

## STRATEGY FOR SANITY

Earl Palmer

One gift of many which my parents gave me I want to pass on to my own children: the gift of *sheer encouragement*. I first ran across those words in the journals of J.R.R. Tolkien, where he wrote: "The unpayable debt that I owe to C.S. Lewis was not influence as it is ordinarily understood, but sheer encouragement."<sup>1</sup>

I strongly advocate this gift as the very best of all gifts that parents have in their power to bestow. It always does good. It can be had in great supply, no matter what the changeable economic welfare of a family, for it can be drawn from the resources of God Himself. In the Bible, it is the most frequent of all the advice made to parents. The mandate is even stated as a vow that parents make at the baptism of an infant; to "raise children in the nurture and the *encouragement* of the Lord."

But what exactly is *sheer encouragement*? What kind of training do we need to learn its mysterious secrets? How do we give it to our own children, and how can we also bestow this gift in some measure onto the kids we work with in our youth groups?

### You Gotta Have Heart

Sheer encouragement can be characterized in at least four ways. First of all, it begins *inside the heart and mind*. I need to be discovering God's love and faithfulness myself in order to share its good effects with those around me.

<sup>1</sup>Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings: C.S. Lewis and His Friends* (San Jose, CA: H. M. Gousha, 1979), p. 32.

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 must have renewable sources of encouragement for our own lives. That source must be a conviction of our own worth, based on the gospel.

Only then can we encourage our children and our kids without the subtle 'hooks' that spoil so much of what is sometimes called "encouragement." Some parents cheer their children towards achievements in academic sports, the arts, or even church—not out of the fullness of grace, but out of half-filled and frustrated parental ambitions, now programmed into the lives of their children. Such encouragement is anything but *sheer*. In fact, it is just the opposite—a highly controlled and prescribed motivation that originates in hidden agendas, now being fulfilled through the experiences of sons and daughters.

I know of only one safeguard against this kind of fraudulent encouragement—the spiritual and emotional health of the encourager. This is why we must begin our reflections on the gift of encouragement with a close look at ourselves as parents and/or youth workers. Where do we find the kind of encouragement that can be given away with no strings attached? We will always find that the good verbs of life like "love" and "encourage" have their source sooner or later in the great Noun, the Lord of love and encouragement.

### R-E-S-P-E-C-T

The second characteristic of sheer encouragement is *respect*. Respect for our children and our kids acts as a strong limitation on the 'hooks' and hid-

den agendas of fraudulent encouragement. I was always taken seriously by my mother and father, and that one single aspect of their encouragement kept typical paternalism and maternalism under manageable control. Though children are advised in the Bible to honor and respect their parents, 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, there are few experiences in life as robust and encouraging as the spirited conversations of people who are genuinely listening to each other.

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 whole congregation to hear. In that announcement, we parents agree that our children are not our property or the extension of our own bodies, but rather unique individuals of dignity and worth because of God's promise and decision. Therefore, we must raise them up as the most important guests in our homes. They don't actually belong to us; they are *entrusted* to us. Respecting the individual's worth in this way enables family members to face one another realistically without excuses and because of the grace of forgiveness that underpins all respect.

### Hurts So Good

The third characteristic of encouragement is *discipline*. Discipline coaches a person toward knowledge and skill in hands and mind; discipline trains in character and self-control. It helps a growing person to reach his or her best stride (and this goal of edification is the test by which all methods of

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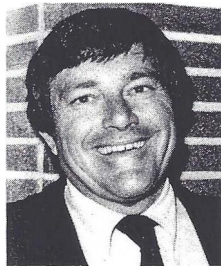
parental discipline should be judged). No real encouragement is possible apart from such a healthy pressure toward growth. We need those teachers and parents who make demands of us for our own good. The result is that we are encouraged to grow, and we are at the same time given a “reality check” on our developing self-awareness by the balanced influence of these demands.

There is no easy way to learn math or French or anything else that may be important in the real world. Consequently, encouragement cannot afford to be indulgent or sloppy. It must be more concerned to prepare the child for the road than the road for the child

### ***Fun, Fun, Fun***

Finally, 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 (often on the way home from a seemingly more important even ) when the family or youth group simply had fun together and enjoyed the simple fact of one another’s existence. It happens when you discover that you not only love your children or your kid but you genuinely like them too; they’re fun to be around. If I want to encourage my children or my kids, I will let them know every day in a different, unplanned way, that they please me, and that I am simply very proud to be their father, or their youth leader.

That kind of encouragement, as Tolkien so wisely observed, goes beyond mere influence to become an unpayable debt – the kind every child should have the joy of owing. ♦



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