

Family Systems Theory: Differentiation and Emotional Triangles

We are going to talk again about differentiation in this lesson. Here is another Jackson Browne quote. This will help us think about differentiation. In the middle of the song “Sky Blue and Black” he says, “Where the touch of the lover ends / And the soul of the friend begins, / There [is] a need to be separate / And a need to be one, / And a struggle neither wins.” Is that not a great expression of the forces we have been talking about? It describes the forces of autonomy and connection and how they interact. It is very difficult to find the balance point between them. It should not be that either one wins. If one wins, everyone loses. I do not mean one person wins or loses; I mean if one aspect wins, all aspects lose. Should it not be that in the struggle both win? Yes. That is the goal. However, in reality neither usually wins. There is both gain and loss, which is part of the brokenness of being in relationship after the Fall.

Is brokenness a result of the Fall? Yes. If you compare our relationships with the Trinity, there is no brokenness in the Trinity. The Trinity is able to do the separate and the one, which is part of the reason why it is so hard for our finite minds to understand it. We do not have experiences like that. We get a taste of it sometimes in marriage, but just a taste. At times we have these glorious moments of connection, but we are still aware that we are separate. That usually leads to frustration, because it is hard not to see the separateness as diminishing the connection. It is hard for us not to see differences as diminishing connection. But the Trinity is a perfect example that it does not need to. After the Fall, however, it does. I think it is because of the alienation, the breakdown of the relationship, with ourselves and others. In the kingdom to come, I think relationships will be easy. Communication will happen well all the time.

Stephen Covey wrote a book, which we referenced earlier, called *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. In recent years Covey wrote another book called *The 8th Habit*. I do not know how old Covey is, probably in his 60s. This is the book that a guy in his 60s writes. It is quite good. In the book Covey has a couple of great appendices. One is about emotional intelligence. It takes insights from a book on emotional intelligence that came out 10 years earlier, written by Daniel Goleman. The book was a New York Times best-seller. Goleman wrote a follow-up on emotional intelligence in business, and he has a few other follow-ups as well. It is a very good series of books. Covey summarizes all this in an appendix, which is very helpful. In one of these appendices there is a drawing in which Covey makes a statement that is very descriptive of the process of differentiation and finding your heart in the midst of family. It is especially helpful for finding the balance between those two bases of operation: thinking and emotions. The statement is, “There is a space between stimulus and response, and we can grow the space.”

How do we keep thinking when our emotions are strong? Imagine that someone interacts with you in a way that you are prone to react to—“response,” in Covey’s language. Well, there is space between the time that the person says or does what they do and when you react. If we can grow that space, we increase the likelihood that we will think and make a choice rather than habitually react. That little action is called growth. It is becoming more mature. Recognizing that a space is there and trying to put more thought time in that space creates the opportunity for us to act in a way that is more mature, or better differentiated. In other words, it is a way of keeping our thinking in balance while we are experiencing strong emotions. It is hard to break habits. But the image of a space between stimulus and response is helpful. It is not that you are a slave to your reactions or that you have no choice. You are not like a dog that reacts to whatever stimulus is put in front of it. A dog has no space between stimulus and response. There is a space for us, however, because we are human beings. It is part of being an image bearer. Part of growing and maturing is being able to stretch that space.

Let me mention two other aspects of differentiation. On the one hand, there is the ability to separate thinking from feeling. On the other hand, there is the ability to maintain identity based on objective and clear boundaries. A differentiated person can be in intimate relationships without being unduly controlled. An undifferentiated person, on the other hand, will find it difficult to separate themselves from others. Relationships can look intimate because the people are very close. But they find it difficult to free themselves or be themselves in the context of those relationships. Therefore they find it difficult to be themselves in the context of any relationship. Our family is our school of relationships. We develop our expectations, reactions, responses, and understanding of relationship in the context of family, and we carry that forward into other relationships. Certainly there is growth and change and modification, but our basic relational tools were put in our toolbox by our families. Especially when things get difficult, we tend to reach down into that same toolbox.

