

THE FAMILY — A personal view.

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The essence of what I wish to say is eloquently and simply contained in the words of Kahil Gibran, when in his work entitled "The Prophet" he speaks of children:-

"Your children are not your children
They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself
They come through you but not from you
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you."

A little further on he says:-
"You must strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you, For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday
You are the bows from which your children as the living arrows are sent forth"

The central underlying theme of these thoughts and of this presentation can be seen as detachment rather than attachment and separateness rather than togetherness. Yet in contradistinction to this the prevailing ideology in western society is that attachment and togetherness are the means by which happiness and harmony are attained in families. In this brief paper I would like to challenge this myth since it is my personal belief that such a view is detrimental to family life.

Before I proceed, I think it would be useful if I defined the parameters within which I am going to make my comments. Firstly, when I refer to families I am referring to what is traditionally known as nuclear families, that is, a husband and wife and their immediate offspring. This is not to suggest that the definition of families cannot be applied to other groups such as communes, but merely intended to convey the meaning of the term that I am adopting for the purposes of this discussion. Secondly, most of what

I have to say is based on my clinical observations of families who are experiencing conflict and dissatisfaction in their lives. This is not meant to convey that my comments therefore are only relevant to disturbed families, on the contrary, I think that in treating troubled families one is given the opportunity to view what is malfunctioning in our society.

I merely state it in order to assert the fact that what I have to say is based on observation of real life situations and not personal fantasy.

The one clear factor that has emerged for me out of this clinical base is that attachment and the pressure for togetherness, despite whatever benefits may spring from the latter, and I think there is some, are central aetiological factors in families experiencing conflict. The problem seems to me to be that togetherness as a philosophy of life has deteriorated into an ideology that results in sameness, mediocrity and ultimately, fear.

In fact, togetherness as it is practised and perceived, functions as a sort of emotional prison within which each family member's individuality is sentenced to solitary confinement. The end result is a type of pseudo-mortality in which every member pretends, at least for a period, that they are just one happy contented family. However, the reality is that some, if not all members, experience frustration, anxiety and depression, and a sense of meaninglessness. It is situation in which parents become unable to allow, let alone facilitate, the growth of individuality in their children, since growth itself is perceived as a threat and experienced as pain and rejection. So the struggle in families becomes one of control and with the goal of holding on and preventing any growth to occur that would threaten the status quo.

Perhaps I ought to make it perfectly clear at this point that I am not against togetherness per se. On the contrary, as I am already indicated, some benefits are derived from the sense of belonging that emanates from togetherness, in fact I would argue that a sense of belonging is absolutely essential if healthy personal growth is to occur. Rather what I am concerned with is what I suspect is a gross distortion of this sense of belonging whereby it has deteriorated into a desire to possess and an inability to let children be different from their parents, or if you prefer an inability to let go, a passion to hold on and be attached. This is what I believe Gibran is saying when he states "though they are with you they belong not to you."

This distortion I would argue has at least in part come about as a consequence of the prevailing materialistic values of our capitalistic society which claims and proffers the belief that happiness peace and contentment can be attained through the acquisition and ownership of material goods. Now, because the family is a social institution it is not surprising that these materialistic values of the boader society permeate family life and come to constitute the rules for living. Togetherness then, is merely a manifestation of the materialism



of western society and serves the interest of a consumer orientated society very well. Further, if one accepts the proposition that the family is a social institution, then one can view it as a microcosm of society. This perspective has the distinct advantage of circumventing the all too common feeling of apathy that so many people suffer from, whereby they project the blame for their own ills and discontents onto the broader macrocosmic level of society and despairingly come to believe that there is nothing they can do about the quality of their own lives. But in viewing the family as a microcosm of society then each of us at least can see that we have the opportunity of working out our personal solutions to societal problems within the confines of our own family life. It is not, naive to suggest that if more people took responsibility for their own lives and did not forsake this responsibility by

blaming society, then in the long run it is possible that society itself could be changed.

