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FAMILY TIES

Of Bamboo and Mobiles

M E S S A G E S I N M E T A P H O R S

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

Author Stephen Covey says, “Inside each of us is this deep longing for ‘home,’ for the rich, satisfying relationships and interactions of quality family life.”¹

When I think of the importance of nurture and growth in a family, two of my favorite metaphors are the Chinese bamboo tree and the mobile as a human art form.

After the Chinese bamboo tree seed is planted, nothing is seen for four years, except a tiny shoot coming out of a bulb. The growth is under ground in a massive, fibrous root structure that spreads deep and wide. In the fifth year, the miraculous Chinese bamboo tree grows up to eighty feet!

Stephen draws a parallel between the family and the bamboo tree. “You work and you invest time and effort, and you do everything you can possibly do to nurture growth, and sometimes you don’t see anything for weeks, months, or even years. But if you’re patient and keep working and nurturing, that ‘fifth year’ will come, and you will be astonished at the growth and change you see taking place.”

Nearly thirty years ago I met Edith Schaeffer, who co-founded L’Abri Fellowship, an international study center and Christian community in Switzerland. She described a family as a living mobile, different from the handcrafted and art-museum mobiles. “A family is an intricate mobile made up of human personalities,”² she said. I never looked at a mobile the same again.

I treasure her approach to viewing families as precious and beautiful. Her focus was on the beautiful things a family can be, but she was clear that an art form takes work. “The Christian family,” she said, “is a mobile blown by the gentle breeze of the Holy Spirit.” She did not see

this as a romantic idea, but saw it in accordance with what the Bible teaches is possible.

Edith suggested that as each member is born again, and the Holy Spirit dwells within, one can picture not perfection, but a measure of reality in thinking of the Christian family as constantly changing month to month, year to year, with the mix never the same—age wise, interest wise, talent wise, intellect wise. It is never static, discovering fascinating new points of communication as people grow and develop.

There is a beauty and community which can never be obtained unless someone in the family has certainty that the whole art form is more important than one incident, or even a string of incidents. Edith asks, “Have any two people never felt like walking away from each other?”

The difference is that the deep, underlying sense of the importance of family continuity must be stronger than the insistence on perfection. “People throw away what they could have by insisting on perfection, which they cannot have, and looking for it where they will never find it.”

I invite you to consider the messages God may have for you as you consider these two metaphors today.

Susan Murray is an associate professor of family studies who teaches behavioral science and social work at Andrews University. She is a certified family life educator and licensed marriage and family therapist.

1. Covey, Stephen R. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families*. New York: Golden Books (1997)

2. Schaeffer, Edith. *What Is a Family?* Grand Rapids: Baker Book House (1975)

