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# The New Peoplemaking

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by Virginia Satir

Latest: Added Chapter 3

## Book formats

PDF <http://stanlylau.github.io/peoplemaking/book.pdf>

EPUB <http://stanlylau.github.io/peoplemaking/book.epub>

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## Waiting for more chapters?

You may notify me by submitting [this form](#) so that I'm aware of the demand for more chapters.

## Background of creating this ebook

This book is so wonderful that I'd love to share and bring it with me for reference. However, there is no ebook version and it is not a common book available in bookstores. I decided to digitise it a chapter at a time before the official ebook version is out so that more people can benefit from Virginia Satir's work earlier.

This work is **not** to replace the official book and will stop when there is an official ebook available.

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To my daughters, Mary and Ruth, and their  
children - Tina, Barry, Angela, Scott, Julie, John and  
Michael - who helped to texture me,  
and  
to the members of the Avanta Network who came on board  
to create new possibilities in the world.

# Preface

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When *Peoplemaking* was first published in 1972, I invited readers to share their responses to the book and their experiences with it. As a result, I have received hundreds of letters, each containing something useful: thoughtful reflections, impressions, questions, suggestions, and constructive criticisms. People requested new topics as well as an expansion and clarification of old ones.

This revision is my response to you, the readers. You asked me to discuss:

Adolescence  
Life in the older years: retirement and  
transitions  
Peace in the world  
Spirituality

I have added these as new chapters.

You also asked for a deepening of understanding of one-parent, blended, and gay-parent families; healthy pairing; sexuality; and the family of the future. I am adding what I have learned in these past fifteen years, weaving it into the fabric of existing chapters. This book cannot do justice to the full range of concerns in these families, however, and I refer you to the bibliography for further information.

I am immensely gratified that you responded so generously. That means lots of people out there care about families. You may also be pleased to know that *Peoplemaking* has now been translated into many languages, including Japanese, Hebrew, Chinese, and Braille. It is obviously widely read, and I hope you keep writing to me with your reactions.

My basic message has been and is that a strong link exists between life in the family and the kind of adults that that family's children become. Since individuals make up society, it seems very important that we develop the strongest and most congruent people possible. It all starts in the family. In time, having congruent people at the helm will change the character of our society.

*The New Peoplemaking* is one of my efforts to make a positive difference toward

enabling congruent adults. Using many experiences with families all over the world, I have written this book to support, emphasize, educate, and empower the family. We know there are better ways to deal with ourselves and each other. We have only to put them into practice. Each of us who does contributes toward a stronger, more positive world for all of us.

Each of us can make a difference; each of us is needed. The difference we can make begins when we develop high self-esteem as individuals. A big hope I have for this book is that it will help each of us empower and commit ourselves to congruence. Our congruent experiences and modeling will lead to creative ways to understand each other, care for ourselves and each other, and give our children a sturdy foundation from which they can develop strength and wholeness.

It is important to remember that every bit of energy we use to fight with ourselves and each other divides and diffuses the energy we could use for discovery and creativity. After all, when the fight is over, we still have to go back to the bargaining table. We can find easier and more effective ways to handle conflict; we can benefit from it rather than destroying ourselves.

I believe we are living in a most historic time. Most of you who are reading this book will live to see the year 2000. A new evolution in humankind is afoot. All people who are working toward becoming more fully human will be bridges to that new time. We are the transition people.

I see small signs of this everywhere. For the planet and its inhabitants to survive, we must develop our ability to live together in harmony. For me, this means learning how to be congruent, and that leads to becoming more fully human.

Often times, it has to get very dark before the light comes. We are in pretty dark places right now. Our destructive past and the shadow of extinction by nuclear weapons, together with the pain of the present, remind us of our ability to be lethal. We also need to remember that we have the resources to be nurturing. The hope lies in our choices.

It is urgent that we nourish and develop the buds of sanity and humanness that are emerging. What we have going for us is a fantastic know-how of technical development and proven intellectual ability. We know how to probe and investigate practically everything. Our challenge now is to develop human beings with values moral, ethical, and humanistic that can effectively utilize this development. When we achieve that, we will be able to enjoy this most wonderful planet and the life that inhabits it.

WE ARE ON THE WAY.

## Editor's Note

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To me, Virginia Satir's writings are like homemade bread. They are yeasty, hearty, and nourishing. They promise much, taste wonderful, digest well, and thoroughly satisfy.

So why revise this book? Virginia describes the new material in her preface. I want to emphasize her devotion to peace in the world. By dipping into her own spiritual life, Virginia courageously tackles the difficult task of writing about peace and spirituality.

Working with Virginia is a blessing for which I am deeply grateful. I also wish to thank Ann Austin Thompson, who carefully reviewed the manuscript; Betsy and Ellen Stevens, who brought a daughter's and mother's point of view to the new chapter on adolescence; and M. Ruth Whitcomb, who particularly attended to the chapter "The Later Years.

