

Sheer Encouragement

Earl Palmer



Carol Ainst

The unpayable debt that I owe [C. S. Lewis] was not influence as it is ordinarily understood, but sheer encouragement. —J. R. R. Tolkien

Where do we find the kind of encouragement that can be given away with no strings attached? Good verbs, like love and encourage, have their source sooner or later in the great Noun, the Lord of love who is the Lord of encouragement.

Has it dawned on you that you belong to a family that is like no other family in the world? There are secrets you know and ways you do things that make you different.

Sometimes it's embarrassing when your family connection is exposed. Maybe when you were a teenager your mother or father kissed you in front of your friends just as you were getting out of the car at summer camp. But sometimes it's profoundly and powerfully wonderful as your pride is stirred because friends at school tell you how great they think your mom is.

Sheer encouragement is a good gift to give to anyone, and the people from whom we first receive this gift may (or may not) be our parents. That gift is one of the best gifts that parents have in their power to bestow. It always does good. It can be had in great supply, no matter the economic welfare of the family, since it can be drawn from the resources of God.

In the Bible, encouragement is the gift most often noted in advice given to parents. It is even a vow parents make at the baptism of an infant. They agree to raise their children "in the nurture and the encouragement of the Lord."

But what is sheer encouragement? What are its mysterious secrets? How do we learn them? And how do we give sheer encouragement to our own children and to oth-

ers around us? How do we compensate when sheer encouragement hasn't been our experience either from parents or mentors or friends? In order to answer those questions, we must understand what encouragement is and what it is not.

Sheer encouragement can be characterized in at least four ways. First, since it begins with the encourager, encouragers must themselves be encouraged. Second, it requires respect. Third, it calls for discipline. Finally, it's fun.

Encouraging the Encourager

Encouragement begins inside our own heart and mind. This means that in order to share its good effects with those around me, I need to discover God's love and faithfulness myself.

Encouragement needs daily renewal because last week's encouraging phone call may not be adequate to help us withstand the pressures of today's trials. The continuous nature of the gift means that we who want to encourage others must have renewable sources of encouragement for our own lives. That source must be a conviction of our own worth, so that we feel encouraged by God to be *who* we are and *where* we are.

Only then can we encourage our children and friends without the subtle "hooks" that spoil so much of what sometimes passes for "encour-

agement." Take parents, for example, who cheer their children toward achievements in academic work, sports, the arts, or even the church—not out of the fullness of grace, but out of their own half-filled and frustrated parental ambitions, now programmed into the children's lives.

Such encouragement is anything but sheer. In fact, it is the opposite. Now, it's a highly controlled endorsement-strategy that originates in hidden agendas, to be fulfilled through the experiences of sons and daughters. Those "encouragers" are pushing someone else to succeed in order in some sense to complete their own incompleteness.

I know of only one safeguard against such fraudulent encouragement, and that is the spiritual and emotional health of the encourager. That is why we must begin our reflections on the gift of encouragement with a close look at ourselves.

The Lord of Encouragement

Where do we find the kind of encouragement that can be given away with no strings attached? Good verbs, like love and encourage, have their source sooner or later in the great Noun, the Lord of love who is the Lord of encouragement. This means that to keep encouragement free from the contamination of my selfish and sometimes hidden motivations, I must feel the safety and

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goodness of God's love for me.

When I am assured of profound inner encouragement, I am able genuinely to encourage others. The apostle Paul, who sensed the fullness of God's love in his own life, was therefore able to encourage his friends at Philippi: "And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19). There are no hooks in that sentence.

Respect

"Mother always held my older brother's hand when they crossed the street. Me she sent alone," lamented Rodney Dangerfield. "I just don't get no respect."

A second characteristic of sheer encouragement is respect. Respect for the other people in our lives acts as a strong limitation on the hidden agendas of fraudulent encouragement. Unlike Rodney Dangerfield, I was always taken seriously by my mother and father.

That one single aspect of their encouragement kept typical paternalism and maternalism under manageable control during the years of my own growing up.

We always talked a lot, disagreed, agreed to disagree, and found agreement too. At the center of the conversation in our home was my mother and father's basic respect for us children and for our ideas regardless of our age. Children are told in

the Bible to honor and respect their parents, but respect is a two-way street.

Mutual respect in a home produces not only a truly educated child, but also an encouraged one. In fact, few experiences in life are as robust and encouraging as the spirited conversations of people who genuinely listen to each other because they respect each other.

