

Sister Who's Perspective

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Life is a collaborative effort, encompassing more than we know. In a time of abundant "information overload," news, communication, and travel across great distances, we often talk at each other without listening, communicating, or understanding. Humanity needs its icons, but also its iconoclasts to grow beyond the good and bad qualities that now limit and describe us. The essences of both God and us remain, in the midst of questions, to be discovered, experienced, and expressed. Please share in this ongoing dialogue, remembering to indicate whether and how you wish to be identified. Blessings, love, and peace to you. ---Sister Who

Overview

It seems that various forms of family are all around us and the word is sometimes tossed about carelessly. One could also ponder to what extent one's thoughts, words, and actions strengthen and support the reality of one's various families or weaken and devalue these constellations of relationship with others of varying descriptions.

Sometimes families cannot be what they need to be due to weaknesses or peculiarities of certain members. At other times, the reasons families cannot be what they need to be are because the members have not contributed the necessary resources of time, energy, attention, material goods, etc.

Discerning what are the true conditions, circumstances, and dynamics of a particular familial grouping is a place to begin. Hopefully the thoughts and insights included here will be helpful.

May one and all and everything, blessed and loved ever be.

Human Family

The basic purpose of all components and aspects of language is to create distinction, to specify one idea, object, action, etc. from others which may be similar or sharply contrasting in comparison. To understand the meaning of the word "family," therefore, one must begin with distinguishing that which is an example of true family from that which is definitely not.

The problem at this point, however, is that so many different definitions are currently in use. How is one to persist in being true family when any specific effort may be interpreted by others in both ways? *If we were truly family to one another, you would never say or do such a thing!* Conversely, *Wow, when you do that, I really feel like part of your family!* As usual, most moments of life unfold somewhere between the two extremes.

The intent of this article is not, however, to establish a universal definition of family, but rather to encourage greater self-awareness within related expectations, words, and actions.

We may ultimately decide to engage in certain mannerisms around certain people, specifically because we do consider them to be part of our extended family and want to communicate that validation to them. Is this lying or misleading them, pretending something that isn't true? Well, as I've often remarked, everything is real within its context, but only within its context. I may do something within a particular relationship because it is real and true within that relationship, but avoid doing the same things with anyone else because with those other persons the same action would no longer be real and true. Truth, within my ongoing observation of life, is always contextual (that is, it is defined, shaped, and influenced by its specific context).

When I hear others speak of humanity being a family, I interpret an expectation of mutual respect, of collective concern, and of interwoven fates. Benjamin Franklin noted "either we all hang together or we shall all hang separately." None of us can survive for very long—physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, or spiritually—without the rest of us.

Taking a proactive response to this fact recommends that we be concerned and helpful in whatever ways we can be, in relation to the whether or not every person has adequate food, clothing, and shelter; whether the factory worker is paid a living wage and whether the medical doctor is being financially destroyed by malpractice insurance premiums; and whether the classroom teacher is appropriately supported by administrators, parents, and members of the surrounding community whenever discipline or behavioral problems occur within educational spaces.

I do believe that we are all family and that this means that we believe in each other and that we love each other. If the least we can do is love, all the rest will gradually fall into place. If we can do more, it's better yet. Love without any expression, however, is not truly love at all.

May one and all and everything, blessed and loved ever be.

Biological Family

I've occasionally overheard people respond to "so why do you do it?" with "because they are family." What is happening within such a context is a multi-dimensional reality—two contrasting but simultaneously existing examples of truth.

On the one hand is the validation of the existence of some sort of connection and commitment to ongoing interaction. On the other hand is the ineffectively concealed or ignored awareness of an incongruity between what one wishes the relationship would be and what the relationship actually is within the present moment. The contrasting but equal truths are the perception of connection and the existence of an incongruity.

For some, the existence of even a dysfunctional relationship is better than no relationship at all. For others, remaining within a dysfunctional relationship allows for certain forms of wounding to recur over and over again, each day they remain within the abusive context. For myself, I ultimately concluded that the greatest respect I could demonstrate toward my biological family was to respect the relational dynamic they had chosen—of having no openly gay persons within their lives—and stay away. Staying away is additionally recommendable because to do otherwise would be a sort of psychological suicide—a repetitious self-killing of the part of me they continue to reject, within each and every interaction within which it would be legitimate and appropriate to speak a contrasting truth.

Similarly, I have a friend (at least one, probably more) who is gay but whose relatives object to this for religious reasons. On Sunday mornings at church, they might often sing with great enthusiasm, "This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine!...Hide it under a bushel, no, I'm going to let it shine!" What they apparently fail to realize, is how their homophobic attitudes persuade my friend to hide the personal light that could otherwise be shared. The best contribution my friend could make to the world isn't happening because of a desire to avoid offending relatives.