*June Y. Schwartz*

# 1. Introduction

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When I was five, I decided that when I grew up I'd be a "children's detective on parents." I didn't quite know what I would look for, but I realized a lot went on in families that didn't meet the eye. There were a lot of puzzles I did not know how to understand.



Now many years later, after working with some thousands of families, I find there are still a lot of puzzles. I have learned from my work, and learning opens up new possibilities and new directions for discovery. It is now clear to me that the family is a microcosm of the world. To understand the world, we can study the family: issues such as power, intimacy, autonomy, trust, and communication skills are vital parts underlying how we live in the world. To change the world is to change the family.

Family life is something like an iceberg: most people are aware of only about one-tenth of what is going on — the tenth that they can see and hear. Some suspect these may be more, but they don't know what and have no idea how to find out. Not knowing can set the family on a dangerous course. Just as a sailor's fate depends on knowing



that the bulk of the iceberg is under the water, so a family's fate depends on understanding the feelings and needs that lie beneath everyday family events. (What goes on *under* the table?)



Through the years I have also found ways to approach solutions to many puzzles. I would like to share them with you in this book. In the chapters that follow we will be looking at the underside of the iceberg.

In this age of expanding knowledge about this very small world of elementary particles and this very large world of extragalactic astronomy, we are also learning new things about people's relationships with people. I believe that historians a thousand years from now will point to our time as the beginning of a new era in the development of humankind, the time when people began to live more comfortably with their humanity.

Over the years I have developed a picture of what human beings living humanly are like. They are people who understand, value, and develop their bodies, finding them beautiful and useful. They are real and honest to and about themselves and others; they are loving and kind to themselves and others. People living humanly are willing to take

risks, to be creative, to manifest competence, and to change when the situation calls for it. They find ways to accommodate what is new and different, keeping that part of the old that is still useful and discarding what is not.

When you add all this up, you have physically healthy, mentally alert, feeling, loving, playful, authentic, creative, productive, responsible human beings. These are people who can stand on their own two feet, love deeply, and fight fairly and effectively. They can be on equally good terms with both their tenderness and their toughness, and can know the difference between them.

The family is the context in which a person with such dimensions develops. And the adults in charge are the *peoplemakers*.

In my years as a family therapist, I have found that four aspects of family life keep popping up:

The feelings and ideas one has about oneself, which I call *self-worth*

The ways people use to work out meaning with one another, which I call *communication*

The rules people use for how they should feel and act, which eventually develop into what I call the *family system*

The way people relate to other people and institutions outside the family, which I call the link to *society*.

No matter what kind of problem first led a family into my office — whether an unfaithful wife or depressed husband, a delinquent daughter or a schizophrenic son — I soon found that the prescription was the same. To relieve their family pain, some way had to be found to change these four key factors. In all the troubled families I noticed that:

Self-worth was low.

Communication was indirect, vague, and not really honest.

Rules were rigid, inhuman, nonnegotiable, and everlasting.

The family's link to society was fearful, placating, and blaming.

I have had the joy of knowing relatively untroubled families, especially in my workshops where families develop their nurturing potential. In these vital and nurturing families, I consistently see a different pattern:

Self-worth is high.

Communication is direct, clear, specific, and honest.

Rules are flexible, human, appropriate, and subject to change.

The link to society is open and hopeful, and is based on choice.

The changes all rest on new learnings, new awareness and a new consciousness. Everyone can achieve these.

No matter where a surgeon studies medicine, he can operate on any human being anywhere in the world, because the internal organs and the limbs will be in relatively the same place. Through my work with families, troubled and nurturing, in most of the continents of the world, I have learned that families everywhere deal with the same issues. In all families.

*Every person has a feeling of worth, positive or negative;* the question is,

Which is it?

*Every person communicates;* the question is,

How, and what happens as a result?

*Every person follows rules;* the question is,

What kind, and how well do they work for her, or him?

*Every person is linked to society;* the question is,

In what way, and what are the results?

These things are true whether the family is a natural one, in which the man and woman who sired and conceived the child continue to care for that child until the child is grown; a *one-parent* family, in which one parent leaves the family by death, divorce, or

desertion, and all of the parenting is done by the remaining parent; a *blended* family, whose children are parented by step-, adoptive, foster, or gay parents; or an *institutional* family, in which groups of adults rear groups of children, as in institutions, communes, or extended families. Today, children are being brought up in many configurations.

