock calls "a three quarter marriage." In his book *The Origin of Civilisation*, published in 1870, Lubbock tells about certain Arabs who have this custom: a man and a woman are legally married for three days out of four, remaining perfectly free for the fourth.

While many relationships in life have shifted from their old assigned places there is a necessary element of constancy in family life. This does not mean that we should cultivate rigid minds, but that change should be justified in some logical way and based on principles.

Long-accepted ideas are not sacred to a new generation. Every new wave of youth selects from the old and forms a new pattern of its own. It faces new pressures and new problems, and the way in which it adapts to the changing character of the age reflects in part the stage of civilization through which it is passing.

"There is nothing wrong in change, if it is in the right direction" said Churchill with confusing logic. Wisdom probably consists in making such changes as are needed at any particular time and in never making greater changes than are needed. Fidelity in family life is neither the lethargy of custom nor the commotion of change, but the sense of oneness that uses imagination to liven it and the putting forth of effort to build it day by day.

Love, companionship and a sense of belonging are basic needs of that life. Some people mistakenly suppose that affection consists of moonlight and roses with an occasional orchid thrown in for special occasions, but it includes much more. It is made up of interest, shared experiences, loyalty, courtesy, unselfishness, and the goals and ideals that are exemplified in everyday living.

Supporting this sort of family life is the Judaeo-Christian religion. The church has always been concerned with the family. The sacred writings of all great religions teem with rites that protect family life, and today's churches have instituted programmes of education not only in preparation for marriage but in its successful continuation. The church, with its wide inclusiveness and its age-long continuity, is in a position to be the custodian and interpreter of family values.

Our homes are the laboratories of our lives. What we do there determines the course of our lives when we leave home. "That is why," said Dr. Rosenberg, "despite all new inventions and modern designs, fads and fetishes, no one has yet invented, or will ever invent, a satisfying substitute for one's own family."

Being responsible for a family may, out of all this, emerge as a pretty fearsome business. Well, it is not something to be taken lightly, but at the same time it is one of life's most rewarding efforts. It is the means by which those who put their best into it project their lives — build their immortality — by passing on the best that they have made of life to younger and livelier hands.