Let us talk about emotional triangles. Triangles occur because the relationship dyad is inherently unstable. During a swing of the closeness/distance cycle, anxiety develops. To cope with the anxiety another person or thing is “triangled” into the relationship. A classic example occurs when parents focus on a child to diffuse the tension between their own relationship. It does not resolve the tension, but by having something else to focus on it does reduce the acute nature of the strife.

Let us discuss some laws of emotional triangles so that you can get a feel for how this concept helps to explain the structure and function of a family. These laws come from Edwin Friedman. Triangles are probably one of the most useful tools for helping think about the structure and function of a family. If you do your own genogram, look for triangles. They are there. If your family is fairly healthy they may be hard to find; that is all right. But generally this is one of the more useful concepts. Here are some of Friedman’s laws.

First, the relationship of any two members of an emotional triangle is kept in balance by the way a third party relates to each of them or to their relationship. When a given relationship is stuck, therefore, there is probably a third person or issue—it does not have to be a person—that is part of the homeostasis. For some who were raised in a home where people were not believers, or in a home where the church that the family attended is very different from the type of church you attend now, there may be a triangle between you, a specific parent, and that issue. Friedman is wise to emphasize that this does not have to be a person.

Second, if one is the third party in a triangle, it is generally not possible to bring change (for more than a week) to the relationship of the other two parts by trying to change their relationship directly. This includes anything from trying to make things more orderly, trying to make someone give up his or her habit, or urging someone to come to church more frequently. It may well be that in the history of our species no family member, upon trying to correct the perception of another family member about a third, has ever received the response, “You are right, honey. I do not know why I did not see it that way myself.”

Third, attempts to change the relationship with the other two sides of an emotional triangle not only are generally ineffective, but also homeostatic forces often convert these efforts to their opposite intent. Trying harder to bring two people closer—brother and sister, child and parent, or another party and his or her symptom—will generally maintain or increase the distance between them. In other words, if you try to bring them closer they usually end up farther apart. On the other hand, repeated efforts to separate a person and his or her symptom, a spouse and his or her paramour, or a child and his or her peer group,

an engaged daughter and her horrible fiancé, or anyone and his or her cherished beliefs, increases the possibility that they will fall blindly in love with one another.

For example, a mother became concerned that her 20-year-old son developed an imaginary girlfriend whom he used to bring home for dinner. She wanted him to see a therapist, but he would not go. She kept trying to take her away from him by forcing reality issues, but he only clung tighter. Then he said he was taking his friend with him on a vacation. The mother was encouraged not only to stop fighting his fantasy but to de-triangle by buying “Mrs. Phantom” a gift for the trip. He left his friend in the Caribbean. Had mother continued to try to straighten her son out, upon his return he and his friend might have moved in permanently.

Think about a situation where your teenage son or daughter is dating someone you are very concerned about. You are now most likely the third party in that triangle. Perhaps you and your spouse together are the third. Since you are the third, if you try to break the other two apart, Friedman says you will have the opposite effect. If you have been in that situation in real life, you know that is usually what happens. This is a theory that can help explain that reality. Even though you are concerned about this, the more you try to push them apart the more they are going to come together. Notice that Friedman’s solution to the above-mentioned problem is not to use child psychology on the couple. In other words, you should not try to put them together and then hope they will come apart. That is not the point. Friedman’s point is that you need to get out of the triangle. That is not to say that you cannot speak to them. You can make your positions clear. Making your positions clear is not the same as being in the triangle and trying to change their relationship directly. I am not saying that you need to be without a voice. Parents cannot lose their voice. But they need to be careful how they apply that voice. If they are the third in a triangle and they are trying to change the relationship directly, they are going to get the opposite effect of what they are intending. I think that is almost universally true.

