

INTRODUCTION

WHEN my son was ten and my daughter four, we camped at Blue Stem Lake. In the afternoon Zeke landed a twelve-inch bass and Sara rescued a frog. While my husband played his guitar under a cottonwood, I lay reading on the shore. For dinner we ate hamburgers and beans. In the dark, we roasted marshmallows around a fire. We listened to cicadas and the motor of a small boat. A moon the shape and color of a pumpkin rose over the lake. Sara snuggled into her father and said a line so beautiful that I can quote it fifteen years later: "I'm melting into richness."

Zeke told us about a boy in his karate class who supposedly saved his mother from a mugger. He told us that he fell asleep nights hoping a robber would break in. He said, "Nothing would make me happier than saving our family from bad guys."

As I watched the stars come out and the moon climb into the sky, I thought about four million years of families. Lucky families have always had days like this—days outdoors fishing and swimming, feeling wind and sun, and later, eating together by a fire. A coyote wailed in the distance. We speculated how far away it was. I talked

about the baby coyotes I had for pets when I was young. Jim played guitar and Zeke stirred the fire. I wanted to stop time and keep us this way forever. I felt the ghosts of a million mothers, each of whom must have had this same thought.

* * *

MAGICAL moments are embedded in ordinary life. The joys and sorrows of family are as mixed together as salt and pepper can be mixed, and as inseparable. Those same children who delighted me around the campfire drove me wild a few years later when they were teens. Even today they can irritate me and vice versa on a regular basis. I have memories of sad and crazy times in both my family of origin and my current family. As a child I was upset by family problems, and as an adult I have lost a great deal of sleep worrying about my children. But I prefer to recall the happy memories.

I remember the day my husband invented car dancing. We were driving through snow to Minneapolis. The children were tired of car games and each other. Jim put on a Van Morrison tape and announced a car dancing competition. As Van sang, "The caravan is painted red and white, everyone is staying overnight," Jim twisted and swayed as much as he could while driving a van. Soon the kids were dancing in their seat belts, raising their hands high, oohing with the chorus. We moaned our way across the Middle Raccoon River in Iowa as the sun went down. Then it was dark and we were in Minnesota. We had all won the dance contest.

When I was five, my cousin Steve taught me to fish near his Ozark home. He baited my hook and took off the bluegills and perch that I pulled in one after another. I remember Sunday dinners at my grandparents' home in eastern Colorado. Twenty people gathered around a table heaped with chicken, roast beef, homemade biscuits and watermelon pickles. My grandfather said grace, my

grandmother poured tea into tall, sweaty glasses. I remember my mother in the 1950s, driving to see patients along county roads and telling stories of her childhood. And I can see Aunt Betty crawling through the Idaho woods for huckleberries to make pies. I see my aunt Margaret at sunset reciting poetry about the "wine dark sea" and the ocean that is "always changing and always the same."

At a family reunion, I looked at pictures of my father and his mother, both of whom died long ago. My father's eyes reminded me of my son's, my daughter's body was that of my grandmother. Talking on the porch late into the night with my brothers, we had the same forty-year-old memories of snapping-turtle soup and black beans around a smoky campfire. As we talked of those times, the same ripples of expression flashed across our faces.

Since I was a little girl, I have struggled to make sense of my family, which was noisy, complicated and filled with intense, emotional people. They argued politics and religion and they made diverse decisions about love and work. I tried to figure out how everyone was wired. Why did certain people fall in love? Why was one cousin spoiled and hard to get along with and another wonderfully patient with his younger siblings? Why did one uncle drink so much? Why did one family forbid rock and roll?

When I went to college, I majored in anthropology. I wanted to understand why we do what we do. Why do we value what we value and hate what we hate? How do cultures get organized in certain ways? Who makes the rules? What part of family business is unique to the family and what part is cultural? How does being Irish and Scottish shape our family? How does coming from poor, rural areas such as the Ozark Mountains and eastern Colorado affect our point of view? Later, I went to graduate school in psychology and became a therapist. My adult work is really the continuation of a lifelong quest to figure out "what the deal is."

The answers are complicated, elusive and partial. Honest parents don't always raise honest kids. Abusive parents sometimes have wonderful children. One of the most wholesome girls I know lives with her alcoholic mother in a small apartment. Some of the unhappiest children I know come from the families of sensitive, child-focused parents. Children who are loved and protected sometimes grow up strong and well adjusted and sometimes they grow into hothouse flowers who suffer from "the princess and the pea syndrome."

Children who are ignored sometimes become as strong, beautiful and resilient as sunflowers and sometimes they turn into dangerous psychopaths. Well-meaning families sometimes have extraordinarily bad luck with their children, while slapdash parents may raise highly successful children.

Not all families are healthy and not all parents good at their jobs. I have seen terrible things happen in families. My first client was a young woman who had grown up on a farm and was repeatedly raped by her father and brothers. Another client's mother had murdered her brother. Currently I'm seeing a woman who has a crooked back because her father threw her across a room when she was two years old. I've seen hate-filled, violent families, families with addictions, families in which the parents were not grown-ups and the children had no childhoods and families in which the children were starving for moral nourishment. I know how destructive families can be, how stifling and riddled with pain. But I also know that this is not the whole, or even the most interesting part, of the story.