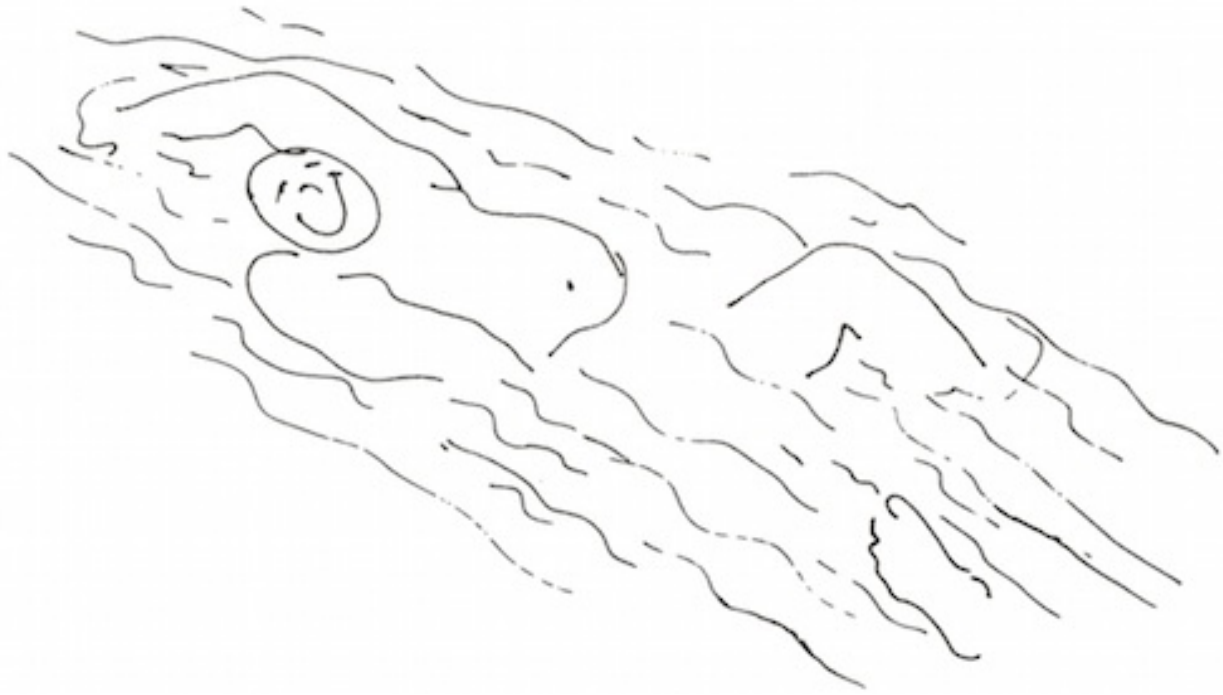
Each of these family forms has its own special problems and possibilities, and we will return to them later. Basically, the same forces will be at work in all of them: *self-worth, communication, rules and links to society*.

This book will help you discover how these elements operate in your own family and point to some new directions you can take to change. Think of my words as the voice of someone who has accumulated experience from sharing the happiness and sorrow, the hurt and anger, and the love, of many families, including my own.

This book is not about blaming parents. People are always doing the best they can. Developing a family is the hardest, most complicated job in the world. The very fact that you are reading this tells me that you care about yourself and the well-being of your family. I hope we can discover a better life together as a family — that we can really experience seeing the lights come on in each other's eyes when we meet.

Relationships are the living links that join family members. Through exploring the many parts of these relationships, you can come to an understanding of the system in which you now live and create new vitality and joy of teamwork with one another.

From time to time, as you read, you will come upon suggested experiments or exercises designed to give you new experiences and new ways to understand what may be happening to you. I hope you will do each one as you come to it, even if at first it seems simple or foolish. Knowing something begins a change; experiencing makes it happen. These experiments are positive, concrete steps your family can take to become less troubled and more nurturing. The more members of your family who take part, the more effective the results will be. Remember, you learn to swim better when you get into the water.



If you feel shy or doubtful about inviting family members to participate in these exercises with you, become thoroughly familiar with what you are asking, feel it from your heart, and present your wish simply and directly. If you feel enthusiastic and hopeful about what you are asking, you will probably communicate a sense of excitement, which will make the invitation attractive and encourage your family to go along with you. By setting your request in a simple, straightforward question — "Will you participate with me in an experiment that I think might be useful to us?" — you maximize the opportunity for a positive response.

Badgering, demanding, or nagging people to go along turns the transaction into a power struggle, which usually works in the opposite direction from what one is trying to accomplish. Things may be so ruptured at this point that nothing can be done. However, chances are good that if your family members still live under the same roof, they will be willing to at least try if they are approached properly. Have patience and faith.

I have seen much pain in families. Each family has moved me deeply. Through this book I hope to ease that pain in families whom I may never have a chance to meet personally. In doing so, I also hope to present the pain from continuing into the families their children will form. Some human pain is unavoidable, of course. I see two kinds of pain: one is the pain of recognition of problems, and the other is the pain of blame. The first we can't avoid; the second we can. We can direct our effects to change what we can and to work out creative ways to live with what we can't change.

#### THE SERENITY PRAYER

God grant me the serenity to accept  
the things I cannot change,  
Courage to change the things I can,  
And wisdom to know the difference.

