

THE FRIGHTFUL AND JOYOUS JOURNEY OF FAMILY LIFE

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I'd like to ask each of you to think "*Is family life hard or easy?*" I'm guessing those of you who say it's easy are either well into retirement or have been far from your family for a very long time. The journey is indeed at times frightful but unparalleled in its joy. Let me share a couple of episodes that I think illustrate that.

There was a little boy 4 years old named Brian. He had a disagreement with his mother and became quite upset. He stormed upstairs and his mother heard him rummaging around opening drawers and cupboard doors and sometime later came back downstairs dragging a large suitcase. He was confronted at the bottom of the stairs by his mother who said, "Where do you think you're going? Are you running away from home?" He said, "Actually, I'm not allowed to cross the street so I packed a suitcase for you." My guess is that boy will be a creative contributor in his family.

My wife Nancy and I also had an experience with a couple somewhat older than we some years ago, Gene and Sylvia Jones. Gene would come home from his busy day operating a business and as he entered the home he would find things not as he thought they should be. So he would say, "Sylvia, how come dinner isn't ready? How come the house isn't clean? How come the children have not done their homework?" He would pester Sylvia and she took it - for a while! The day came when she had had enough. She said, "You know Gene, you have some faults too". "Yes, I know, but they don't bother me like yours do!"

Perhaps one of the blessings and challenges of family life is that when we're especially tired or frustrated, we really become irritated with each other. It's my view that our automatic reactions in relationships are almost always wrong. Not because we're wired badly, but perhaps no one ever taught us how to understand other people's point of view, perhaps no one ever taught us to be a little more civil and a little more understanding.

I have thought of five tools that can help us in the challenges of family life and I would like to share them with you.

My first recommendation is to **look upon family members with compassion**. It seems to me that we soon learn, in the give and take of family life, to be pre-irritated. It doesn't have to be that way. We can become aware of our tendencies to let old issues drag into the future. Just as a side note - Lawrence Steinberg's research shows when parents and adolescents have battles, that teens quickly forget it but parents, especially mothers, tend to remember for a long time and feel their children are rejecting their values, when in fact children are usually just finding ways to express themselves. Understanding that what may feel painful to us is not always intended to be painful and to look on each other with compassion can help us to find our common ground. Let me give you some examples.

Nancy and I have dear friends who have two boys, Jeff and Jodie. He is trained as a Marriage and Family Therapist. They are good people whom we knew when we lived in the same state. Then they moved away and we also moved away. One day, Jeff sent me an email. He said, "You know, Wally, my little boy Andy is driving us crazy, and I wondered if you had any suggestions." Without more information it was hard to know what to recommend, so I recommended what we always do

which is *“Are you spending time with him? Are you letting him know that he is in a safe and caring environment? Do you respond helpfully and with teaching to problems that he encounters”*

I suggested those things and didn't hear back from him and hoped that things were going better. However, some weeks later he emailed me again and said that things had gotten so bad that they were afraid they were going to hurt their little boy. I thought, “Wow, here are two sweet, well educated, good, conscientious parents who are so frustrated that they are afraid that they will hurt their little boy!” He asked in his email if we might arrange a time and talk by phone. We arranged a time and talked for about 2 hours on the phone. We ticked through what was happening. The typical scenario was - Mum might be sitting on the sofa nursing the baby and the older boy, Andy, would start running around the living room and start jumping on the furniture. In spite of his understanding that it was against the rules, in spite of his mother's invitation to do otherwise, he would continue to jump, scream and carry on. Nothing they did changed the behaviour. We talked through the things that could be tried and he said they had tried them.