I've heard the expression that one can pick one's friends, but not one's relatives. My primary objection to this witticism is the abuse that it attempts to justify. I cannot agree that the continual and repetitious wounding of a soul is justified by the existence of biological relationship.

On a purely physical level, a biological family is fairly essential to the beginnings of any

physical existence. A friend oriented toward New Age beliefs once suggested to me that souls return to earth again and again through multiple consecutive lives and that souls which are more advanced in age, experience, and understanding, often have a very difficult time finding a family through which to re-enter the physical/material world. For these souls especially, dis-association from a biological family is apparently a fairly common phenomenon.

Perhaps; but perhaps it is equally possible that familial breakdowns are often caused by failures to communicate, failures to cease being judgmental toward one another, and failures to integrate the sometimes peculiar or eccentric uniqueness of specific persons. If we look upon each other as potentially empowering areas of investigation and questioning instead of as irritating non-conformists, I suspect we will find our own self-definitions, emotional capacities, and intellectual abilities growing and expanding too.

When a family unit has for whatever reason adopted a self-sabotaging dynamic, however, it is not significantly different from a racist police department or a judicial system manipulated by money. The end result is that those who have the most to teach and the greatest empowerment to give, are often the ones most oppressed and victimized by prevailing norms. More concisely, everybody loses and nobody wins.

As with a police department, a judicial system, or any other collective administrative entity, correcting the self-sabotaging behavior and adopting more constructive and empowering dynamics will require everyone working together to make the change real. For a biological family to be truly a family in more than merely physical properties, everyone must commit to persevere—in changing; in eradicating wounding behavior, in embracing intolerance of judgmental attitudes, and in filling all of the empty spaces with as much love and wisdom as can be learned.

The problem with biological families is not that they are physically interrelated, but rather that the external physical interrelatedness is often not mirrored on emotional, psychological, and spiritual levels. When consistent practices of unconditional love and wisdom become as obvious and real as commonality in genetic DNA patterns, between one generation and the next, the love that can heal the world is once more verifiably among us.

May one and all and everything, blessed and loved ever be.

Extended Family

I'm not sure which is the better way to address this, since it takes the noun of "family" and turns it into a verb. Creating or experiencing extended family generally includes extending one's self in some way toward others—not just to perform an isolated act, but to create lasting bridges of relationship which will endure through a wide variety of struggles, celebrations, and interactions.

Extended family may be something which we discover has quietly occurred while we were busy working together to solve a problem. Without any specific intention or preconceived notion, we encounter a problem, collectively address it, and without any fanfare simultaneously create a common memory of accomplishment within the range of our own diversity and individuality.

In order for such to ever occur, however, each participant is circumstantially required to extend an opportunity, perhaps even a subtle welcome, to deeper connection with the other persons involved. Logically, those who have been wounded within relationships in the past, will have a more difficult time opening themselves up to such possibilities. For those persons especially, however, the opening is essential because it is a primary means by which they may experience relationships which heal the perhaps long-standing wounds within the heart and mind.

I am reminded at this point of a counter-intuitive dynamic of downhill skiing, that when one is skiing down a steep slope and begins to lose control, one must do the opposite of the typical subconscious reaction. Losing control is very analogous to falling and the typical response to falling is to lean away from the direction one is falling, as if attempting to pull back from the edge of a high ledge. Specifically because control within downhill skiing comes from the sharp edges of the skis carving into the ice and snow, this typical practice of pulling away will only make things worse. Leaning away from a fall pulls the

edges of the skis away from the underlying ice and snow, denying the skier the control which would result from the two being more strongly forced into confrontation with each other. In order to regain control, the skier must lean into the fall—lean downhill more—so that the sharp edges can grip the underlying snow and ice and restore control.

This very much parallels Scott Peck's observation within *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* that the primary characteristic of pseudo-community is conflict-avoidance and the primary characteristic of true community is conflict resolution. In order to resolve the conflict of falling, within the activity of skiing, the source of conflict must be confronted, embraced, and resolved rather than avoided.

The characteristic which therefore most identifies true extended family from pretended or imitated extended family, is the honest, direct, and effective collaborative engagement by which conflicts are resolved—which can sometimes include a bit of hard work. Those who prefer to avoid conflict, therefore, but still want to refer to each other as extended family, can only produce an unhelpful, meaningless, and mostly ineffective example of pseudo-community.

