

The World at a Turning Point: Considering Innovative Approaches to Peace Through Responsible Leadership and Good Governance

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Session IV: The Central Role of the Family in Personality Development

"The Family is the only secure foundation. You must have the support and love of a family or you don't have much at all." Mitch Albom.¹

Introduction

Honored guests, ladies and gentlemen. It is a great honor for me to speak to you today. Let me start with a brief personal introduction. It is now more than thirty years that I have lived in the U.S. and Canada. While teaching subjects in theology and philosophy in several academic institutions, I developed a special interest for the field of marriage and family. Being married to my loving wife Elisabeth, who is from France, we both treasure the experience of having raised one son, Chris, and one daughter, Diesa, who are now young adults. Being keenly aware of our share of mistakes in building our family, we thought it would be a good idea to allow other couples to learn from our experience. Thus, we conduct relationship enrichment seminars with the goal of helping couples and families to discover the power of genuine love.

The Family in Today's Society

It may be useful to describe briefly the situation of the family in the U.S. for a possible comparison with the European situation. It seems to me that, from one perspective, family life in the U.S. reflects our capability to cope with abundance and affluence. What is the verdict? I have to admit that on many counts we are failing. There seems to be a lack of internal strength to walk the talk.

Two reasons emerge for explaining that inability to build successful human relationships in the midst of an increasingly materialistic consumer culture. One is our often unconscious acceptance of a self-centered individualism that insists on the right to do what is best for me. The other reason follows from such thinking and can be called a mindset of unrealistic expectations. Whatever comes our way, it does not seem good enough.

Let me illustrate the predicament of a declining family life. I will start with a profile of a somewhat typical American couple, Sally and Tom. Sally thinks: I never imagined that my life with him would be so difficult. I thought I could change him after we were married, but twenty years have passed and he still irritates me with his uncivilized manners and uncaring behavior. Leaving his dirty socks and underwear on the floor, expecting me to clean up after him, and raiding the fridge at his whim, showing no self-control in his eating and drinking habits, are just a few of the annoying daily incidents that drive me up the wall. I do not even want to speak about his snoring and his uncontrolled raising of his voice when he thinks he needs

to prove that he is right. All he wants is sex and it seems that intimacy is not even in his dictionary. He is so irresponsible, not making any clear plan for our future, always living in his own world and being oblivious to what is happening around him. I dreamed of romance, affection and a life of togetherness, really sharing with each other, but I feel I am the last person on his list.

Tom thinks: Here we go again. How can she be so sensitive? She behaves like a princess disturbed about a pea. She worries about every little detail and gets upset if things do not turn out her way. She is always on my case trying to turn me into some kind of superman. Once her mood of giving instructions takes over, I feel like a two-year-old being told how to lead my life, and I end up doing things I really do not want to do. These are the moments when my self-esteem hits rock bottom. I thought our life together would be like teamwork, sharing our joys and burdens equally, but I feel I am getting the short end of the stick. No matter how hard I try to please her, she leaves me with the feeling that it is not good enough. How can I handle the ever increasing financial pressure when she seems to be stuck with her own version of financial reality, assuming there is a never-ending flow of cash pouring into our home? She wants to dine fine and have her dream vacation and I feel stuck in an emotional pit because I cannot deliver. So I ask myself: where is the teamwork?

What do we learn from such a profile? It appears that today's marriages suffer from an increasing tension between unrealistic dreams and the reality of unfulfilled expectations. Often, when such a tension seems unbearable it leads the couple to divorce, even if they may be aware of the devastating effects divorce has on their children. In the final analysis, it is the voice of the weakest family members, namely, the children, that best describes the quality of family life.

According to Dr. James Dobson, a well-known American family therapist, one elementary school teacher in California gave a simple assignment to the children of her class: to write down sentences that begin with "I wish." She expected answers like: "I wish to be a pilot," "I wish to be a movie star," or "I wish to be a professional athlete." To her surprise, she read the following sentences: "I wish my dad had more time for me," "I wish I had only one father and one mother," "I wish my mother would stop having boyfriends. They botch up my life," "I wish my parents would not withhold their love when I have bad grades." The list of similar responses continued. More than 80 percent of the answers related to issues connected to dysfunctional families, thus reflecting the dismal statistics of a divorce rate of more than 50 percent.

But are the other five out of ten couples happy? Family experts answer in the negative. Only one or two out of ten couples seem to have a harmonious marriage. Family life is increasingly exposed to undermining influences such as the menace of free sex, adultery, pornography, homosexuality, and lesbianism. The whole culture, in particular the entertainment industry, appears to be saturated with abusive sex, resulting in the increase of teenage pregnancies, abortions, and sexually transmitted diseases, in particular AIDS.