Our Children Are Not Our Own

At an infant's baptism, the parents receive the child back into their hands from the pastor, who announces the child's Christian name for the congregation to hear. In that announcement, parents agree that their children are not their property or the extension of themselves. Rather they are unique individuals of dignity and worth because of God's promise and decision. That therefore means that parents must raise their children as the most important guests in their home. They don't actually belong to them, but they are entrusted to them. Respecting each individual's worth in this way enables family members to face one another realistically.

Because the grace of forgiveness underpins all proper respect, we experience the realism, along with the encouragement, that has its origin in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are respected for what we are. Despite our shortcomings, those who respect us

will listen closely to what we say. They try to hear us. Thus there is an earnestness in relationships that sets each of us free to think things through for ourselves. We come to feel that our thoughts matter. We sense this respectfulness in the encounters of Jesus with people throughout the Gospel narratives. Everyone Jesus met had his full attention.

Disciplined Pressure toward Growth

A third characteristic of encouragement is discipline. Discipline coaches us toward knowledge and skill of hands and mind. Discipline trains us in character and self-control. It helps a growing person to reach his or her best stride. This goal of what I'll call edification is the test by which all methods of discipline should be judged.

No real encouragement is possible apart from a healthy pressure toward growth. We need teachers and parents who make demands of us for our own good. The result is that we are encouraged to grow. At the same time the balanced influence of their demands give us a reality-check on our developing self-awareness.

The Stress that Destroys

Discipline is healthy pressure, healthy stress, in contrast with bad pressure, which is what the Bible calls temptation. Temptation presses



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us toward bad choices and away from hope.

Discipline encourages us to decide and act toward truth and knowledge. The goal of discipline is to strengthen; the goal of temptation is to destroy. In discipline, stress is necessary; without stress on the heart muscle it cannot be thickened and made more efficient in its recovery rate after strong exertion. In temptation, the stress on our lives seeks to destroy and is therefore always evil.

Discipline from a parent can be profoundly encouraging because it signals how seriously my life and growth are being taken by someone else. They not only know that I exist, but they want me to succeed.

But since disciplining a child involves the handling of another person's life, it takes skill, time, and work for a parent or teacher—and also time for the learner. There is no easy way to learn math or French or anything else important. Consequently, encouragement cannot afford to be indulgent or sloppy. It is concerned to prepare the person for the road, not the road for the person.

The Shared Fun Instinct

Finally, and fourth, sheer encouragement is characterized by what I call the shared fun instinct. The kind of encouragement usually cherished longest in our memory is the inadvertent, unplanned event (perhaps on the way home from a seemingly

more important event) when the family or a group of friends simply has fun together and enjoys the simple fact of one another's existence. It happens when you discover that you not only love your children and your parents but you genuinely like them too. They're fun to be around.

If I want to encourage someone, I will let them know every day in a different, unplanned way that they please me and that I am proud to be their father, or their youth leader, or their friend, or their son.

Fun is a powerful force for encouragement. This is why heartfelt laughter is so healing. The thin laughter of cynicism has an opposite effect. Because it is sustained at someone else's expense, it builds up an inevitable debt of anger and bitterness. But there is sheer encouragement in laughter, and its result is as ethically good as it is physically healthy.

Families need fun events where children and parents laugh together, just as they need heavy moments together where parents and children cry together. Only human beings laugh and cry, and we must have both to remind us of our humanness.

The Legacy of Grief

The legacy of genuine joy is encouraging, but so is the legacy of genuine grief. Our experiences of sorrow become a wondrous part of the encouragement mandate that

parents have for their sons and daughters, and that close friends are able to share together.

A stranger will not cry with you at some very small but real defeat that your heart feels. Opaqueness of social and interpersonal distance is discouraging when you feel pain.

When your father or mother or close friend starts to cry with you because they understand how much you hurt, at that instant the gift of empathetic encouragement binds you together. What hurts you at this particular moment may be small in the vast moving parade of history, but for you it needs someone who is there, someone who understands how you feel.

Availability for the real moment of joy or of sorrow is the fundamental mandate of parenting and of friendship. It turns out to be the best gift we can give our family and friends. It means being there with love, respect, discipline, or tears when tears are needed—and with laughter when everyone breaks out laughing.

Encouragement becomes an unpayable debt, the kind everyone should have the joy of owing. ■

Earl Palmer is the author of many books, including *Love Has Its Reasons* and *The 24-Hour Christian* (where this article was originally published). Rev. Palmer is also the head of Earl Palmer Ministries.