

Parenting and Fusion

I want to take up a number of points in this lesson. Let me begin by mentioning a principle of parenting. This often comes up around the time of the death of a loved one. In those circumstances we often try to protect our kids. But you cannot do that. It is often destructive if you try. It is much better for people to experience things. God has made us in a way that we are able to take in as much as He gives us. So the principle is, do not protect your kids from these things. Comfort them. Be there for them. Hold them. Be present. Talk to them. Let them talk and ask questions. You do not have to have all the answers, but enter into those processes rather than try to protect them. This actually ties into one of Edwin Friedman's principles about secrets, which we discussed in an earlier lesson. Often when parents think that they are protecting their kids, they are really trying to protect themselves.

Let me mention the issue of grief for a moment. One of the things Friedman says about grief is that it is proportional to the unresolved residue in the relationship. If there are unresolved issues in the relationship, the grief will be tougher. The other counseling professor at Covenant Seminary, Richard Winter, made a comment when his father died that reminded me of this. Richard is from England, and his dad was still living there. So Richard traveled to England to see his dad when he was approaching death. Richard was able to be there for a certain period of time, but his dad continued to linger, and Richard had to come back. That is a hard thing to do, knowing that you will not likely see your dad again. But Richard said something along these lines, "The good thing is that we do not have anything left to say." There were not things that were left unsaid. They had been able to do that through the course of their lives. So while grief is never easy, it is not as tough as when there are things that really need to be said.

Another aspect of change that I did not mention in a previous lesson is the importance of finding a different perspective. As you do your genogram, a big goal is to find a different perspective on issues that may have been difficult. It is difficult because you do not know beforehand what information will bring a shift in perspective.

It is much harder to do your own genogram than someone else's, because you are involved in it. It is tough to be objective about the situations that you are in. It is hard for a fish to describe water, because it is in it. It is much easier to do a genogram for other people. It is easier to look at the situation objectively. For instance, when a couple is having serious trouble, they often come to counseling even though one of them has already decided they are out of the marriage. They want a divorce. But they come to counseling so that they can say they tried everything. They are not really there to work on the marriage. They are there so they can say they have done this. But the other spouse does not know that. As a counselor you can see these things that they cannot. One spouse thinks they are coming to counseling to work on the marriage while the other spouse has already left the marriage, so to speak. But that is easier to observe than when you are in the middle of it yourself. That is why when you do your own genogram sometimes you have to make guesses. Start with the information you have and then make educated guesses about key relationships. That may be the best that you can ever do. You end up doing the same things when you are counseling others. You hear certain things, but the information is incomplete, so you make an educated guess as to what is happening. That is appropriate. You need to do that sometimes. You especially have to do that with your own family, because things are easier to see with others than they are with our own families.

Sometimes people feel guilty about writing things on a genogram that they are not absolutely sure about. That is all right. In a way you are bound to feel guilty because these things are secrets. It is not that

people have colluded together to keep the secret. It is rather that that is simply how the family has decided to handle difficult situations. If you have a family that exhibits some of these patterns and you start to name them in your genogram, you will start to feel discomfort about that. Sometimes the best result from doing a genogram is that you end up with some really good questions rather than answers. Perhaps you end up with a good hypothesis.

I have very little data, for instance, on anyone on my father's side of the family past my own father. I know my grandfather's name and his social security number. I also know that when his wife died, he was going to give the kids up for adoption because he did not think he could handle it. He ended up giving them to his grandparents. Then he moved to Salt Lake City, Utah, became a Mormon, and had more kids, though I do not know how many. I know the name of one of them, but that is all I know. I do not know where he came from. I do not know any history apart from that. But in looking at the little bit I know about my father, his brother, my brothers, and I, and knowing about the women they all married and what their families were like, I have a few guesses about the men on this side of the family. I have no idea whether they are right or wrong, but I think they are fairly good guesses. They feel like they would fit. There could be exceptions, but I doubt it.