— *Reinhold Niebuhr*

Just reading this book may evoke some or both kinds of pain for you because it can bring back memories. After all, facing ourselves and learning how to take some responsibility for ourselves have their painful moments. If you think there may be a better way of living together as a family than the way you are living now, though, you'll also find this book rewarding.

## 2. What's *Your* Family Like?

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*Does it feel good to you to live in your family right now?* This question seemed not to have occurred to most of the families I have worked with until I posed it. Living together was something they took for granted. If no family crisis was apparent, everyone assumed everyone else was satisfied. Perhaps many family members didn't dare face such a question. They felt stuck in the family, for better or for worse, and knew no ways to change things.

*Do you feel you are living with friends, people you like and trust, and who like and trust you?*

This question usually brought the same puzzled replies. "Geee, I've never thought about that; they're just my family" — as though family members were somehow different from people!

*Is it fun and exciting to be a member of your family?*

Yes, there really are families whose members find home one of the most interesting and rewarding places they can be. But many people live year after year in families that are a threat, a burden, or a bore.

If you can answer "yes" to these three questions, I am certain you live in what I call a nurturing family. If you answer "no" or "not often," you probably live in a family that is more or less troubled. This does not mean that you have a bad family. It only means that people aren't very happy and have not learned way to love and value one another openly.

After knowing hundreds of families, I find that each one can be placed somewhere along a scale from very nurturing to very troubled. I see many similarities in the way nurturing families operate. Troubled families, too, no matter what their problems, seem to have much in common. I would thus like to draw for you a word picture of these two types of families, as I have observed them. Of course, neither picture will fit any specific family exactly, but in one or other you may recognize some part of your own family in action.

The atmosphere in a troubled family is easy to feel. Whenever I am with such family,

I quickly sense discomfort. Sometimes it feels cold, as if everyone were frozen; the atmosphere is extremely polite, and everyone is obviously bored. Sometimes it feels as if everything were constantly spinning, like a top; I get dizzy and can't find my balance. Or it may be an atmosphere of foreboding, like the lull before a storm, when thunder may crash and lightning strike at any moment. Sometimes the air is full of secrecy. Sometimes I feel very sad and cannot find an obvious reason. I realise that's because the sources are covered up.

When I am in any of these troubled atmospheres, my body reacts violently. My stomach feels queasy; my back and shoulders soon ache, as does my head. I used to wonder if the bodies of these family members responded as mine did. Later, when I knew them better and they became free enough to tell me what life was like in their family, I learned that they did indeed have the same sensations. After having this kind of experience over and over again, I began to understand why so many members of troubled families were beset with physical ills. Their bodies were simply reacting humanly to a very inhuman atmosphere.

Perhaps you will find the reactions I describe here surprising. Everybody — every body — has physical reactions to individuals around him or her. Many people are not aware of it: we were taught as we grew up to turn off these feelings. With years of practice we may turn them off so successfully that we are totally unaware of reacting until, hours later, we have a headache, an aching shoulder, or an upset stomach. Even then we may not understand why. As a therapist I have learned to be tuned in to these feelings in myself and to recognise signs of them in other people. They tell me a good deal about what is actually going on. I hope this book will help you learn to recognize these useful clues in yourself. The first step of change is to recognise what is happening.

In troubled families, people's bodies and faces tell of their plight. Bodies are either stiff and tight, or slouchy. Faces look sullen, or sad, or blank like masks. Eyes look down and past people. Ears obviously don't hear. Voices are either harsh and strident, or barely audible.

There is little evidence of friendship among individual family members, little joy in one another. The family seems to stay together through duty, with people just trying to tolerate one another. Now and then I see someone in a troubled family





make and effort at lightness, but the words fall with a thud. More often humour is caustic, sarcastic, even cruel. The adults are so busy telling the child and each other what to do and what not to do that they never get to enjoy themselves as persons. It often comes as a great surprise to members of troubled families that they actually can enjoy one another.

Seeing whole families who were trying to live together in such an atmosphere, I used to wonder how they managed to survive. I discovered that in some families, people simply avoided one another; they became so involved in work and other outside activities that they rarely had much real contact with other family members. It is very easy to live with others in a house and not see them for days.

It is a sad experience for me to be with these families. I see the hopelessness, the helplessness, the loneliness. I see the bravery of people trying to cover up — a bravery that can prematurely kill. Some still cling to a little hope, some still bellow or nag or whine at each other. Others no longer care. These people go on year after year, enduring misery themselves or, in their desperation, inflicting it on others. I could never go on seeing these families unless I had hope they could change, and most of them have. The family can be the place where one finds love and understanding and support, even when all else fails; where we can be refreshed and recharged to cope more effectively with the world outside. But for millions of troubled families, this is merely a dream.