A New Vision for the Family

Having said all that, I am still convinced that there is another side to the story. There are many conscientious people who are working tirelessly to bring back traditional family values. There is the Marriage Encounter Movement and Retrouvaille providing support for couples seeking enrichment in their relationship and helping couples whose marriage is on the rocks so that they are able to avoid the divorce trap. There are

the Marriage Savers, an initiative directed at Christian ministers and Jewish rabbis urging them to provide extensive marriage preparation and counseling. There is Divorce Busting, Relationship Enhancement, and How the One of You Can Bring the Two of You Together, to name a few more approaches to marriage therapy. Furthermore, there are organizations that promote abstinence-based sex education, such as Free Teens and the Pure Love Alliance, which are receiving increasing acceptance from public and private schools. One could ask why is there not more success in healing dysfunctional families.

Even if I risk committing the fallacy of simplification, let me offer one answer. Successful marriages and families need both spiritual commitment and relationship skills. Most family therapists focus on educating their clients on the skill level and develop sophisticated psychological approaches to relationship building. But where does the motivation and commitment come from to follow through with repetitive and demanding exercises that aim at increasing self-mastery and the sensitivity level towards one's spouse? In my view, such a lasting commitment for improving family relationships has its roots in our love for God and the ensuing active spiritual life for all family members.

At this point, let me offer a brief account of Reverend Moon's vision of a healthy family. What is included in the understanding of the original God-given potential of a fulfilled family life? Human development advances through building loving relationships in stages. The experience of love does not just happen in a general way by reaching out to others, but it is designed originally to take place within the family. In other words, first we need to build loving relationships with family members, thus experiencing growth towards maturation, and then we will be able to extend our love to the world around us.

The chief aspect of love is the fact that it starts with our partner. We cannot generate love by ourselves but we need to transcend our own self, making it empty so to speak. Based on that condition of overcoming self-centeredness and living totally for our partner, love will appear. Family therapists agree that love is the decision to make your partner the number one person in your life.² They also agree that persevering in such a decision to live for the sake of your spouse is hard work, and requires daily commitment to transcend personal preferences. In other words, the emerging higher reality of the marital union now receives priority over individualistic considerations.

It is the family where we experience four successive stages of loving relationships, namely, children's love, sibling's love, conjugal love, and parental love. Each of these loving relationships effects a distinct formation in the personality of the family members. Reverend Moon speaks of "four realms of heart" to emphasize that each human being has the potential to develop his or her "heart" in terms of attaining a unique loving personality. The experience of having the four types of loving relationships in the family then contributes that formative influence to our personal development.³ Thus, the family provides education for the experience of love and it also reveals the ultimate meaning of love as the connecting medium between the temporal and the eternal realms. That is to say, the experience of loving family relationships in the physical, temporal order prepares human beings for their existence in the spiritual, eternal order.⁴

It may take some effort to understand the unique characteristics of these four basic types of love which define family life. Generally, marriage and family therapists use a psychological approach in analyzing the love relationships among family members. Here, the experience of love is primarily seen as a natural occurrence and explanations are expected to move within the observable physical realm. However, upon

further reflection, we may conclude that the reality of love is not the product of human ingenuity but it is given to us as an original endowment and as the fruit of sincere effort. In short, loving relationships have a distinct spiritual dimension by virtue of manifesting different aspects of God's love. A vision statement of a healthy family life needs to pay special attention to that spiritual aspect of love.

Returning to the four types of love within the family, we discover a unique significance for each of them. First are sibling's love and conjugal love, which show mainly a horizontal nature, emphasizing growth and development in the physical order among family members of the same generation. Brothers and sisters express their love through sharing, mutual respect, and cooperation, thus undergoing a growth process in preparation for marriage. They develop their sexual identity and face a unique growing experience during the time of puberty. The unmistakable sign of human self-transcendence consists of our identity as sexual beings. That is to say, man and woman are created for the sake of the complementary partner of love.⁵

Conjugal love begins with marriage and marks the fulfillment of sexual love as originally intended by God. Husband and wife within their horizontal loving exchange of mutual self-giving develop a two-in-oneness and in this way establish the ideal of becoming a perfect object partner for God, thus being able to respond to his love. That is to say, God's vertical love finds its substantial expression in the horizontal love of the mature couple, thus forming a three-in-oneness between husband, wife and God. The realization of true love through the ideal of marriage as intended by God affirms also human co-creatorship. God's fruitfulness is expressed in human fruitfulness. The birth of children then marks the propagation of true love through the establishment of lineage. Ultimately, we can understand that the married couple and the family become the full expression of the image of God, thus expanding the earlier notion that individuals are the complete divine image.

The remaining two kinds of love, namely, children's love and parent's love, are primarily of a vertical nature where the mutual response of dependence and unconditional giving connects two generations. Children take mainly a receptive position that is best described with a disposition of filial piety and gratitude, while parents assume an actively loving role that reflects a sacrificial disposition. When referring to its spiritual dimension, the parent-child relationship signifies the loving relation between God and human beings. We are created as God's children who themselves become fathers and mothers, thus experiencing the parental heart of God.⁶ Furthermore, the family becomes the place for the unfolding of God's love by establishing a family lineage through the appearance of the new generation. In fact, inasmuch as establishing the family lineage communicates the parental experience, it also marks the goal of personal maturation, namely, to become the image of God by inheriting his parental heart. Here, human beings have the potential to realize the essence of their own personality by reflecting God's unchanging parental heart of unconditional giving.⁷

Experiencing an Inner Transformation

Discovering our God-given potential to become loving personalities involves an internal change. Our understanding of the aforementioned vision of the healthy family may well be the starting point for such an inner transformation. To illustrate that internal change in our personality, we return to Sally and Tom, exploring their thoughts.