Having now established that the materialistic values permeate family life, culminating in an attitude of owning our children as possessions, I would like to tackle one other general point before I discuss family life in more detail. This point relates to what I would feel as a fundamental trait of human nature and that is to make sense and order out of our experience. If we had to respond to every event as if it were unique, then life would become intolerably confusing. Therefore we respond to our environment with certain preset or pre-conditioned interpretations or classifications, that allow us to attribute meaning to our lives and in so doing life at least takes on the illusion of predictability.

Now in the main the preconceived

A consumer oriented Society!!

interpretations that we hold are acquired through the process of socialisation or learning as a child. We continue them on into adult life often unquestioningly as we go about our daily living. However, because I have already indicated the family is a social institution, the sense of meaning that we acquire and utilize to interpret life is derived from the prevailing social values. Hence, one can see that the dominant system in a society, in our society, that being the economic system, will determine the nature of meaning that we come to hold. It will, in short, provide the rationale or purpose for living. Thus, to reiterate the point I made before, the family will tend to be dominated by materialistic values. Yet, ironically, if any of you should ask the question "have my possessions brought me peace and con-

tentment" the answer I would venture to suggest would be unequivocally "NO"! The question then arises, Why do we continue these beliefs? The answer, at least in part, can be found in another basic human trait, aptly described as the conservative impulse. This means that not only do we need meaning, need to make sense and order of our experience, but also we need to preserve the meanings that we do have, since change is experienced as confusing and painful. That is, any substantial change requires a restructuring of our sense of meaning and rather than do that, we hold onto our old beliefs, a response which is reinforced and rewarded by a materialistic society. Thus one's responses to the demand for change or restructuring, is frequently one of doing more of the same in the misguided belief that more possessions, more control, more acquisition will ultimately solve the problem. There is sufficient evidence nowadays to substantiate the fact that these solutions are not working and in fact the solutions have become problems in themselves.

This leads me to the conclusion that the system of meanings that we hold are basically inappropriate and maladaptive as instanced by the frequency of mental illness, the divorce rate, drug addiction etc. These values are not providing us with the promised land but on the contrary are leading us further and further away from peace and contentment. This, I would suggest is because the very process of life itself, at all levels, demands constant change and detachment, not holding on or acquisition. This process, I believe can be broadly summarised under the term separation. We start life by separating from the womb, end it by separating from our physical existence and experience it punctuated by a constant series of separations. Existence as Paul Tillich says, "is separation". Is it therefore surprising that a structure of meanings that emphasise attachment and possession has failed to lead us to peace and happiness? The answer for me is quite clearly "no", and the result I believe is an incapacity to make sense of most of

our experiences, whether they be in a family or not. Separation then becomes a meaningless, confusing, anxiety provoking experience, because we have no means of understanding it.

If for the moment I can indulge in the use of an analogy, perhaps my meaning will be a little clearer. Life in a general sense for me seems to be characterised by seasons and one can extend this notion beyond nature by seeing our personal lives as if they were seasons. So one can speak of the spring of life, the autumn etc. In this sense the eminent psychiatrist Carl Jung says "we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life's morning. For what in the morning was true, will at evening have become a lie." Life requires, as I understand it, constant change and re-adjustment and thereby separation from what was, while at the same time maintaining an underlying belief that change itself and forward movement are the only constant things. This is surely what Gibran means when he says, "life goes not backward nor carries with yesterday". Yet attachment and the prevailing materialistic values of possession seem to me to deny this fundamental quality of life resulting in fear and uncertainty.

Taking this notion of the inevitability of change and the consequent inevitability of separation, I would now like to turn my attention to family life and explore the relevance of these ideas. In many families that I have seen, and I suspect in many that I have not seen, what I have observed is a pronounced tendency for parents to see their children as extensions of their own egos and not as individual and separate beings in their own right.