We found no ready answers until, after some talking, I said to the mother, “Jodie, is there anything happening in your life that's different at the times you have these episodes, these problems?” She heaved a sigh and said, “Yes. Every once in a while the baby has colic or is sick and does not sleep during the night and I am up during the night, several times with him, sometimes all night long walking him, trying to comfort him. When morning comes, I am exhausted. That is usually the scenario when we have trouble with little Andy”. At that point it seemed really clear what the answer was. I asked a follow up question. I said, “Tell me about Andy. Is he a tender, sensitive boy or an independent, not in tune kind of boy?” “A tender boy, very, very sensitive and very tuned in to the emotional environment in the family”. We all knew what was happening. If I were to put it into words, it would be this – every once in a while, when the day begins, Andy gets up and finds that Mum is unavailable emotionally, she is exhausted and worn out, naturally, and little Andy feeling desperate in his own little world now feels unsafe and very lonely and is crying out to his mother – ‘Mum, Mum, I need you, I miss you, where are you?’

I believe that when children know when civil ways of involving us in their lives do not work they will turn to terrorism. It's worth noting many of you have experienced that. The necessary condition in children's lives is that we be involved. If we will not be involved in civil ways, they will resort to uncivil ways to draw us in. So much of what we see as awful behaviour in children is actually a plea, a heartfelt, earnest sometimes fear filled plea – ‘Mum, Dad please don't leave me alone in my little life’. In this case, there are no easy and obvious answers for what could help Andy. Punishing him won't help. Is it possible that on one of those nights when the baby keeps Mum up all night long, they might be able to get a baby sitter to help, so that when the baby goes down, Mum gets a nap, or Dad might stay home from work. If we believe that children are the most sacred trust we'll ever have, then we find creative solutions.

So the first tool is to look on family members with compassion. I wish I could say I had done that myself unflinchingly, I have not. But now as grandparents, we have assumed our role to celebrate our little grandsons that we love so much.

The second tool is to **provide emotional first aid when needed**. I believe that very, very often, children send out signals that they are desperate, struggling, lonely, needy. Sometimes we don't sense those signals or don't interpret them properly.

Let me set the context by telling you about a time when our daughter Emily and her neighbour friend Donna were proceeding to Central Elementary School across the street from our home. They often went over there to play on the playground on weekends or after hours. On one occasion, Donna came to get Emily and they headed to the playground. We had, many times, told Emily to look both ways before crossing the street, apparently Donna had been told fewer times. As they came to the street, Emily stopped, Donna did not. Donna was hit, fortunately by a slow moving car, and thrown some distance where she bounced on the pavement, getting that painfully uncomfortable road rash, and lay bleeding and frightened. So let me ask you, since Donna should have known better, is this the right time to march to Donna's side and with finger pointed say “I

guess you learned a lesson". Is this the right time to say *"Someday, maybe you will learn to obey your parents"* or *"Well, this is what you get when you're not careful"*. Well the answer is obvious. **When people are hurting is the time for emotional first aid. When people are injured they don't need our lectures. They need our love. Donna needs someone to kneel at her side, to wipe her brow to comfort her and arrange for help to be brought so that her injuries could be attended to. The same principle applies in emotional injuries. Children are often deeply injured emotionally and very often what we respond with is lecturing. I don't want to be misunderstood, I believe in rules, limits and consequences. I believe however, that sensitivity and emotional first aid is the key element in working effectively with children in preparing them to learn.**

A lot of these ideas are drawn from a wonderful book written by Haim Ginott, a wonderful Jewish man who emigrated from Israel to the US to study child psychology and worked with children his entire career before unfortunately dying as a young man. His book sold millions of copies but was out of print until his widow and I revised it. If my testimony is tainted because of my involvement in the project, I would point you to the authoritative guide to self-help books which says that it is one of the greatest self help books ever written in this area.

That aside, Haim Ginott tells a story about a boy who comes home from school one day very tense and upset. Can you tell when a child is upset? His fists were tight, his muscles were tight, he obviously was not happy. The typical response was for a parent to ask, "What's wrong?" Let me ask you, what will he say in response to that question? The answer is the same in Australia as in the US – "Nothing!" We are tempted to ask why? Why is he responding to my inquiry in such a blunt way? I think the answer is this – he has already spoken volumes to us with his body and we didn't listen to it, so he will not respond to our blunt inquiry. So what do we do? Haim Ginott recommends, and I think it's brilliant, to respond to the message already given. We might say to the child, "Wow, it looks to me son, as if you've had a terrible day". Do you see how that's different to asking them, "What's wrong?" That sounds like an inquiry, it sounds like the police have pulled you over and asking if you're an idiot. In contrast, to say, "It looks to me son as if you've had a terrible day" is a way of saying, "I see that you're troubled and I care".