Fourth, to the extent that a third party to an emotional triangle tries unsuccessfully to change the relationship of the other two, the more likely it is that the third party winds up with the stress of the other two. If you have been in a relationship where you are trying to break up your son or daughter from their girlfriend or boyfriend, you end up being the one who is anxious about it. In reality, the couple that is dating ought to have the anxiety. It is normal to have anxiety about a dating relationship, because you are trying to figure out where the relationship is. As a parent, you do not want to do something that takes that anxiety away from them. You do not want to create an opportunity for them to pass it on to you, where you are so worried about the relationship that they do not have to worry about it. You do not want to do that. It contributes to their blindness. As they see that you are worried about it, they are not going to worry about it. They are not even going to pay attention to it. They are just going to enjoy what they can enjoy.

Fifth, the various triangles in an emotional system interlock so that efforts to bring change to any one of them are often resisted by homeostatic forces and the others in the system itself. Sixth, one side of an emotional triangle tends to be more conflictual than the others.

Seventh, we can only change a relationship to which we belong. Therefore the way to bring change to the relationship of two others—and no one said it is easy—is to try to maintain a well-defined relationship with each one and to avoid the responsibility for their relationship that they have with one another. To the extent we can maintain a non-anxious presence in a triangle, such a stance has the potential to modify the anxiety in the others. The difficulty is to be both non-anxious and present. Anyone can keep his or her own anxiety down by distancing, but that usually preserves the triangle. In this seventh law, Friedman has defined something that is worth taking special note of. He has defined

the greatest challenge, I think, of counseling couples. You are automatically in a triangle when you are counseling couples. But Friedman is saying that when you are doing that work you cannot change the relationship of those couples directly. You can only have impact on a relationship you are in, and you are not in their relationship. You can have a relationship with each individual, and in that way you can impact the couple's relationship. But the responsibility for their relationship has to stay with them. I believe Friedman is exactly right. If you can understand that law alone, you will probably be in the top 10 percent of people who work with couples, so far as understanding what is really happening is concerned. Most people do not understand that. What Friedman has written here should be considered as gold.

Let me give you a picture of what this looks like. Friedman says that you cannot impact a relationship to which you do not belong. As an example of this, imagine you are meeting with a couple who are sharing their struggles, and you say, "What you are doing here is wrong. You two need to do this instead." Your reason for saying that is that you think it will bring change to the relationship. Friedman says that will not work, because that is trying to bring change directly to a relationship that you are not a part of.

Why would that not work? Here is a couple whose entire hearts are invested in this relationship. Those hearts have been impacted by family histories. So when this couple is sitting in front of you and they are struggling in a particular way in their relationship, they are struggling for all kinds of reasons. They are struggling because they are each bringing to that relational moment the way their family has taught them to respond to the anxiousness that they feel because of the disagreement. There are all kinds of things that will be involved. A lot of them are things that they are not thinking clearly about themselves. When you are watching them, it is easy to see that certain things are wrong and destructive. It is easy to see that they need to do things differently. It is easy, therefore, to assume that if we could just get them to do things differently it would go better. And it would. If they could hear you and do things differently, it would go better. If they would not tear each other down, if they communicated better, or whatever it is that you are suggesting, if they could do it, it would go better. But the problem is that the suggestion you are making is not helping them figure out what it is that has driven them to do things this way in the first place. You are simply trying to give them a new skill. But the skill they need is growing the space between stimulus and response, and you have not even thought about that. There are all kinds of reasons for their behavior that have very little to do with the way that they are disagreeing at the moment. So to try to modify the way they are disagreeing is not enough. Rather, I am advocating that you continue relating to each individual and trying to understand each one in terms of what is happening in their thoughts, feelings, and choices.

The tricky part of this, however, is recognizing that you are not doing parallel, individual therapy. At the same time you need to recognize that you can only bring change to a relationship that you are a part of. And you can only be a part of a relationship with each individual. You are not in their couple relationship. You are trying to bring change in the thinking of the individuals by growing their differentiation so that they can think more about what they are feeling and make different choices. It is still about the couple's relationship, but you have to work indirectly through each individual. You have to help them bring change into the relationship, and leave the responsibility for it with them.