In short, children can become the means by which many parents attempt to fulfil their own unmet aspirations and fantasies from the past. That is, they are unable to allow separateness to exist and become obsessed with turning their children into the type of person they wished they were, or more ostentatiously, the type of person they think they are. Thus, any attempt on the child's part to express and

develop their own individuality is experienced as a loss. These two feelings seem to frequently result in one of two reactions. The threat resulting in anxiety and the loss in depression, with not infrequently a combination of both. This tendency can be seen as being partly related to the conservation impulse to hold on to the past and an inability to assimilate and accommodate to change. Such emergence of difference spells out separation, not only of the child from the parent or parents, but also parent from themselves, in so far as they have to separate from the past and the fantasies, hopes and aspirations of the past. In brief, they have to separate from parts of themselves.

Yet, family life as we know it, is a constantly forward moving process, punctuated by a series of inevitable changes that demand re-organisation and restructuring of meaning. Attempts to stagnate this movement can only result in failure with the consequent feelings of pain, hurt, anger and dismay. From a sociological perspective, we can delineate several major points of transition in family life, all of which require a readjustment and change.

Courtship — Marriage:

The first is quite obviously the point in a person's life when they get married. Here the necessary change is from the voluntary relationship of courtship or living together, to the more compulsory one of marriage. This means that the couple now have to let go of the belief or meaning that they are only in the relationship because they want to be and now have to decide whether they are in it because they want to be, or because they have to be. This shift for some couples is never satisfactorily made and they spend their entire married lives unable to separate from the past voluntary relationship orientation. Thus the relationship comes to be characterised by resentment and anger.

Birth of First Child:

The next transition arises when the first child is born. Here the couple have to adjust to a third member and incorporate into their existing roles of husband and wife,

those of mother and father. Again, in several families, this shift, one members part of both, is never satisfactorily made. For an ever increasing number of couples, children become a burden that they resent and thus they are unable to incorporate the roles of mother and father. They live their lives then as either husband or wife, or alternatively as if they were single. Given that they have chosen to have children, then I see this difficulty as an inability to move forward with life and a desire to hold on to what was. Or within the terms of this paper, an inability to separate from the past.

First Child goes to School:

A third transition occurs when the first child goes to school. Here the shift required is one of sharing responsibility and authority with the outside world. Some families are unable to negotiate this transition, particularly if they are over attached to their children, often resulting from unmet dependency needs within the parents. That is they need their children to need them, to a pathological extent. Hence the child going to school is experienced as a loss of part of themselves. It can also, on a more pragmatic note, be a difficult period if the child has some disability or behavioural problem which the parents feel reflects on them. The child going to school of course means that the family and family secrets have now become public property.

Adolescence:

The next critical period is that of adolescence. It is here that I believe the issue of separation becomes the critical issue in a family. It is at this stage that a child's individuality and struggle to establish a separate identity become the dominant theme of family life. It is at this point that the "togetherness" myth is most likely to be exploded. It is at this point that the inevitable separation of child from parent becomes painfully obvious and it is at this point that the struggles over control and the maintenance of the status quo are most predominant. For many parents, teenage children can precipitate an adolescent identity crisis in the adults as much as in the

teenager. Because of the threat to their own identity that the teenagers produce in their parents, it is not uncommon to find parents at this stage of family development to undergo a deep and profound crisis with respect to their own identity and materialistic values. This is perhaps because holding on and the acquisition of material goods no longer provide a meaningful interpretation or adaptation to the ongoing process of separation.

Empty Nest:

The next stage or transition is when children leave home, a phase sometimes referred to as the "empty nest" phase. This stage, apart from producing a sense of loss and depression also requires the couple to re-establish their own relationship, and in many cases to try and re-establish intimacy. If, in fact, they have sacrificed all for the children, including their marriage, then this phase can be very difficult. Particularly difficult is it if the original question of whether I am staying with this person because I want to, or because I have to, has not been answered. This now re-emerges as a vital question again and hence marriages can often become very unstable at this stage.

