

Family: A View from the Other Side

I just returned from working with parents in Manila and Singapore. The cities and cultures are both extremely different. Parents in the Philippines worry for their children's safety with a heightened fear of kidnapping in a corrupt society. Singapore parents have no concern about safety in their practically crime-free city-state where the government has such tight control that the consequence of owning a mere 2 grams of illegal drugs is the death penalty. Singaporean parents worry about how their children can achieve academic and career success in a highly competitive society. Singapore is clean and beautiful with little-to-no poverty. Manila is filthy, highly polluted and has the worst poverty I have ever seen. And the people in Manila are some of the loveliest and most generous I have ever met. Whenever I commented on their warmth and hospitality, I heard, "It's the Filipino way."

The common ground across Southeast Asia is the value placed on family. Family is the center of their universe. Extended family is an under-statement. The concept of a young child sleeping in his own room is unheard of. The thirteen-year-old son of a wonderful family we got to know still sleeps in his parents' bed most nights, and *it is not an issue*. In most cases, all members of a family live together, whether in the same room, a compound of buildings or at least very close by. Singapore government offers financial incentives for a young married couple to live within close vicinity of their family. Often the couple goes to live with the husband's family.

Room is always made for an elder. They have *no nursing homes*. If there is no room, a younger member of a family gives up their space to an incoming elder. Where there is room—and I mean enough space for a person to sleep—children live with their families until and often beyond marriage. On Sundays, restaurants are brimming with large tables of families who have a tradition of eating together for that meal, whether at home or in public.

In Singapore, adult children are required to give financial support to their parents, regardless of need. In fact, there is a law that grants a parent the right to sue if the child is not providing sufficiently. Among young adults the question is not *whether* they give money to their parents, only *how much*.

We could easily draw conclusions and find fault with many aspects of such a system where family is more important than the individual, but I found their

unquestioning family bond inspiring. I can only imagine how differently family allegiances are drawn and dealt with in a culture where staying together is a given. I wonder what the world would be like if family, then community, then the workplace were equally as important as the individual. Would we have less greed and power-hungry people? What would the corporation look like if there were equal value placed on the impact of the corporation onto the whole? Would children feel more cared for and thus more responsible to care for others in their family and community?

What inspires me is the family as a team. That each member of the family is just as and no more important than any other member. That the youngest and the eldest are not seen as incomplete or incompetent to contribute equally to the whole. That the whole functions better than the same number of individuals out for themselves.

From the American perspective where family is often scattered hundreds of miles apart, where young parents struggle over managing work and home and are stressed and exhausted because they believe they should do it all, where elders disintegrate in nursing homes and no one learns from their accumulated wisdom because their value is undermined by the value of youth and beauty, and where children sleep alone because it is considered unhealthy for a child to share a bed—all under the banner of independence—a view from the other side is a breath of fresh air.

What can American parents learn from knowing that we do not have the corner on how things must be done and how children must be raised? Might it reduce the pressure we fall under to get it right and go it alone? How can we integrate the “I” and the “we” to build stronger families and thus stronger communities? How can we give our children equal importance, yet not more importance in the family? How can we honor what children and elders have to contribute now, not just in the future or the past?

As the holidays are upon us, family is up. What does family mean to you? Is it a support or a burden? How would relationships be different if you did not have the option of going back home again? What or who can replace family if members are too far away or no longer here? Is blood indeed thicker than water? Or can water be colored to create the picture of support and caring we need?