This may seem off the point, but it is not. I get concerned over a common practice that I see in many of the therapists now, even though they are very good therapists, many of them better than I. This is what happens. A person is meeting with the therapist, and things are going well. Let us say they meet for a number of weeks. Eventually the client says, "What about if my spouse comes in, too?" So they start couple therapy. There is a relationship already established between the therapist and the one spouse, but there is no relationship with the other spouse. By doing that, it seems to me that they do not understand

Friedman's law of the triangle. They do not understand that in couple therapy you are entering into a triangle. It may be that these therapists can do this better than I can. I am aware that there are some things that I simply find difficult. I avoid them because it will not be helpful. I avoid triangles where I already have a strong relationship with one individual and not with the other, because I do not know how to balance it out very well. I will try it at times. There can be reasons for that. But we will end up talking about it. My fear is that some of my therapist friends are not talking about it because they do not see the importance of the triangles. They are not thinking about those dynamics. They are thinking about how they can change the relationship directly, rather than thinking, "I am in a triangle. I cannot change that relationship directly. I have to work with these individual relationships." To do that, the two relationships have to be fairly balanced.

When a couple walks out of the room after a meeting with you, they should not know whose side you are on. You do not want them to leave thinking that you are definitely on one person's side. The difficulty, however, is that that is what both individuals want when they come in. Both are convinced that they would have a good marriage if the other one would just straighten up. You will feel those forces in the triangle that you are in. You will feel people pulling you. They will tell you a story in a way that tries to make you sympathetic to their side. You will feel the pull of having each individual want you to agree with them. They want you to get beside them and start lecturing the other person. But it does not take very long before you are pulled the other way. As a result, if you have a good relationship with one person already and you are just meeting the other person for the first time, it is difficult. I do not know how to do it well. Why do people do it? I do not think they are thinking about triangles and especially Friedman's seventh law. If you can grasp that, you are ahead of a lot of people, and you will avoid a lot of difficulties. Of course, there may be times when you feel you have to try it anyway.

Pastors, for instance, often have to do things that most counselors would not do. Counselors talk about the importance of not having dual relationships. In other words, you have a counseling relationship with a client and no other kind of relationship with them. You do not do business with one another; you do not become friends; you do not meet each other socially. That is possible when your office is in a different neighborhood than the one you live in and you are not seeing people who live next door. You can do that then. It is not like you are going to see your clients at the grocery store. So you can have a really intense, unique kind of relationship in the office, and it stays in the office. But pastors do not have that opportunity. As the pastor you have at least two relationships. You are their teacher and friend. And there are times when you may have to make a decision that a counselor would not have to. You may decide, after seeing one person, that you really should see their spouse. You might feel it is best to make that decision. But do it with an awareness of triangles and especially of this law. Start with a conversation about the nature of these things. I would suggest even saying specific things like, "I want to make sure that there is enough space for you to feel like you can be in here equally. I want you to know that we are going to be trying to build a relationship pretty quickly to balance out this relationship I already have with your spouse." There are times to do that. You need to pray for wisdom when you try.

What is the purpose of meeting with a couple if there is so much individual work? I think Friedman is right in saying that you cannot directly change this relationship that you are not in. You can only change the relationships you are in. But that does not mean you are doing individual therapy. You are doing work with the couple about their relationship. You are recognizing that they are the ones who have to do things differently. You are coaching each one of them at the same time. Well, it is not always at the same time, but you do want to keep things balanced. I do not always do that so well. Thankfully, however, people are usually pretty honest about that and voice their concerns. They tell me if I have been unduly hard on one person. I tell them that I do not intend it to be that way. It is difficult, because one of the two relationships always feels like the bigger priority to address. That is how I can fall into

the mistake of seeming like I am coming on one person's side and attacking the other person. I would say that is my most common mistake, and it is not helpful at all. That is the thing I really have to stay aware of. Thankfully my clients will usually let me know. I try to be collaborative enough with my clients that they will usually speak up when I am messing up. I want to emphasize that you are not doing therapy with individuals, because that is not couple therapy. The focus is on the relationship. But you need to recognize that you have to help the individuals address their own contribution to this relationship. They each have to make changes if there is going to be change in the relationship.

