



Family Connections Across the Ages Notes from VAN Forum, December 14, 2004

Presenter: Sue Meyers, University of Minnesota Professor Emeritus

Introductions

Jan Hively welcomed the group and asked the participants to introduce themselves and respond to a question related to the meeting topic:

“Think about some behaviors and values that have been passed through three generations in your family. What one value or behavior comes to mind?”

- Acute self-consciousness
- Family loyalty – keeping family secrets
- Vital aging
- Breaking the mold
- Promptness, impatience, one-upsmanship
- Celebration of family and life
- Individualism – separation rather than togetherness
- Humor
- Adventure, travel
- Feminism
- Hard work, love of reading, love of family
- Oral history, folklore
- Hard work
- Being sensible – keep your head, no matter what
- Terminal honesty
- Travel
- Work ethic, productivity
- Strong women
- Singing
- Fortitude, determination
- Separation
- Make your own way
- Got to have a job, have to get married and stay married, have to have children
- Loved people, relationships – do as you are told
- Love of learning
- Eat good food, get a good education, accept diverse perspectives
- Get an education to expand choices – overachieving, intuitive and kind
- Humor – we’re all God’s children, tolerance, privacy

Family Values

Jan introduced the presenter, Sue Meyers, who was affiliated with the U as a Family Sociologist for 33 years. Sue's focus on families in their later years has continued into Sue's next phase of life. Her research in family genealogy and adult development has demonstrated the endurance of values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors across generations.

Sue began by stressing the fact that "family values" belong to all of us. What we believe and how we act toward others is shaped during our early years growing up in our families. As we mature and lead independent lives from our family of origin, we often bring our "backpack" of attitudes, beliefs and expectations into our new relationships. Since our family histories are different, we may not be aware of these differences until others challenge our assumptions.

Many families share meals and activities during November and December holiday gatherings. Different generations are pleased yet surprised by the beliefs and attitudes expressed during these gatherings. Sometimes quarrels erupt. Sometimes there is a tacit understanding not to discuss certain topics. No matter how close or distant the family members (emotionally or physically), they share some common values that could be celebrated!

Longitudinal Studies of Families

There have been a lot of societal changes affecting family structure. Worldwide, there is a sharp division between families with highly educated parents who have children later in life and live long, and families with low income and little education who have many children and die younger. Added longevity has resulted in more generations being together in the world. With the increase in the labor force participation of mothers, marital instability, and single parenting, the importance of multigenerational support is increasing. Grandparents are frequently found raising their grandchildren and underwriting the college education of their grandkids.

Longitudinal studies that track family links between parental behaviors and developmental outcomes over several generations are useful although expensive. Vern Bengtson, from the Andrus Gerontology Center at the University of Southern California, has conducted longitudinal studies since 1969. His most recent book is: Bengtson, V.L., Biblarz, T.J., & Roberts R.E.L. (2002) "How Families Still Matter: A longitudinal study of youth in two generations."

Bengtson looked at similarities and differences in the family backgrounds of the Baby Boomers, who were the most advantaged generation in history, and their children in Generation X. He observed the drop in families with more than two children, the increase in parents with college education, the increase in mothers employed full-time, and the increase in divorce. But he found, despite assumptions, that there was little difference between the generations in the

degree of solidarity between the young adult and mother – approximately 75%, and between the young adult and father – approximately 65%. Although baby boom women had many advantages -- growing up in a time of prosperity, enjoying more education and more choices in career roles – they were not better off in their psychological wellbeing. By midlife, baby boom women had lower self-esteem and were more depressed than WWII women or Depression Era women. Difficulties in balancing work and family, and marital dissatisfaction and uncertainty contributed to the higher levels of depression in mid-life.

Bengtson and others conducting longitudinal studies see that both major social trends and the timing of historical events (Depression, World War II, Vietnam, 9/11, etc.) have important consequences for individual development – in addition to family background. In answer to the question, “Are family influences on youth declining in importance?,” Bengtson says “No. Continuities seem to outweigh contrasts. Family influences are not declining.” He has also seen from the baby boomer women’s experience, however, that early cohort advantages may not persist into later life.