The boy will not necessarily respond with more information, he may or may not. He may not be ready to say more, he may not be of a disposition to say more, but there is a chance. In fact, in the story told by Hans Gernart, this boy said, "Coming home from school today, everyone was running around and acting up and doing crazy things and the bus driver got mad and he stopped the bus. He pulled it over and stopped the bus, he got up and marched right up to me and pulled me up and starting yelling at me and blamed it all on me".

I don't want to get into trouble with anyone here, but it's been popular in the US perhaps here also, to say to children that if you're in trouble at school then you're in twice as much trouble at home. Ginott asked the poignant question – "Where does the child go for emotional first aid?" If having been hit by a car and bounced along do we then tie them to a car and drag them even farther? We do it, we drag children emotionally. I'm not going to recommend that we take the child's side against the teacher, nor the teacher's side against the child, those are the usual alternatives. On one extreme we say, "No son, I know you. You are an impediment to society. You are a major pain in the culture. I don't know how that poor bus driver tolerates you". So we blame the child. At the other extreme we say, "You know son, we have a few firearms in the basement and some hand grenades and I wonder if we might go down to the bus driver's house and have a little visit?"

Do you notice that what looks like opposite reactions actually have one big thing in common, which is, we take the role of God and assume that we know everything. With scant information we impose our meanings on a child's life. There is a better way, and I think that way is to provide emotional first aid.

Does anyone here remember back years or decades ago when you were a human. For many of us that extends far beyond our memory. There was a time when we were little, when we felt

incredibly vulnerable, frightened, outnumbered, overpowered by everything around us. Children feel like that very often, but we forget. So when we try to administer emotional first aid, first try to remember back to when we were human. We might say, "Son I wonder if you felt humiliated, being called names in front of your friends?" Then the boy is likely to share more. "Yeah, everybody was running around, everybody was acting up and he blamed it all on me". "Wow, you feel misjudged".

As long as a child is still bleeding emotionally, we offer first aid for as long as that takes. I think it's fair to predict that for most children, within a few minutes, they will start to show that relaxed, hunched over posture that says, "I got it out, I'm feeling more peaceful. If not more safe, at least more peaceful."

At that point I ask what I think is the key question. "Son, you've had a terrible experience today. I wonder what you could do to make sure that never happens again." Do you notice the assumption I make? I assume that the very best answers are inside him. I could cross-examine, I could even go and interview all the children who were on the bus. I might never, with all that interviewing and investigating, never find out what my little boy knows which is – he soaks spitwads in his mouth for 5 minutes before he shoots them at the bus driver's right ear. He may know what you don't know and you may never know. But that's why I think emotional first aid is so important. That's why letting answers come from inside the child is so important.

I do believe that there needs to be sensible outcomes, there needs to be education and learning. In fact your son may say, "You know Mum, I hate to admit it but I just love to torment that bus driver, so I probably should take my bike to school." Or he may say, "You know, I've learned a lesson, I've learned that Joey, who sits next to me on the bus, is the one who starts all the fooling around. It's me who doesn't notice that the bus driver is watching, so I get blamed." He'll become more aware that when you're doing mischief, you need to be aware of those who are watching. The lessons are inside our children.

The third tool is – **react to problems and to life in ways that teach.** Very often our primary objective is to make children suffer. I'm going to make you suffer for not doing what I want you to do. **Suffering is not necessarily educational. Unless accompanied by compassion, it's likely to result only in rebellion or passivity, neither of which is the outcome which we seek in children.** Let me give you an example.