In our urban, industrial society, the institutions we live with have been designed to be practical, efficient, economical, profitable — but rarely to protect and serve the human part of human beings. Nearly everyone experiences either poverty, discrimination, pressure, or other negative consequences of our inhuman social institutions. For people troubled families, who find inhuman conditions at home, too, these difficulties are even harder to bear.

No one would intentionally pick this troubled way of living. Families accept it only because they know of no other way.

*Stop reading for a few minutes and think about some families you know that would fit the description “troubled.” Did the family you grew up in have some of these characteristics: Was your family at times cold, deadening, super polite, secretive, confusing? What are the characteristics of the family you are living in now? Can you discover any signs of trouble that you haven’t been aware of before?*

How different it is to be in a nurturing family! Immediately, I can sense the aliveness, the genuineness, honesty, and love. I feel the heart and soul present as well as the head. People demonstrate their loving, their intellect, and their respect for life.

I feel that if I lived in such a family, I would be listened to and would be interested in listening to others; I would be considered and would wish to consider others. I could openly show my affection as well as my pain and disapproval. I wouldn’t be afraid to take risks because everyone in my family would realise that some mistakes are bound to come with my risk-taking — that my mistakes are a sign that I am growing. I would feel like a person in my own right — noticed, valued, loved, and clearly asked to notice, value, and love others. I would feel free to respond with humour and laughter when it fits.

One can actually see and hear the vitality in such a family. The bodies are graceful, the facial expressions relaxed. People look at one another, not through one another or at the floor; and they speak in rich, clear voices. A flow and harmony permeate their relations with one another. The children, even as infants, seem open and friendly, and the rest of the family treats them very much as persons.

The houses in which these people live tend to have a lot of light and color. Clearly a place where people live, these homes are planned for their comfort and enjoyment, not as showplaces for the neighbours.

When there is quiet, it is peaceful quiet, not the stillness of fear and caution. When

there is noise, it is the sound of meaningful activity, not the thunder of trying to drown out everyone else. Each person seems to know that he or she will have the chance to be heard. If one's turn doesn't come now, it is only because there isn't time — not because one isn't loved.

People seem comfortable about touching one another and showing their affection, regardless of age. Loving and caring aren't demonstrated by carrying out the garbage, cooking the meals, or bringing home the paycheck. Instead, people show their loving and caring by talking openly and listening with concern, being straight and real with one another, and simply being together.

Members of a nurturing family feel free to tell each other how they feel. Anything can be talked about — the disappointments, fears, hurts, angers, criticisms, as well as the joys and achievements. If Father happens to be bad-humored for some reason, his child can say frankly, "Gee, Dad, you're grouchy tonight." The child isn't afraid that Father will bark back, "How dare you talk to your father that way!" Instead, Father can be frank, too: "I sure am grouchy. I had a terrible day today!"

Nurturing families can make plans. If something interferes with the plan, they can readily make adjustments, often with a sense of humor. This way they are able to handle more of life's problems without panicking. Suppose, for example, that a child drops and breaks a glass. In a troubled family, this accident could lead to a half-hour lecture, a spanking, and perhaps sending the child away in tears. In a



nurturing family, more likely someone would remark, "Well, Johnny, you broke your glass. Did you cut yourself? I'll get you a Band-Aid, and then you can get a broom and sweep up the pieces. I'll get you another glass." If the parent had noticed that Johnny had been holding the glass precariously, he might add, "I think the glass dropped because you didn't have both hands around it." Thus the incident would be used as a learning opportunity (which raises the child's self-worth) rather than as a cause for punishment, which puts that self-worth in question. In the nurturing family it is easy to pick up the message that human life and human feelings are more important than anything else.



These parents see themselves as empowering leaders, not as authoritative bosses. They see their job primarily as one of teaching their children how to be truly human in all situations. They readily acknowledge to the child their poor judgment as well as their good judgment; their hurt, anger, or disappointment as well as their joy. The behavior of these parents matches what they say. How different from the troubled parent who tells the children not to hurt each other, but slaps them whenever displeased.

Parents are people; they are not automatically leaders the day their first child is born. They learn that good leaders are careful of their timing: they watch for an opportunity to talk to their children when they can really be heard. When a child has misbehaved, the father or mother moves physically close to offer support. This helps the offending child overcome fear and guilt feelings and make the best of the teaching the parent is about to offer.

Recently, I saw a mother in a nurturing family handle a troublesome situation very skillfully and humanly. When she noticed that her two sons, ages five and six, were fighting, she calmly separated the boys, took each by the hand, and sat down with one son on either side of her. Still holding their hands, she asked each of them to tell her what was going on; she listened to one and then the other intently. By asking questions she slowly pieced together what had happened: the five-year-old had taken a dime from

the six-year-old's dresser. As the two boys talked about their hurts and feelings of injustice, she helped them make new contact with one another, return the dime to its rightful owner, and pave the way for better ways of dealing with each other. Furthermore, the boys had a good lesson in constructive problem-solving.