George Vaillant, the director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, has taken account of three longitudinal studies in his entertaining book called “Aging Well: Surprising guideposts to a happier life.” (2002) One was his study of men who graduated from Harvard with him in the early ‘50s; a second was a study of men in the inner city; and the third was the Terman study of highly intelligent (IQ 155 plus) women. Vaillant reviews some of the problems in conducting longitudinal studies that use interviews with the same cohort over time, e.g., finding representative interviewees; maintaining connections with interviewees who, in turn, have to remain loyal to the task; and assuring continuing relevance when the questions were written at the time of the initial design.

Vaillant compared his observations with those of Erik Erikson, who had described the tasks of human development as finding a balance in eight stages:

- During childhood: basic trust vs. mistrust; autonomy vs. shame; initiative vs. guilt; industry vs. inferiority
- During adulthood: identity vs. identity diffusion, intimacy vs. isolation; generativity vs. stagnation; and integrity vs. despair

Vaillant adapted this material, based on his observations, to describe six stages:

- Development of identity and intimacy – in the same way that Erikson described
- Career Consolidation – contentment, compensation, competence, commitment
- Generativity – moving beyond yourself
- Keeper of the Meaning – passing on a legacy
- Integrity

One piece of good news that came from the longitudinal studies is that what goes RIGHT in childhood predicts the future far better than what goes WRONG.

Positive Aging

What is NOT a predictor of healthy aging: ancestral longevity, cholesterol, stress, parental characteristics, childhood temperament, vital affect and general ease in social relationships.

What DID predict healthy aging: Not being a smoker or stopping young, adaptive coping style, absence of alcohol abuse, healthy weight, stable marriage, some exercise, years of education.

Do people change over time? Adult self-help guides, and authors including Vaillant, have indicated the midlife capacity to change the past into a more desired future. But the guides have indicated more individual influence than the longitudinal research can support. Yes, change is possible, but other things begin to influence individual behavior at a much younger age.

We know what contributes to Positive Aging, i.e., individuals who are growing old with grace.

- They care about others, are open to new ideas and, within the limits of physical health, maintain social utility and help others
- They show cheerful tolerance of the indignities of old age. They acknowledge and gracefully accept dependency needs.
- They maintain hope in life, insisting on sensible autonomy and cherishing initiative
- They retain a sense of humor and a capacity for play
- They are able to spend time in the past, take sustenance from accomplishment, yet remain curious and continue to learn from the next generation
- They maintain contact and intimacy with old friends while heeding that “the seeds of love must be eternally re-sown” (Anne Morrow Lindberg) (“Make new friends and keep the old. One is silver and the other gold.”)

Talking about Values

For her graduate thesis, Sue conducted interviews in the '70s for the U of MN Council on Aging that resulted in a book co-authored with John Modrick and Bob Papke, titled “Transitions for Successful Aging.” When assembling a panel on “assumptions underlying different attitudes about abortion,” Sue realized that both setting the right framework for open discussion and going back to understand assumptions are important tools for working and learning together. It's important to unlock the assumptions/beliefs that underlie the values that are passed on to others and to seek the common ground shared by antagonists (love of children, for the panelists discussing abortion).

Sue handed out some hints for discussing sensitive topics with loved ones, and questions to use when discussing “Your Family History” (attached at the end of

these notes). She suggested that we look for internal consistency among these attitudes and values as we uncover them.