Death of One's Partner:

The final stage in the family life cycle is the return to a single life with the death of one's spouse. This is the most obvious and often most painful separation that occurs in one's family life. The extent to which this phase will be coped with by and large depends on the extent to which each of the other stages have been satisfactorily handled.

Throughout all these stages, what you have probably noticed is my continual use of the term 'separation'. I use this deliberately, since it is the word, which best describes the process of family life and highlights the inappropriateness of any system of values predicated on a philosophy of attachment. However, I have used it for another purpose, and that is that it allows me to use another concept, that of grief and grieving. It is the process of grieving which I feel makes additional sense of many aspects of family life and conflict. Normally,

we only think of grief as something that takes place when a near relative or friend dies. However, I would argue that if one thinks of grief in a general sense, as a process which occurs in response to separation or a sense of loss, then I think it can provide a useful means of understanding many aspects of life.

Although physical death is inevitable, of all the changes that beset a lifetime, bereavement is characteristically the change we are least prepared for. In an affluent society that values the permanency of objects, death is a factor that tends to be systematically denied. Yet it is in reactions to bereavement that we can most clearly see the inherent difficulties in adjusting to separation and change, and this ought to enable us to see more clearly the difficulties involved in any aspect of separation. Without going into specific details of the typical process of grieving, I think it would be useful if I briefly outlined them and then demonstrated their relevance to the present discussion. The typical signs of grief can be summarised as physical distress and deteriorating health, an inability to surrender the past, the clinging to possessions, being unable to comprehend the loss, feelings of unreality, withdrawal into apathy and hostility or anger against others, fate or turned inwards on oneself. Although the process varies from individual to individual and with the circumstances of the death, the general pattern seems remarkably consistent.

It takes little imagination to grasp the fact that this process describes and incorporates many aspects and factors that I have already discussed. While some of the aspects of grief may be difficult to identify in normal family life, two aspects are clearly not. These are the phases of clinging to possessions and the hostility and anger either directed inwards in the form of depression or outwards on to "society", children, wife or some other outside source. Thus the so called "blow-ups" in families and periods of withdrawal and depression in certain members is not so inexplicable if one takes this slightly broader view of grief and sees it as a general reaction to

loss resulting from a sense of separation. Thus what one finds are the signs of grief, in particular the aggression-depression complex appearing in families at the points of transition that I have just discussed. This, of course, is most noticeable in families with adolescent children.

Given that I have indicated that I believe that separation is an inevitable aspect of life then it follows logically at least, that we will all experience periods of grief, even if we do not recognise it as such. This, I believe, to actually be the case and further, that in families where the overriding value system has been, or is, materialistic, emphasizing possessions and attachment, these periods of grief are more profound and less readily resolved, if at all.

In short, they take the form of inhibited or chronic grief. This I would suggest, consistent with what I have already said, is related to the fact that the materialistic structure of meanings simply does not make sense of a separation type of experience, hence the responses are likely to be inappropriate or maladaptive. Likewise, it seems to me that if we have system of beliefs or a set of meanings that are not predicated on attachment, but rather on detachment, then the separation experience will make more sense and thereby be less disruptive. In short, we will be able to continue forward with life's journey and in so doing, provide for our children the environment in which they can grow and develop as separate individuals.

In concluding, I would like to

return to the opening quotation of Gibran, and in particular where he says.

"You are the bows from which your

Children as living arrows are sent forth".

By extending the implications of this quotation, one can appreciate that it would be nigh impossible to hold the bow forever poised, in fact, having drawn it, time will come when the arrow must be released, if only through the aegis of sheer fatigue! Alternatively, equally impossible is it to hold onto the arrow once it has been released, all one can do is hope that it has been pointed in the right direction.

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