Parents in nurturing families know that their children are not intentionally bad. If someone behaves destructively, parents realize some misunderstanding has arisen or someone's self-esteem is dangerously low. They know people learn only when valuing themselves and feeling valued, so they don't respond to behavior in a way that will make people feel devalued. Even when it is possible to change behavior by shaming or punishing, the resulting scar is not easily or quickly healed.

When a child must be corrected, as all children must at one time or another, nurturing parents rely on being clear: asking for information, listening, touching, understanding, using careful timing, and being aware of the child's feelings and natural wishes to learn and to please. These things all help us to be effective teachers. Children learn from the modeling of direct behavior.

Rearing a family is probably the most difficult job in the world. It resembles two business firms merging their respective resources to make and single product. All the potential headaches of that operation are present when an adult male and an adult female join to steer a child from infancy to adulthood. Parents in a nurturing family realize problems come along, simply because life offers them, and they will be alert to creative solutions as each new problem appears. Troubled families, on the other hand, put all their energies into the hopeless attempt to keep problems from happening; when they do happen — and, of course, they always do — these people have no resources left for solving the crisis.

Nurturing parents realize change is inevitable: children change quickly from one stage to another, nurturing adults never stop growing and changing, and the world around us never stands still. They accept change as part of being alive and try to use it creatively to make their families still more nurturing.

*Can you think of a family that you would call nurturing at least part of the time? Can you remember a time recently when your family could be described as nurturing? Try to remember how it felt to be in your family then. Do these times happen often?*

Some people may scoff at my picture of the nurturing family and say it isn't possible for any family to live that way. Unfulfilling family living is so habitual that it's easy to think

there's no other way. To these people I would say, I have had the good fortune to know many nurturing families intimately, and it is possible. The human heart is always seeking love.

Some may protest that there just isn't time to overhaul their family lives. To them I would say, their survival may depend on it. Troubled families make troubled people and thus contribute to the devaluing of self, which is linked to crime, mental illness, alcoholism, drug abuse, poverty, alienated youth, terrorism, and many other social problems. Giving ourselves full permission to make the family a place to develop people who are more truly human will reflect itself in a safer and more humanly responsive world. We can make the family a real place for developing real people. Each of us is a discovery, and each of us makes a difference.

Everyone who holds a position of power or influence in the world was once an infant. How he or she uses power of influence depends largely on what that person learned in the family while growing up. When we help troubled families become nurturing — and nurturing ones become even more nurturing — each person's increased humanity will filter out into government, schools, businesses, religions, and all the other institutions that contribute to the quality of our lives.

I am convinced that any troubled family can become a nurturing one. Most of the things that cause families to be troubled are learned after birth. Since they are learned, they can be unlearned, and new things can be learned in their place. The question is, how?

First, you need to recognize that your family sometimes *is* a troubled family.

Second, you need to forgive yourself for past mistakes and give yourself permission to change, knowing that things can be different.

Third, make a decision to change things.

Fourth, take some action to start the process of change.

As you begin to see the troubles in your family more clearly, it will help you to realize that whatever may have happened in the past represented the best you knew how to do at the time. There is no reason for anyone to go on feeling guilty or blaming others in the family. Chances are that the causes of your family pain have been invisible to all of you — not because you don't want to see them but because either you don't know where to

look or you have been taught to view life through mental glasses that keep you from seeing.

In this book you will begin to take off those glasses and look directly at the things that cause joy or pain in family life. The first is self-worth.





### 3. Self-Worth: The Pot Nobody Watches

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Self-esteem is a concept, an attitude, a feeling, an image; and it is represented by behavior.

When I was a little girl, I lived on a farm in Wisconsin. On our back porch was a huge black iron pot, which had lovely rounded sides and stood on three legs. My mother made her own soap, so for part of the year the pot was filled with soap. When threshing crews came through in the summer, we filled the pot with stew. At other times, my father used it to store manure for my mother's flower beds. We came to call it the "3-S pot." Anyone who wanted to use the pot faced two questions: What is the pot now full of, and how full is it?



Long afterward, when people told me about themselves—whether they felt full, empty, dirty, or even "cracked"—I thought of that old pot. One day many years ago, a family was sitting in my office struggling to find words to tell each other how they felt about themselves. I remembered the black pot and told them the story. Soon the members of the family were talking about their individual "pots," whether they contained feelings of worth or of guilt, shame, or uselessness. They told me later how useful this

metaphor was to them.

Before long this simple shorthand word was helping many families express feelings that had been difficult to talk about before. A father might say, "My pot is high today," and the rest of the family would know that he felt on top of things, full of energy and good spirits, secure in the knowledge that he really mattered. Or a son might say, "I feel low-pot." This told everyone that he felt he did not matter, he felt tired or bored or bruised, not particularly lovable. It might even mean he had always felt he was not good; that he had to take what was handed to him and could not complain.