Families are ancient institutions. Since humans crossed the savannas in search of food, our families have been unique. Human brains are so large that our heads can barely make it through the birth canal. We are born helpless and dependent, and after birth our brains continue to grow. Unlike monkeys, who can run around within hours of birth and are self-sufficient within a few months, it takes humans in even the simplest environments more than a

decade to be independent of parents. Homo sapiens needs families to survive.

We need our families but we don't always behave well in them. We love and hate them, yearn for them deep in our bones and feel so disgusted with them that we want to spit. Like all interesting and important phenomena—jazz, Shakespeare or Zen—families are sad and happy, complicated and simple, and full of victories and failures. Families remind me of what Greg Brown wrote about life, that sometimes it seems as if we should be grateful for every breath and other times it's a miracle that we don't all drink ourselves to death. They make me think of lines from a Leonard Cohen song. In "Dance Me to the Eve of Love" he writes, "Raise the tent of shelter although every thread is torn." Buddhists say that families are filled with ten thousand joys and ten thousand sorrows.

It's impossible to capture the diversity or complexity of families. I'll attempt something considerably less ambitious—to explore how our culture affects the mental health of families that I know. This book tells stories of the families I see in my Midwestern city. My goal is to encourage discussions about what families need. The book isn't a how-to book but is, I hope, a how-to-think book. I discuss fewer solutions than I do problems. I believe the solutions will be found family by family and community by community.

This book will sympathize with families' efforts to survive a difficult era. It is for the vast majority of parents who are trying hard to do the right thing. It will connect family problems to larger cultural forces. My goal is to help readers be anthropologists, who look at the broader culture and ask—How does the culture affect the life of my family? What values does it teach? What behaviors does it influence? How does the culture define the good and important? I want to help families become more conscious of how they are shaped by the culture in which they live.

I write about families because I love them. When I travel alone

far from home, I think of my children's faces to calm myself down. I picture them smiling, studying, playing violin or volleyball. I picture my husband's face bent over his guitar or relaxed and fresh, the way it is on the mornings when we drink coffee together on the front porch. Those faces are my mandalas. They comfort and secure me. The faces of those we love are the first, the primal, mandalas for us all.

PART ONE



The Crisis

THE first section of this book examines the loss of old-fashioned communities, the rise of an electronic community and a consumer mentality, and the influence of popular psychology. I want to explore the relationship between this family ecology and family well-being. I tell two main stories, that of my grandparents, who homesteaded on the harsh plains of Colorado in the early part of this century, and that of a family I saw recently in therapy. I'll compare these families on a variety of dimensions—their relationship to the broader culture, their tools, their media exposure, the importance of time and money and the involvement of mental health professionals in their lives.

These are both good families trying to do their best, but the different times present them with different challenges. The Pages had problems of privation, the Copelands the problems of plenty. The Page family had time but no money, the Copelands have money but no time. It is hard to argue that the 1930s were idyllic. They were times of poverty, disease and backbreaking labor. My grandparents told stories of children dying of rattlesnake bites and cholera. An old

couple from Kit Carson County was found dead in their bed, an empty box of cereal between them. But I will argue that the Pages knew what the enemy was—tornadoes, droughts, locusts, blizzards. Their worst enemies were external to the family and they could fight against them together. This family had the closeness of people who worked in subzero weather together.

The Copelands were relatively protected from the natural elements, but they had new hostile elements—crime, isolation and a continuous flow of information that was impossible to process. Brian did work he hated at a corporation that was downsizing. Sandi, whose work was more rewarding, came home tired with “second shift” work awaiting her. Their oldest daughter was anorexic, their second daughter was acting up and their son was afraid to go to school. They’d been told they were dysfunctional.

The Copelands were more prosperous and had more choices, but they were thirsty in the rain. They were stressed as individuals and as a unit. They didn’t know each other very well and rarely had time together. The Copelands were less clear about who the enemy was and sometimes they blamed each other for their pain.

Chapter Five explores how tools and electronic media have changed communities and families. Chapters Six and Seven examine the role that therapy has played in the lives of families. I outline some of the mistakes that we therapists have made and offer some suggestions for a more family-helping therapy.

1

Thirsty in the Rain

“Events are in the saddle and ride mankind.”

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

We have a six-foot corn plant in our office waiting room. It’s not a good environment for a plant. There are no windows, little kids tear off its leaves, and we therapists, who are known for our nurturing abilities, keep forgetting to water it and dust its leaves. Sometime in the late 1980s we gave it plant food. But month after month, as old leaves turn brown and drop off, fresh green leaves sprout from its center. The corn plant is a good metaphor for families—it’s plain, not at all exotic or even attractive, and it’s in a hostile environment. But it’s surviving.

Our culture is at war with families. Families in America have been invaded by technology, mocked or “kitschified” by the media, isolated by demographic changes, pounded by economic forces and hurt by corporate values. They have been frightened by crime in their neighborhoods. Parents worry about their children’s physical safety and children are afraid of strangers. When I speak to or smile at children I don’t know, I see fear and doubt in their eyes. I