Friedman noted that issues are somehow passed from generation to generation. Parents pass their immaturity on to their children. That is the family projection process. Emotional forces operate in a family over the years in recurring patterns. So in the nuclear family there are recurring patterns. Parents project their immaturity on to their kids, and it goes from generation to generation.

Bowen recognized the importance of sibling position. But it is much more complex in the thinking of Bowen than what we are commonly told. We commonly hear that firstborns are one way, the youngest another way, and the middle child is another way still. There is some truth to that, but it tends to be a very simplistic understanding. Bowen borrowed a system of thinking about the impact of birth order and sibling position from a fellow named Walter Toman. I got Toman's book one time and after glancing at the table of contents I realized that I would not get anything from reading it. The book was very good, but it was too detailed. It would describe, for instance, the case of a firstborn who is a male and an only child. Then it would describe the case of a firstborn who is a male in a family of males. Then it would talk about a firstborn who is a male but the only male. Then it would talk about a firstborn who was a female and an only child. On and on it would go. Toman recognized that there are all these differences that shape and modify things. It is so much more complex than what is in the popular literature. I am not saying that the popular literature is useless, but there is a lot more complexity and subtlety to it.

I do not know that I think about this too much when I am counseling, but I do try to listen to people as they explain their experiences. I am an example. I am the youngest. There are certain things that the popular literature says about what it is like to be the youngest that are certainly true for me. For instance, am I less responsible than my older two siblings? Yes, probably. I am certainly less responsible than my oldest brother. He was a guy who would take charge in all kinds of things. He was an administrator all his life and a great one at that. Part of the reason for that was his role in the family, his sibling position. I have done administrative things, but it is not really part of my giftedness. That is partly because of my temperament, but it is also partly because of the fact that I am the youngest. Why would I pay attention to stuff like that? I am a lot more free-spirited than my two brothers. But the popular birth order literature would not suggest to you the most important facet of being the youngest in my family. That is because it is something that is fairly unique to my family.

My father died when the kids were five, 10, and 14-and-a-half. He was a pastor, but he was also fairly athletic. My mom was always called the oldest, but she was really the second born. The firstborn died in the first two days of life. So she was always called the oldest of 11 kids. There were lots of athletes in that family, too. I did not really know that. I was ignorant of it. Even recently my mom, who is 91, was telling me some stories about her brothers, and I was thinking, "Really? I wonder if that is still true." I knew that the youngest, who was born when she was in college, was athletic. He stayed at home for college and went to Winona State in Minnesota, which back then was a teachers' college. Now it is a university. I knew he played football there, but recently my mom was telling the story of how Lance, that was his name, found it hard to leave home. He was really attached to his mom. His dad died when he was about 15 years old. Lance had the opportunity to play football elsewhere, but he stayed home so he could play at Winona State. I had known that story for a long time. Since Winona State is not known

for having a good football team, I had always thought, “How good of a football player could he really have been?” But I came to find out that he ended up choosing between Winona State and Oklahoma University. When I looked back at the record of Oklahoma University, I found out that that was the same time that Oklahoma was in the midst of the longest winning streak in the history of college football. The coach at that time was named Bud Wilkinson, and he is now in the College Football Hall of Fame. All of a sudden I realized that Bud Wilkinson tried to recruit Lance when Oklahoma was the most powerful football team in the nation. They actually went four or five years without losing a game. My mom also recently said that another uncle of mine was a great hockey player and still holds some records. He is now 70 years old. I wonder if it is true. I think it might be. I am telling you all this to make the point that in our family the basic fact of life was, if you were going to make it and be someone, it was going to be through athletics. Be a good Christian, of course, which meant following a bunch of rules. But if you were going to make it, it was going to be through athletics. That was your identity.