*Pot* is a plain word in this use, almost a nonsense word. Many of the words professional people use to talk about self-worth sound sterile and lack life-and-breath images. Families often find it easier to express themselves in pot terms and to understand when other people express themselves this way. They seem suddenly more comfortable, released from our culture's taboo against talking about one's feelings. A wife who might hesitate to tell her husband that she feels inadequate, depressed, or worthless can say frankly, "Don't bother me now—my pot is dragging!"

In this book when I say "pot," I mean *self-worth* or *self-esteem*; I use these words interchangeably. (If you prefer another playful word that suits you better, use it.) As I said earlier, every person has a feeling of worth, positive or negative. As with my old family pot, the questions are: is my self-worth negative or positive at this point, and how much of it is there?

Self-esteem is the ability to value one's self and to treat oneself with dignity, love, and reality. Anyone who is loved is open to change. Our bodies are no different. In my many years of teaching young children, treating families of all economic and social levels, meeting people from all walks of life—from all the day-to-day experiences of my profession and personal living, I am convinced that the crucial factor in what happens both *inside* people and *between* people is one's self-worth, one's pot.

Integrity, honesty, responsibility, compassion, love, and competence—all flow easily from people whose self-esteem is high. We feel that we matter, that the world is a better place because we are here. We have faith in our own competence. We are able to ask others for help, yet we believe we can make our own decisions and are, in the end, our own best resources. Appreciating our own worth, we are ready to see and respect the worth of others. We radiate trust and hope. We don't have rules against anything we feel. We also know that we don't have to act on everything we feel. We can choose. Our intelligence directs our actions. We accept all of ourselves as human.

Vital people feel high-pot most of the time. True, all of us experience times when we would just as soon chuck it all, when fatigue overwhelms us and the world has dealt out too many disappointments too quickly, when the problems of life suddenly seem more than we can manage. But vital people treat these temporary low-pot feelings as just what they are: a crisis of the moment. This crisis might well be the birth pains of some new possibility for us. We may feel uncomfortable at the time but do not have to hide. We know we can emerge from this crisis whole.

When people feel they have little worth, they expect to be cheated, stepped on, and depreciated by others. This opens the way to becoming a victim. Expecting the worst, these people invite it and usually get it. To defend themselves, they hide behind a wall of distrust and sink into the terrible feeling of loneliness and isolation. Thus separated



from other people, they become apathetic, indifferent toward themselves and those around them. It is hard for them to see, hear, or think clearly, and therefore they tend to step on and depreciate others. People who feel this way build huge psychological walls behind which they hide, and then defend themselves by denying they are doing this.

Fear is a natural consequence of this distrust and isolation. Fear constricts and blinds us; it keeps us from risking new ways of solving our problems. Instead, we turn to still more self-defeating behavior. (Fear, incidentally, is always fear of some *future* thing. I have observed that as soon as a person confronts or challenges whatever she or he is afraid of in the present, the fear vanishes.)

When persons with constant low-pot feelings experience defeat, they often label

themselves as failures. "I must be worthless or all these terrible things would not be happening to me" is often the inside response. After enough of these reactions, the self is vulnerable to drugs, alcohol, or other flights from coping.

Feeling low is not the same as low pot. Low pot essentially means that when you experience undesirable feelings, you try to behave as though those feelings did not exist. It takes a lot of high self-worth to acknowledge your low feelings.

It is also important to remember that persons of high self-esteem can feel low. The difference is that people who are feeling low don't label themselves as worthless or pretend that their low feelings do not exist. Nor do they project their feeling on someone else. Feeling low is quite natural from time to time. It makes a big difference whether one condemns one's self or sees this low time as a human condition with which one needs to cope. I shall be frequently calling your attention to this process of coping.

Feeling low and not admitting it is a form of lying to yourself and others. Devaluing your feelings this way is a direct link to devaluing yourself, thus deepening the conditions of low pot. Much of what happens to us is the outcome of our attitude. Since it is attitude, we can change it.

*Relax for a moment now. Close your eyes and feel your condition now. How are you feeling about yourself? What has happened or is happening at the moment? How are you responding to what is happening? How are you feeling about how you are responding? If you are feeling tight, give yourself a message of love, physically relax yourself and consciously be in touch with your breathing. Now open your eyes. You will feel stronger as a result.*

This simple remedy will help build your sense of worth: in moments you can change your state of feeling. You then meet any event with a clearer mind and a firmer personal foundation.