It is all right to do that. It is all right to hypothesize about how your great grandparents might have been, for instance, because of how your family is today. It is important to emphasize, however, that a genogram is not a genealogy. It is not a family history. The facts are not as important as the analysis.

Let us talk about fusion. What is the difference between a strong bond between two people and fusion between them? I think that is very hard to identify. I am sure it is a fuzzy line. There is probably overlapping territory. People who have strong bonds probably look like they are fused at times, but they do not stay there. They do not get stuck there. When fusion occurs people get stuck in that place. Identifying this, however, is more intuitive than definitive, for me. A key distinguishing factor that you will begin to see is the destructiveness of fusion. Helplessness and the inability to know oneself are key things to look for. If you are talking with a family and it is very clear that an adult child cannot express the way he is, that is a good sign.

I am thinking about a student whom I supervised as a counseling intern many years ago. She was a single girl in her mid 20s. Any time there was talk about her nuclear family, if I asked her what she would be doing, all of her answers used the pronoun "we." I am not sure I ever heard her say "I," especially in the context of her nuclear family. It made me uncomfortable. It would probably make anyone uncomfortable. Even the confusion about who she was talking about was uncomfortable. I asked a question about her, and she answered by saying "we." I would think, "Who just joined in this conversation?" The more I listened, the more I learned that there was a lot of fusion. She had graduated from college, moved back home, and worked in her dad's business. It was amazing that she actually left town to come to school. I think that was very hard. Decisions were made together. The family thinks together. Bowen calls this an undifferentiated ego-mass. In my head I actually picture brains that have melted together. They think and feel together. It is very difficult for a person to do things differently. If you ask one family member a question about what they are thinking and feeling, and if you ask another family member the same question, you get the same answers. You may know that there are different factors involved that should lead to different answers, but you get the same answers. There is no safety for a person to be their own self.

This is a hard issue, because sameness can be legitimate. Sameness does not have to be enmeshment. There can be strong bonds. People are alike. In my family we have two children. One is much more like my wife, and the other is much more like me. My wife has an easier time understanding the one child

than the other. They have an easier relationship. It is easier for me to understand the other child, and that is an easier relationship. The places where my wife and I struggle are similar to the kinds of places that I struggle with my one daughter, who is much more like my wife. And there can be a little of that toxic nostalgia around so that I can react to the things that my daughter does that are the same things that my wife does. I can react to those things unfairly. What my reaction is really saying is, "Do not be like your mother." That is not fair, of course. It is my issue. If my wife and I are not wise about it, there could be enmeshment with our daughters who are like us, because it is an easier relationship. There is something that is rewarding about the fact that you and your child think alike. In one sense, my one daughter and I are closer in temperament than my wife and I. The potential is there for two interlocking triangles to form. So we have to work against it. It could easily become enmeshment. One of those daughters lives with us now. So we have the potential for the triangle to get intensified. You have to pay attention to that.

Sameness can be a real advantage and a good thing. It is nice and comfortable. You have to be careful, though. I am not sure that we know when we cross the line and things are getting too close. It is easier observing it from the outside than when you are in it. One key when you are talking with people is that you start to get a sense that they are having a hard time figuring out for themselves what they think and believe.

A lot of enmeshment happens covertly. Communication experts will tell you that a large percentage of communication happens non-verbally. I do not know what the actual percentage is. I have heard people say it is over 90 percent. Well, if a huge amount of communication is non-verbal, think about how that plays out in a family. Think about how a family shapes people's hearts. Most of that happens without words. So enmeshment can happen without words. Enmeshment can be broken down by speaking up.

One of the difficulties of family counseling is choosing the relationship to focus on. Do you go after the relationship that will be the easiest to make a change in? Or do you go after the relationship where, if change can happen, it will have the most significant impact? It really depends. Pray for wisdom. Recognizing that the family is a system, however, enables you to go after the relationship that will most easily change, because it can impact the other relationships. If there is a child who is acting out, the relationship that I am usually going to go after first is the marriage. I think that will have the greatest impact. However, it may also be the hardest to change.