My uncle was an all-state athlete in two sports in the state of Wisconsin, and my other uncle was better than that in basketball. We had people like Dean Smith (legendary basketball coach of the University of North Carolina) and Charles “Lefty” Driesell (basketball coach of the University of Maryland) in our house when I was a kid. I, on the other hand, was not that great at any sport. I was not bad, but I was not great. To understand the impact of being the youngest in my family, you need to understand the importance of athletics and how I was the third best of the three. That experience negatively shaped the view I have of myself, and I fight it every day. I am a fairly shy person. It does not show usually because I do pretty well at working at that. But there are many days in a semester when I walk into a classroom and question what I am doing there. I question why I am the one walking up to the front of a class that has 75 people in it. I do not want to be up there. I do not want all those people looking at me. I am not thinking that, but I am feeling it. A lot of that goes back to the fact that I was always the third best out of three. You cannot get much lower than that, which is why I ask myself what I am doing at the front of a class.

A big piece of my identity is connected to sibling position, but you would not discover that from the sibling position books. I have often felt that I am not that good. Thankfully, through the years there have been lots of good things that have happened that have helped me grieve the loss of not being an all-American. Enough has happened that I have been able to grieve it to the point where I can accept it. Today, I am able to say that I was a good athlete in certain ways. Several years ago I would have said, “No, I was not very good.” I have been more comfortable with what God has given me. It is all right that when my brother Dave was born, my middle brother, God said that Dave was going to get Dave’s athleticism and I was going to get my athleticism, too. I was not going to get much. That is really what happened. I am saying all this so that we do not get too tied into sibling position. The individual application of it is probably more important. All this is more of a factor in my life than the fact that I am the youngest and a freer spirit than my brothers.

Let us talk about emotional cut-offs. Emotional cut-off is a method people use to control fusion. That may seem counterintuitive. Fusion is the enmeshment that happens when people are too connected. There is not enough distinction between people. So in order to manage it, people cut off the relationship. They go away. They break the relationship. People generate distance from parents by physically moving away or emotionally by limiting conversation to impersonal topics. The emotional cut-off reduces the anxiety but does not solve the problems that led to it. I mentioned a while back the coaching conversations I get into with people who are anticipating going home. Often we are talking about the cut-off that has occurred, where these people do not talk about things. Even though they are going home to visit they do not really talk about important things.

A good song that talks about this is a song by Dave Wilcox called “Covert War.” It is a song written as if it were a letter to his parents about why he is not coming home for Thanksgiving because of the war that has gone on between them. As a younger person he assumed that he could step in and take the shots. He thought they would pass right through and not damage him. But the truth is that it did something to kill his heart, and he is not going to do it anymore. By not going home he is cutting off. But on the other hand, he is not, because he is being direct about it. He says that he is not coming, but he is expressing the reason why.

Having a conversation with your parents about these things is something that can be done well or something that can be done poorly. To do this well, you need to be well differentiated. In other words, you cannot be reactive. This is not about accusing. It is about having conversations. You need to remember that the point is not to diagnose the other person’s pathology. If you decide that you are going to be more honest with your parents, that does not mean telling them all the ways in which they did you wrong. A lot of people start there. A lot of people think they have taken a good step forward by going home and telling their parents all the things they have done wrong and how everything is their fault. Systems theory, however, says that blame is not the point. Yet at the same time it does not relieve you of your personal responsibility. If you have made bad choices, they are your choices. Your family may have operated in such a way that shaped your heart in a particular way, but that does not make your family responsible for your choices. Life is not that deterministic. You are still a human being. You were exercising your will. Even though it has impacted you in this way, you are still responsible. So to go home and tell your father, for instance, that he is to blame is neither right nor helpful. The point is not about why you are messed up. Rather, the questions you are asking are “What am I looking for? What do I feel I did not get that I keep acting out about in such a way as to try to prompt someone to give it to me?” Usually the question is, “How do I know you care?” Usually it is about the connection and the difficulty to be connected and the needs for attachment.

