

HomeWord

Dedicated to household harmony & family faith

Sharing About

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- Generation Flip-Flop

Breadth Perception by Rev. Tom Greisen, Mary Jo Pedersen, and Rev. Ron Wasikowski

Family life is far from clean and tidy. On a regular basis, we all experience the messiness and pain of living and growing up together. In the midst of such conflicts, we are tempted to think that this struggle will never end, that we have failed.

Family has a history, and not all parts of that history look positive. In the broad sweep of things, individual moments and phases, though sometimes frustrating, demonstrate that families are challenged to see with breadth perception. Breadth perception is recognizing and placing a particular moment within the context of history. Breadth perception allows a sower to see the seed at every stage of its development, from sprouting to yielding fruit. Each seed has a cycle of growth; so too does the family.

The intimate community of family includes both the struggling and the coming together, the fighting and the friendships. Breadth perception helps us parents develop a spirituality that combines fragile trust in God’s power with confidence in our own ability to live through difficult times.

Consider this story:

I have been a single parent for over twenty years, starting when my children were ages three, two, and one. One of the most difficult situations for me to deal with was the ongoing sibling rivalry between my two sons. They really had a terrible case. I know that I felt guilty and angry that

they didn't have a father to help them deal with “male stuff” and each other. The tension decreased when one of them entered the service and was away from home.

It wasn't until after the Christmas holidays one year that the two of them were able to—or forced to—spend some time together, and they treated each other as responsible, caring adults. We were all sitting together at the dinner table, and they began to talk about the fierce fights they had as kids and laugh about them. I was even able to share how responsible I felt for them and their fighting and how worried I used to feel. All the prayers I had prayed for them had not been unheard (although with my fragile trust, I often wondered), and we established a new family relationship with one another, an adult one based on today. We also welcomed a new brother into our family—my daughter's husband.

We had come together to a new place, very different from the struggle of growing up, but very much still a family. The bond is there even though each has his or her own life. I thank God for that—for their reaching adulthood, and for my sanity through it all!

This mother finally sees her boys' rivalry in the context of their growth to adulthood. For twenty years she had to deal with the very real temptation to narrow her vision, to measure the worth of her children and

There is a certain movement in this story, namely, that difficult moments can bring us to “a new place, very different from the struggle,” which is in fact a better place. As you recall instances of conflict or frustration in your family, identify the temptations you faced. How has time given you a different perspective on any of your family conflicts or frustrations?

her own effectiveness as a parent by what she could see on any given day, week, or month.

For this family, the fighting between brothers is one phase in the ongoing history of its development. Just as the seed is not judged until harvest, so too the relationship of these brothers is not judged solely on adolescent sibling rivalry. Breadth perception allows a parent to see an adolescent as an “unfinished” creation, and to be patient and faithful to the process going on in that child. This mother was faithful to what she was sowing, continuing to pray in “fragile trust” to God, with whom she is a coparent.

(This article is an excerpt from the authors' forthcoming book *More Than Meets the Eye: Finding God in the Creases and Folds of Family Life*. The book will be available from Saint Mary's Press in the fall of 2000.)

The Yahtzee Game

by Tina Brennan

It is Monday, and my drive home from work has given me time to ponder what I might find when I get there. I have left my mother, who is visiting (and in the beginning stages of dementia), at home in the care of her three grandsons.

I walk up the brick path to the back door, the work day falling behind with each step. The sound of dice rattling and rolling floats out the screen door, accompanied by a shout: "Go for the full house, MomMom!"

As I survey the scene at the breakfast room table, flashbacks, surprise, and delight all fight for room in my weary head. Perched around a Yahtzee game at the table is twenty-three-year-old Kevin, twenty-year-old Chris, sixteen-year-old Ryan, and eighty-four-year-old MomMom, who is grinning smugly while being coached by the trio.

Gently the boys help her make choices in combinations, add up her score, and lend encouragement. Looks dart from one to the other when a little more patience is needed.

My heart sighs, the years rush backward, and images of a day long ago drift in: *Three little boys sit at the same table, the youngest, four-year-old Ryan, perched in his youth chair so that he can roll the dice and see what is going on.*

Gently MomMom tells him when to roll again and raises eyebrows at his brothers, Kevin and Chris, for patience as once more they have to wait for him while he decides what to go for.

"Go for the full house, Ryan!" coaches MomMom, explaining which numbers he needs.

That one sentence triggers more than my heart can stand. I need time to sort. How did we all flip-flop, and when?

My mind snaps back to this morning and the tale unfolds itself. I lay the clothes neatly on the bed: slacks, shirt, shoes, etc. Will the day turn cool? Maybe a sweater or sweatshirt for later. I put out a cereal bowl, juice, half of a banana, instant coffee, and a cup and saucer. I'll let her pick out the cereal—she likes to do that.

It's time to get her up and moving before I leave for work. I pat her shoulder and answer questions as the cobwebs untangle as much as they will between what is and what was. "You're at my house in Washington. No, Daddy isn't here, he died fifteen years ago. Yes, it's really true."

We go through the usual protests over the medicine, and I watch as she takes each pill. She pockets one, and I fish it out to another look of disgust.

Finally I'm ready to go, giving the guys at home instructions to help her find lunch, let her iron a bit if she wants, and make sure she gets a little rest.

The morning of a day long ago is much the same: *I lay out clothes for Ryan—play clothes and an extra outfit in case Mother wants to take him to the park or store, maybe a little sweatshirt in case the day turns cool.*

I put out a bowl and some juice and tell her to let him pick out his own cereal—he likes to do that.

HomeWord is edited by Leif Kehrwald and is published monthly for parish bulletins and individual households by Family Faith-Life Resources of Saint Mary's Press.

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"Make sure that you watch while he takes his vitamin. Sometimes he puts it in his pocket or feeds it to the dog. It's okay if a few little friends come over to play. A little television would be fine if he or you need some rest. A game of Yahtzee in the late afternoon would probably be fun."

(Tina Brennan, mother of seven and grandmother of four, lives in Yakima, Washington, with her husband of thirty-six years.)

Like a game of Yahtzee, the attic can be a place to find the richness of family history. In her book *Sacred Dwelling*, Wendy Wright reflects on the mystery of the attic.

Attics mutely speak the truth that a family is more than the individuals who inhabit a structure at a specific moment. Families are a complex web of lives stretched across years of generations as well as vast geographical and cultural distances.

An attic's contents—forgotten treasures, souvenirs from long-ago times, belongings once possessed by a deceased aunt or grandparent or cousin—serve to remind us that we are part of a larger organic whole. (In *Spiritual Literacy*, Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat [New York: Scribner, 1996], p. 100)