We were standing in the entrance of a garage with a friend of ours, as we were talking his little boy about 5 years old, rode his bicycle into the garage and parked it in front of their old and battered station wagon. I don't know what the family rules were, but this clearly violated a family rule because the man stomped to his son's side, grabbed the little boy, held him up in the air and started to scream, "How many times have I told you?! What's it gonna take?! When are you going to learn?!" All those lines are well-prepared and rehearsed by parents universally.

Let's do what I call "perspective taking". Let's for a moment depart from our perspective as adults and parents and see the world from a child's eye. Would you guess that that 5-year-old suspended over his father's angry face was saying *"You know Dad that's a good point, you're really making me think and I'm sure I'm going to be a better boy as a result of this little exchange today."* Research shows that's not the effect. In fact, **research shows that when a child is fearful, the emotions block all learning. Not a word is heard, not a thing is learned. What is experienced is fear. It floods and overwhelms all potential learning.**

There was an additional irony in this experience. The man gave his lecture and reminded his boy about the awfulness of parking his bicycle there and then having finished his lecture said "I love you!" He came and rejoined me in conversation and I was thinking – *"Would this little boy be thinking 'even when I make mistakes my Dad loves me'?"*

Sometimes we forget what it's like for children. We need to react to problems in ways that teach. Imagine that the Dad went to his boy's side after he had parked the bike there and knelt by him

and said, "Son, have we talked about where we park the bike?" And I'm guessing that with just that little prompt the boy would say, "Oh Dad, I forgot". "Thanks Son, what can we do to help you to remember?" "Oh no Dad, I think I'll remember". Now some of you are probably saying you shouldn't have to do that again, as you've told him a hundred times. Well I would ask you, are there things of which you have to be reminded? Men, how about putting your socks in the laundry hamper, how many times have you been reminded and still fail? If we bring compassion to our children and our family members, then it's a lot easier to teach them.

Tool four is to **help children get what they want in a way we feel good about**. There's a trick there. In days gone by in our perhaps less wise days, we used to say give children everything they want and they'll turn out great. Didn't work! But some people say children shouldn't even have a preference, we'll tell them what they want and they will learn to like it. Neither one of those views is really helpful; instead, it's our job to help children get what they want in a way that we feel good about. **It's our job to bring adult wisdom, good sense and understanding and experience to frame and set bounds on children's experiences**. Let me share one of the experiences we had that I think demonstrates that principle.

Some years ago, one of our foster children, a girl named Lisa, had been in drug rehabilitation and had come to live with us to try to get straightened out. We were like a halfway house for her between drug rehab and going back to her family. Lisa was one day dusting the items on our mantle in our living room. Our youngest daughter, Sarah only 3 years old, approached Lisa and made a request. I don't know the words but the substance was, "Lisa, I'm interested in the vase on the mantle, may I look at it?" Clearly a 3 year old didn't say it that way, but Lisa understood the request and said what we're all trained to say which is, "No, you're too little. Forget it!" Let me ask you, is that effective? Did Sarah say, "I know you're a person of superior experience and wisdom, so why don't I just put a little note on my calendar for 5 years hence, then I'll return and revisit the vase issue?" Is that likely to happen - not! In fact the more we deny children the opportunity to explore some of the things in which they're interested, the more they become intrigued by them. If I were right this very moment to say, "Please all of you, you're mature, you're not children any more, so please for the next 5 minutes don't look at my tie - don't even think about it. Put it out of your mind. Now there are some people over here that didn't last a half a second.