When I think about my life, I was living in a world that taught me that I would be cared for if I was good enough. My brother could do all kinds of things athletically, and people liked him for it. They would like me, too, if I could do the same things. But I could not. I was not rebellious, however, in response. I did not act out in that particular way. But this dynamic was fairly influential in some of the other things I did, which were done to try to make others like me. I did a lot of school for that reason. I did college, then a graduate degree, then later another graduate degree, and then later another graduate degree. The last time it took me eight years to get it done, and it was very difficult and challenging. If I did not need it to keep my job I probably would have quit. My mother came for graduation at the end of it. She would have been in her mid 80s at that point. She did not fly anymore, so I went to pick her up. The drive was about 10 hours. I went up and got her and the next day came back so she could be here for graduation. She was here for a few days and then I drove her back. Four or five days after finishing that last degree I was driving back, and on the way I passed by Madison, Wisconsin, where I was born and where my father is buried. I chose to pull over and figure out again where the cemetery is where my dad is buried. I have not gone there enough to have it memorized. But once I get in the gate I always know where his grave is. So I went and visited his grave.

There were a lot of things going on at that time, which led to a realization. Part of this was because of some reading I was doing at that time, including a book called *Finding our Father*, which is a helpful book. But also, I was tired. My brother Dave was worried about me. I was tired. It had been a long haul, and it was hard. Doing a dissertation is the worst thing you can possibly do. Several things went wrong with mine. It was very stressful. I was very worn out at the end of it all. I get that way from time to time. I am able to keep putting one foot in front of the other, which is a very bad thing, because I just get worn out sometimes. Another part of the context is that at that time I started to add up the years that I had

been in school. I went to school in kindergarten, then there were 12 more years, which makes 13, then there were 4 years of college, which makes 17. When I added it all up I realized that I had been in school for 31 years. I am now 55, which means I have another seven years to go before I break even. Even at my age it is still the case that I went to school longer than I have been out of school. That is when the realization came that part of the reason I had been doing all this was to try to make my dad proud. That is part of the reason that I kept trying so hard in athletics even though I was not as gifted. I mean, I tried hard. I played three sports in college. Most people do not do that. That is working too hard. But the only way I could prove I had ability was to do all three. Why was I doing that? There may have been several reasons, but in the final analysis I needed to know my dad was proud of me. I simply needed to know he was proud of me. Perhaps all men need to know that. Maybe women do, too. I do not understand that side of it. That is not the side I have lived.

I am not saying this for the purpose of baring my soul. I am trying to create a better teaching moment by illustrating how this whole thing works, the impact it has, and the way it shapes us. As we are working with people, it is best to help them see some of these things. They would never see it all. But in a certain sense you are trying to get them on a different journey than the one they are on so that they grow in understanding their own heart. Perhaps one of the worst interpretations of any Scripture passage is the one that is sometimes applied to Jeremiah 17:9. We are told there that the heart is deceitful and no one can understand it. But it does not follow to say that we should not try. That is one of the worst things we can do. God wants to work in us so we know who we are, and it is all right.

God was doing a good thing when He made you just the way you are. Romans 8:28 is true. God uses all things for good, even the evil things, because of His love for us. This applies to my situation growing up and not being athletic. I was set up to fail in the one clear way that was available to me to be someone. Yet even in that God was doing something good. One of the worst things that could have happened to me would have been that I was more athletic. Finding the level of success that I wanted in that area would have been destructive.

This is about paying attention to the impact of family and the way it shapes life. It is about helping others see it better to expand our spiritual formation. Recognize that the Gospel has something to do with this. The Gospel is where I find out that there is a God who loves me, who has made me the way I am and likes it. Sovereignly, in some mysterious way I cannot understand completely, He arranged my life the way it was and has used it, even the stuff that is a product of evil, for my good. I can rest in the fact that this God is proud of me. This God wants to take me under His wing, counsel me, love me, father me, direct me, and encourage me to be the man He made me to be. In that framework I can trust that my biological father would have done something like that, too. Or at least he wanted to.

