
STRATEGY FOR SANITY

Earl Palmer

Let me show you how a family happens.

Without our prior consent each of us are entrusted physically, spiritually, and emotionally to an interpersonal, amateur institution. Those in charge of this institution are young, with little or no experience. They're called parents.

We enter by birth or adoption, and we are so immersed in a family's support and discipline for the first years of our lives that our very physical survival depends upon it. During adolescence we are gradually loosened from the family's discipline and some or all of its support so that, in young adulthood, the being who was once the babe in arms now stands separately—but just long enough for most to choose to voluntarily join up again with this ancient interpersonal fellowship called marriage and the family. When this decision is agreed to by another whom we love, then the whole incredible cycle of creation starts over again.

Have a Rock, Son

And so the question: Why does this institution called the family exist in God's creative and redemptive design? The inescapable conclusion is that God decided that a family supplies best of all what a man and woman need to become

truly human. This means that the family is a critical link in the orders of both creation and redemption. Jesus himself thought highly of the family's potential for people building, and his parables prove it. One He told in the Sermon on the Mount: "Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?" Here is the purpose of parenting—we exist to give good gifts to our children. And although we have our own problems, we still try to do this: "Even though sinful, you know how to give good gifts to your children." This parable is not only an illustration of the Father's goodness, but reveals what Jesus expects from ordinary human parents. But what is the bread and fish that we need to receive from mothers and fathers?

Soul Food

At least five essential marks of humanness are best communicated to us in families. Each is a food, a source of nourishment in the early stages of physical growth—yet they're also the raw material, the building blocks in the mysterious experience of redemption.

Language that bears a unique identity imprint and accent is best learned in a family. I learn how to talk and how to listen in a family. But this isn't all—language includes the special accents and hidden family cues that both bond me with a family as well as mold me into a unique individual. Proof from the order of creation that God wanted his human creatures to be special and individually fascinating is found in his decision to entrust our linguistic formation primarily to parents and grandparents, brothers and sisters. We need the family, therefore, to help us know how to speak and to hear.

Culture is best taught in families, and this second need also brings us to our parents and grandparents, relatives near and far to receive this bread and fish. Culture is the mixture of shared memory—often called tradition—and reasoning with which we explain and integrate the past and the present. Family photo albums and living-room plays and familiar ceremonies of belonging explain our existence so that as persons we feel worthwhile and needed. This kind of bread and fish feeds our sense of history, of where we've come from.

Meaning is the dynamic coming together of values and daily habits and future goals. Meaning is the bread shared in the family when we learn together how to make practical decisions on the basis of long-term purposes and agreed-upon convictions. This happens first of all in the family.

Faith is also first learned when we are young. We trust our parents, and we believe what they tell us—especially in the earliest years of our lives. We discover that faith is a journey together during which we encounter assurance as well as disappointment, doubt as well as realistic confidence.

Finally, in the family we first meet *love*. Moments after our birth, we find love in the embrace of our mother, then of our father, brothers, sisters, grandparents. Love from the beginning in a family is the celebration of who I am right now as a person—there is nothing I can do to earn or achieve it. Just being who I am is enough! It is love that nourishes the robust person who feels good about being alive.

Each of these five ingredients is an essential food for every human being;

and in a thousand ways we ask our parents, before we ask anyone else, for these five foods, this bread and fish for our lives. Each of us, therefore, has a profoundly high stake in all families; the health of every family in one way or another affects us. Healthy families that learn to speak and listen, to celebrate history and make righteous decisions, to trust and to love—these families are a benefit to all other families.

Similarly, every one of us is touched when any daughter or son receives a rock instead of bread, or a snake instead of a fish from the very ones who were mandated in God's purpose in creation to give good gifts to their children. Our task as Christians is clear: each one of us must help every family give good gifts to the next generation of human beings. We must be always at work giving good, nourishing gifts to families—giving the good, redeeming news of help for families glutted with rocks and snakes. Youth ministry in the Christian church is, therefore, at its heart, a ministry to families as much as it is a ministry to youth themselves. And those who minister in Christ's church can never forget that commitment to the whole person.

Proximity or Presence?

But what about each of us and our own ancient institution? How do I as the member of a family give the good gifts I want to give? There is one ingre-

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dient necessary for each of these foods of the soul—language, culture, meaning, faith, and love—and that one ingredient is *presence*. If we are a father or mother, we first of all must be where our son or daughter can find us in order to hear the request for bread and fish. Personal presence takes time, and souls become malnourished without it. Families spend hours in proximity to each other, yet with very little real presence to go with the proximity. When I use the word *presence*, I mean time together during which real language and real listening takes place—so that memories are created out of the

ordinary, decisions are made, faith is begun, and love is flowing through us. Presence is the focused gift we give to each other. In a family it means that there is time for you—time for you to ask for help, time to be yourself, to relax, to try, to laugh, to argue about ideas, to tell stories that others might not be interested in. Here is your safe place where you are important; so that even when time is short and when people are busy, the principle still holds true that there are times you do have together that can be *presence* time. This presence cannot happen all the time, but it must happen some of the time, enough of the time that we are able to grow our character.

There is theological reasoning behind this too. What God has given to each of us, something more important than any other gift, is His own presence alongside and within our lives.

“If you then know how to give good gifts to your children . . . how much more your heavenly father.”♦



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