Some of you are saying, well, where do the boundaries fit in? Well, Sarah was dismayed. While she was not spoiled, she was not used to that particular type of response so she went and found her mother, Nancy, and expressed the same request. She said "I'd like to look at the vase, is that OK?" She was a little bit shell-shocked now, having been disappointed by Lisa. Nancy said, "Oh sure, Sarah, you're welcome to look at the vase". Nancy didn't know what had happened between Sarah and Lisa. She took her hand and as they walked into the living room she said, "Sarah you might not know that vases are quite fragile and breakable. Would you mind climbing up on the sofa and I'll bring the vase to you?" How did Sarah feel about that? She didn't care where she saw the vase. She gladly climbs up on the sofa and Nancy gives her the vase and she does something really weird – she sat down with Sarah. Let me ask you – do children like it when you sit down with them and join them in their world of exploration? Does it mean a lot to them? Does it send a message that they're important? She handed Sarah the vase so that she could look at it and point to the peacock on the side and to talk about how this lovely oriental vase was made. The brilliant thing that Nancy did next was what she did not do. She didn't say, "Well that's about enough vase for a 3-year-old." Rather she sat with Sarah until Sarah said, "Thanks Mum". And I think Nancy did what was the final brilliant thing, she said, "Sure Sarah, anytime you want to look at that vase, come and get me."

Do you see how that works? It's our job to help our children get what they want, experience, exploration, learning, growth, but in a way that we feel good about. We set some boundaries. At about that same time, Sarah would say that she wanted to stay up late with Andy and Emily. We'd say, "Yeah, it would be fun to stay up late wouldn't it, now do you want Mum or Dad to tuck you in?" "No, I want to stay up late". "Yeah, it's fun to stay up late, now do you want Mum or Dad to tuck you in?" Sarah thought I had a learning disability. We care about what she wants, but if we know that she'll be a grouch the next day, we still give her choices like, "Who do you want to tuck

you in? Would you like us to read or sing you a song?” We don't let Sarah run the family, but we do everything we can to honour her preferences.

Intriguingly, neither Nancy nor I nor Sarah remembers that experience, but Lisa does. Lisa has told us in detail about that experience because she stood in the corner amazed that it's possible for parents to act in ways that don't pit themselves against their children and their wills.

The next tool is tool number 5 – to **look for the good**. Instead of noticing and talking about what we don't prefer maybe look for, notice and celebrate the good. I think of a friend of mine who lives in Canada. Jack Stone is his name. He told me a story once. As Mother's Day approached, his little girl wanted to do something special for Mum, but this little girl was only 3 years old. She had no money and very limited abilities for creating something, but she wanted to do something special and so she approached her Dad. “Dad, I want to do something for Mum for Mother's Day” and Dad said, “Let me help you”. He sent her on a mission to go around the house and round up some things that seemed magical to this little 3 year old. Things like yarn and string, macaroni and finger paints and maybe water colours and some coloured construction paper, and so she rounded these things up and with her Dad's help glued them to some paper and sprinkled on some glitter and made something for her mother that was a special expression of love. Then Dad helped his little girl wrap the present. Now when Mother's Day came and Mum opened each present in turn, she got to this little girl's present and opened it. Would you guess that Mum looked at that and said, “Honey, that's really sweet but I sure do wish you wouldn't waste any macaroni.” Would you guess that's what she said? If so you don't know Janice! Janice Stone fell to her knees in front of her little girl and pulled her close and said, “Oh honey, this means so much to me.” I wouldn't be surprised if now, a decade later, that it's still hanging on the refrigerator in Canada.

If we look beyond the imperfect construction of our children's efforts to live and carry on their lives, look beyond that to their intentions, their hopes, their expressions of love, their dreams, if we can see that far and that wisely, we can respond in ways that are helpful.

So we have 5 tools –

- look on family members with compassion,
- provide emotional first aid when needed,
- react to problems and life in ways that teach,
- help them get what they want in a way that we feel good about
- and look for the good.

Let me conclude with my all-time favourite story. A little boy named Terry showed up for kindergarten with a little note pinned to his jacket. He worked his way around the classroom making sure that everyone spotted his note. Eventually the teacher also saw the note and asked if he would like her to read it expecting that it had some instructions or information for her. He said yes he would and so she removed the note and read, “Terry was unhappy this morning because his sister had a note and he didn't, so this is Terry's note and now he is happy.”

In the frightful and joyous journey of family life, I wish all of you more joy.