- Look at your family's meaning of entitlement. Is it based on age, money, gender, race or religion?
- How is grief expressed?
- How do family members use humor – to support or to demean?
- Do we believe in instant gratification or deferred gratification, i.e. do we open our gifts before or after?
- What is the role of touch in our family?
- Do we gossip?
- What are the attitudes about independence, dependence, and interdependence?
- What are the expectations for filial responsibility?
- Do we forgive, or hold onto our resentments? Is conflict open or hidden?
- What's the thermostat set for – are we comfortable or do we add/subtract clothes?
- What is the attitude about litigation – do we sue if there is a problem?
- What is the role of silence – for understanding or for use as a weapon?
- How do we express our differences – do we discuss them or avoid them?
- What are our traditions for gift giving? Gift receiving?
- How do we respond to illness – do we get pampered or left alone?
- What assumptions do we make about intentionality? Are those who do things wrong “thinking bad thoughts” -- or just making mistakes? (Note that we don't see something in others unless we have some of it ourselves.)

Conclusion

Sue has experienced having political pressures from both the left and right hijacking the work on marriage that she had accomplished as a family sociologist. She believes strongly that family values belong to FAMILIES, even though no political party or group is immune from attempting to “own” certain values!

Sue handed out some tokens as reminders of her messages and read:

THE COMMODORE'S PRAYER

THOU KNOWEST BETTER than I know myself that I am growing older and will some day be old. Keep me from the fatal habit of thinking I must say something on every subject and on every occasion. Release me from craving to straighten out everybody's affairs. Make me thoughtful but not moody, helpful but not bossy. With my vast store of wisdom, it seems a pity not to use it all, but thou knowest that I want a few friends in the end.

KEEP MY MIND FREE from the recital of endless details; give me wings to get to the point. Seal my lips on my aches and pains. They are increasing and love of rehearsing them is becoming sweeter as the years go by. I dare not ask for grace enough to enjoy the tales of others pains but help me to endure them with patience.

I DARE NOT ASK for improved memory but for a growing humility and a lessening coxsureness when my memory seems to clash with the memories of others. Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally I may be mistaken.

KEEP ME REASONABLY SWEET; I do not want to be a Saint – some of them are so hard to live with – but a sour old person is one of the crowing works of the devil. Give me the ability to see good things in unexpected places and talents in unexpected people. And give me, please, the grace to tell them so.

AMEN

Attachment: YOUR FAMILY HISTORY

Family members are often curious about the family system from which they came. We can share some of our background by identifying how we were raised as children, and how we have changed through the intervening years. As starting points, identify how your family of origin (in which you grew up) acted/believed about the following. You may choose to compare your responses with others with whom you grew up (parents and siblings, if you have any). By comparing your reflections with you partner's reflections, greater understanding of the relationship may be gained.

1. How were differences of opinion expressed – between parents?
...between siblings? ...between parent and child?
2. How was love shown? Were there differences in how love was shown by men/women?
3. How was humor shown and/or expressed?
4. How were spiritual or religious beliefs expressed?
5. How were education and/or learning valued as you were growing up?
6. How were elders in the family treated?
7. How were young children in the family treated?
8. How frequently were people of different religions, different ethnic backgrounds visitors in your home?
9. How openly was income discussed in your family?
10. What was the role of anger and how was it expressed as you were growing up?
11. How were others “protected” from bad news?

12. How were new family members (in-laws) incorporated (welcomed) into the family?
13. How were tasks of home maintenance and or childcare shared and/or delegated in the family? How big a role did gender play in this allocation of responsibility?
14. Who helped in earning income (making money) for the family?
15. What was the role of volunteering in the community (school, town, faith community)?
16. Were meals shared by all family members? What were common meals? How frequently did you eat meals separately from others?
17. Did your family value sleeping late or rising early?
18. What were the values upon which your family took an active and public stand?
19. How was sexuality shown between your parents?
20. How did you know which relatives were valued in your family?
21. What holiday or vacation traditions stand out in your memory?
22. What role did food play in the family? What were your favorite meals?
23. What chores or tasks did the children do on a regular basis? Did you receive and allowance for that?
24. What did your family do "for fun?"
25. Your family health scorecard (general health, what ailment were present, what died from)

Mother
Father
Brother(s)
Sister(s)
Maternal grandmother
Paternal grandmother
Maternal grandfather
Paternal grandfather
Aunts/ Uncles
Partner/Spouse
Partner/Spouse's parents
Partner/Spouse's siblings