After Sally reflects, she thinks to herself: However, something deep in my heart tells me this is my man and even if there are all these walls to climb, I still love him. I only wish we could turn our love from the lofty highs of hope into an actual fulfilling experience right here on this earth. I realize this means hard work on my part to overcome the habit of focusing on his weak points and always trying to change him. Rather, I will develop the habit of acknowledging all his good points, becoming aware of his God-given talents and encouraging him to use them. Before mentioning one point of improvement, I will show him my appreciation about several of his good character traits.

Tom thinks to himself: Still I know that Sally is special. She is the one I will always love no matter how unexplainable our marriage sometimes turns out to be. Somehow I feel that there is another dimension in our relationship waiting to be discovered, that our common journey to find genuine love actually has a destination. It seems to be worthwhile to have a dream about our marriage and to invest sincere efforts to make that dream come true. I will start really listening to her, so I can understand her feelings. I realize we need to spend more quality time together so that our love for each other can grow and we will be able to experience genuine intimacy.

To carry out all good intentions for change in our marriage relationship, we need to be constantly motivated by the ultimate purpose of our lives, namely, to respond to the love of our Creator. Not only the spouses but all family members will come to understand the importance of a strong spiritual life that functions as the foundation for our desired internal transformation.

Conclusion

We have explored our God-given potential for a healthy family life. As much as we may acknowledge such an essential orientation towards loving relationships in our human nature, nevertheless our contemporary culture rallies behind a different message. It is called individualism. We are supposed to believe that a complete life is the result of paying attention to the self. The self is selected as the locus for advancing the quality of life, resulting in a pre-occupation with self-realization, self-gratification, and self-fulfillment. Here, emerges the need for an internal transformation from secular self-centered individualism towards a God-centered individualism that cares for others first. We have shown that at the core of the needed inner transformation lies in a new vision of the family. Such a vision implies that individualism cannot be an end in itself but needs to be redefined in terms of including the higher purpose of building a loving family and serving the community.

We can summarize our discussions by showing that we need to experience such an inner transformation on three levels to reach a new human self-understanding that serves as the foundation for lasting peace:

1. On the individual level, we need to redefine the healthy personality by allowing reason to exist in the service of love. The past emphasis on our rational faculty has caused an analysis of the self that often ignored our God-given potential to focus first on building loving relationships. That is to say, the education of the intellect needs to be based on character education—also described as the education of the heart—which takes place mainly in the family. In short, the healthy personality attains a mind-body unity that is directed towards realizing the ideal of true love. In this way, we reach the consciousness of a new individualism that is centered on self-transcendence and the higher purpose of living for the well-being of others. In terms of the practical

implications of such a consciousness of self-transcendence, we may point to the IIFWP family-based literacy educational programs which promote the full development of the human potential.

2. On the family level, we find the resources for making the ideal of true love substantial. The present divorce culture, having its roots in secular individualism, needs to be transformed into a marriage culture that affirms the new individualism of living for the sake of others.⁸ Once the love of parents finds fulfillment in mutual commitment and affection while embracing God's loving partnership, the raising of good children will follow naturally. Two initiatives should be mentioned that raise the awareness of the need for healthy families. Reverend Moon's International Blessing Ceremonies promote harmony across racial, ethnic and national lines, while the Pure Love Alliance has the goal of preparing young people for committed marriages. Furthermore, the central importance of family life is now supported on the national and global levels. The United States Congress has approved the celebration of the Day of the Family on each fourth Sunday in July, while the United Nations declared The International Year of the Family in 1994 and is preparing to celebrate its tenth anniversary in 2004.

3. On the society level, we need to leave behind our narrow agendas of partisanship and historical divisions rooted in ethnicity, race and nationalism. Such a healing of the past is effected by the new consciousness for humanity that is best described as the consciousness of the global family. Here lies the ultimate vision for world peace. We may add that peace is not just the absence of conflict but it marks the active state of a fulfilling family life for all humankind. Let us go forward and support with our own lives the centrality of God-loving families for our common goal of attaining lasting world peace.

Thank you very much.

¹ Mich Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie*. New York: Broadway Books, 1997, p.91.

² Well-known family therapists James Dobson and Gary Smalley speak of the need to make love a decision.

³ Sun Myung Moon, *True Love and True Family*. New York: FFWP, 1997, p. 53. Henceforth cited as TLTF.

⁴ TLTF, p. 5.

⁵ TLTF, p. 22.

⁶ Herbert Richardson, *A Time for Consideration*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1980.

⁷ TLTF, p. 24.

⁸ The Institute for the American Family states: "We are presently waging a war over values involving traditional versus liberal family values. What is desperately needed is the transformation of our present divorce culture into a marriage culture. This is not an option but a life and death question."