Obviously we need something more than that, if conflicts are to be resolved and solid empowered relationships are to be built—with ourselves, with the Divine, and with each other. One might even say that life is too short to waste time in the meaningless rehearsal of pseudo-community and pretended family, feigning affection that never has enough substance to do the work that most needs to be done. Within the awareness of each conflict or potential source of conflict, however, is the invitation to go further—to embrace growth and demonstrate true love.

Ultimately it is true love which forms the foundation of every mutually empowering (rather than debilitating) relationship. Similar to the witticism that "that which does not kill us, makes us stronger" is the observation that refusing to be paralyzed by fear puts us directly on track with an experience of genuine love and greater strength.

Whether or not we understand all of the details at the time, leaning into the fall when skiing and choosing to bring love into a moment of conflict, can bring us into the embrace of a greater sense of family than we have perhaps ever previously known—if we just give it a chance.

May one and all and everything, blessed and loved ever be.

"Even ignorance has its purpose, since it is in ignorance that we dare to attempt (and often overcome) difficulties we would otherwise never even consider embracing."

-- Sister Who

Spiritual Family

Far too often, what is unseen is presumed to be non-existent. A consequence of this is that when times of need occur, we fail to invite assistance from all of the available sources. On numerous occasions, after great struggle, I have discovered possibilities which might have made the accomplishment far easier—very much like the old Laurel and Hardy movie within which after many attempts to move a piano up a long outdoor stairway to a large house, they discover a driveway on the other side of the hill.

It may very well be that our spiritual family is like the unseen driveway, providing a way for us to finally come home. Until or unless that driveway is discovered, however, it is imperative that we embrace whatever struggles we must, to get to where we need to be. The additional quirk, however, is that the same driveway doesn't work in the same way for everyone and it is very difficult if not impossible to provide effective directions.

Why? Because we're not all driving the same kind of truck, car, jeep, motorcycle, bicycle, unicycle, etc. Some of us may even be approaching with only a good pair of hiking shoes or no shoes at all. For each one, the climb looks different and the descriptions we've been told rarely match what we see and feel along the way.

Nevertheless, the reality of spiritual family persists and as it has often been said, "life is journey and not a destination." The destination is that transcendent sense of home; the search for the driveway, path, sidewalk, or road leading to there and the traversing of that route is the collection of experiences, thoughts, words, and feelings which comprise our individual finite lives.

In so many ways and just beyond the tips of our fingers, the auditory range of our ears, or the limits of our vision, a great family of loving and wise spirits weep over our pain and joyfully cheer over our accomplishments. We are not alone nor could we ever be, although it does often seem that way to our limited physical senses.

To the extent that we remember the unseen, however, that which is seen is diminished in size and power and any victory over us it claims becomes empty and ridiculous. Once one has been born—physically, spiritually, emotionally, psychologically, socially—there is no evil that can undo the reality of the corresponding family.

May one and all and everything, blessed and loved ever be!

On a Personal Note

After successful completion of plastering and painting and the construction of an eight-foot-tall string-art tree, a holiday television special was recorded and is scheduled for cablecasting within the city of Denver on channel 56 every Saturday night at 10 p.m. throughout this month. The show is also available for viewing on the Internet at any time, by going to my website at sisterwho.com, selecting the button labeled "Click here to view episodes of 'Sister Who Presents' using streaming video," and searching for "Episode 182: Sister Who's Holiday Care Package."

Nine other episodes of "Sister Who Presents" have also been recently completed.

My doctoral writing is temporarily paused due to interpersonal conflicts at Walden University, but a slight change in degree program seems to have resolved the deadlock. Hopefully I will know for certain about that within the next few days and can thereafter make much better progress toward the completion of a doctoral academic degree.

The proceeds from the sale of the 1997 GMC Jimmy were sufficient to pay for all remaining repairs to my motorcycle and to also purchase a 1996 Geo Tracker (which is obviously far more affordable in every way—and I found that I love this little jeep from the first moment I drove it). I had hoped to soon exchange its canvas convertible top for a hard top, but a new friend surprised me by making this his Christmas present; the tentative delivery date is in fact just before Christmas.

Now I just have to practice and develop more confidence and expertise riding my motorcycle, since it has been quite a long time since I was last able to ride it. In all honesty, it does scare me a little, because I realize how essential it is to make no mistakes, but parking problems are non-existent and my first fuel fill-up after leaving the repair shop was less than \$3. More importantly, it offers a way for me to carefully stretch my limits and cautiously confront my fears.

May God's blessings, love, and peace be with you now and always, *Sister Who*

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