I know that if my dad would have lived my life would have worked out differently. I am in a different denomination, and I think differently theologically. I think that would have happened no matter what. I think that was God's work in my life. I do not know why God worked that way in my life and not his. If he were still alive this could be a tense relationship because of that difference. But it does not matter. God worked to strengthen my heart, to do what Paul prays for, to strengthen my inner being. This has not fully happened. I can still walk in the back of a classroom and think, "What am I doing here?" That struggle will probably be there for the rest of my life. But each one of us needs to know that we are who God wants us to be. That is not a statement about your behavior. I know you do things that are sinful. That is not what we are talking about. God made you who you are, and it is important that you love that, that you love yourself the way God made you to be. That is really good. It is also really good that we love each other.

I had the wonderful privilege of going on a mission trip with a group of counseling students. We went to work with an HIV/AIDS project in Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia. In one of our meetings before we left, the director of the trip said, "This will change you." He said he did not know how, but it would change us. Around day four or five of the trip, I was sitting toward the back of the bus as we were traveling somewhere, and the director happened to be at the back of the bus as well. I looked at him and thought about how profound the change really was that he was talking about.

I had a realization recently regarding one of the changes. We had an experience where we were talking with people of all different faiths who were in a missionary-run project for people who are HIV positive. There were times when we were counseling people who were in situations for which there is no real answer. Almost without exception, however, there was tremendous resilience in their spirits. I do not think I heard any complaining in my 11 days away from home. One of the hardest adjustments when I came back home was listening to Americans who complain about everything, most of which is not very important. This is in comparison to people who are 21 or 22 years old, HIV positive, and their biggest prayer concern is that they will live long enough to raise their child. Now, that is something to complain about, but they do not do it. I remember we had a conversation with the whole team together and someone said, "Do you not just love these people?" And it was universal. There was something special about the Ethiopians. It was wonderful.

On the way home from work the other day I stopped at a restaurant where they had free Internet access, because I had e-mail to catch up on. I was eating a bit, and I had talked to my wife, who had decided not to join me. I was there about an hour, and during that time there were a couple of families who were there with their kids. There was a mom in front of me with a girl who was about seven or eight years old. Little girls sometimes catch my attention because I have two daughters, and it takes me back to when they were young. So I was looking at this mom and her daughter, and I could tell that the little girl was definitely her daughter. She looked like her. The daughter was explaining something to her mom, and although I was not close enough to hear, she was very animated, and it was fun to watch. There was such a joy in that moment of seeing the uniqueness of this little eight-year-old girl expressing her personhood before her mother, which is in part inherited from her mother. But more than that, it is unique and special. It is a special reflection of God's creation.

Another family there had three or four kids. The youngest was about two or three years old. He was not crying, but he was making a protest of some kind. Nevertheless, it made a similar impression on me. This three-year-old was doing the same thing in his own way with the tools he had available to him. He was expressing his own personhood and his own giftedness. As the parents responded they showed their own goodness and what God had created and built into them. At that moment I thought, "God has worked something in me." It had something to do with the Ethiopians. They impacted me in a way that I have not experienced before. I love people in their variety and goodness. Seeing God's created work in people is wonderful.

I do not know those people, their situations, or where they are spiritually or emotionally. I do not know whether one of those kids is going to be a complete delinquent. I have no idea. I do not know which ones God is going to work in through His providence, making them realize that they need a Savior. I do not know which ones are going to accept Him as God's Spirit works in their heart and draws them to Himself. But even though I did not know that, it did not matter, because I had something of a glimpse of all these things that we are trying to understand.

Do not get too focused on negatives. Somewhere in the midst of this God's finger is still there. The beauty is there. The beauty is in those people. The beauty is in the Muslim man we met who does not

know God. Yes, he is HIV positive and he is dying, but that does not have much to do with it. There was something of beauty in that man. There was something of God's image in that man. The glory of God was shining through. Even though he is wrong about things and does not know the Lord, God's handiwork and glory were still represented. I have missed that for too many years by looking at the negatives and the lack of faith. I have not loved people as well as I should. That should be the prayer for every one of us. Let us look at this so that we can become more and more the people God wants us to be. That is the bottom line. Know that He made each one of you exactly the way you are. All the messed up parts, He is all right with. He is going to use them, because that is what He is up to.