*Invite your family members to try the following experiment with you. Take a partner, then tell one another your feelings ("Right now, I feel scared/tight/embarrassed/happy/etc."). Each partner simply thanks the other without judging or commenting. You thus hear one another's feelings so you can know each other better. We need a lot of practice to break the taboo against sharing our feelings. Practice as much as you can with people you trust.*

*Now, tell each other what makes you each feel low, or high. You may find new*

*dimensions to the people you have been living with all these years and feel closer or more real to them as a result. When you have finished the exercise, give yourself permission to share what happened for you.*

An infant coming into the world has no past, no experience in handling itself, no scale on which to judge his or her own worth. The baby must rely on experiences with people and their messages about his or her worth as a person. For the first five or six years, the child's self-esteem is formed almost exclusively by the family. After the child starts school, other influences come into play; the family remains important. Outside forces tend to reinforce the feelings of worth or worthlessness the child learned at home: the confident youngster can weather many failures, in school or among peers; the child of low self-regard can experience many successes yet feel a gnawing doubt about his or her own value. Even one negative experience can have effects out of all proportion to the event.

Every word, facial expression, gesture, or action on the part of a parent gives the child some message about self-worth. It is sad that so many parents don't realize what messages they are sending. A mother may accept the bouquet clutched in her three-year-old's hand and say, "Where did you pick these?"—with her voice and smile implying, "How sweet of you to bring me these! Where do such lovely flowers grow?" This message would strengthen the



feeling of worth. Or she might say, "How pretty!" but add in a judgmental voice, "Did you pick these in Mrs. Randall's garden?", implying that the child was bad to steal them. This message would make the three-year-old feel wicked and worthless.

What kind of self-worth is your family building in the children and reinforcing in the adults? You can begin to find out with this next experiment.

*Tonight, when the family has settled around the table for dinner, notice what is happening to your feelings about yourself when other members speak to you. There will be some remarks to which you have no special response. However, you may be surprised to find that even "Pass the potatoes, please" can give you a feeling of or*

*depreciation, depending on the speaker's tone of voice, facial expression, timing (did the message interrupt you, or ignore something you said?), and how good you are feeling about yourself. If you are feeling good about yourself, you may find that you have a lot of options for how you respond. If you are feeling low, however, you might find that your options are limited (see chapter 6 on communication).*

*Halfway through dinner, change the perspective. Listen to what you are saying to others. Try to be in the other's shoes and imagine how you might feel if you were talked to as you are doing now. Would you, for instance, feel loved and valued?*

*Tomorrow night explain this little game to the other members of the family and invite them to join you. It will be helpful to read this chapter aloud before you do this as a family. After dinner, talk together about what you discovered and how you felt.*

Feelings of worth can flourish only in an atmosphere in which individual differences are appreciated, love is shown openly, mistakes are used for learning, communication is open, rules are flexible, responsibility (matching promise with delivery) is modeled and honesty is practiced—the kind of atmosphere found in a nurturing family. It is no accident that the children of families who practice the above usually feel good about themselves and consequently are loving, physically healthy, and competent.

Conversely, children in troubled families often feel worthless, growing up as they must amid "crooked" communication, inflexible rules, criticism of their different-ness, punishment for their mistakes, and no experience in learning responsibility. Such children are highly at risk of developing destructive behavior toward themselves and/or others. Much of an individual's potential is held in abeyance when this happens. If this has happened to you, I hope you are now taking steps to free that energy. The basic tools and directions for doing so are contained throughout this book, especially in the chapters on communication and self-esteem.

These same differences in self-worth can be seen in adult family members. It is not so much that the family affects the adult's sense of self (although that certainly happens) as that parents with high self-esteem are more likely to create nurturing families, and low-self-worth parents to produce troubled families. The system evolves out of the architects of the family: the parents.

After years of working with families, I find that I can no longer blame parents, no matter how foolish or destructive their actions may be. I do hold parents responsible for accepting the consequences of their acts and learning to do differently. This is a good

first step to improving the whole family situation.

Happily, it is possible to raise anyone's self-esteem, no matter what one's age or condition. Since the feeling of low worth has been learned, it can be unlearned, and something new learned in its place. The possibility for this learning lasts from birth to death, so it is never too late. At any point in a person's life, she or he can begin to learn higher self-worth.

I mean this to be the most important message in this book: *there is always hope that your life can change, because you can always learn new things*. Human beings can grow and change all their lives. It is a little harder as we grow older, and sometimes takes a little longer. It all depends on how set we choose to be in our ways. Knowing that change is possible and committing oneself to changing are first big steps. Some of us may be slow learners, but we are all educable.

This bit of prose contains my feelings and ideas about self-worth.\*

#### My Declaration of Self-Esteem

I am me.

In all the world, there is no one else exactly like me. There are persons who have some parts like me, but no one adds up exactly like me. Therefore, everything that comes out of me is authentically mine because I alone chose it.

I own everything about me: my body, including everything it does; my mind, including all its thoughts and ideas; my eyes, including the images of all they behold; my feelings, whatever they may be: anger, joy, frustration, love, disappointment, excitement; my mouth, and all the words that come out of it: polite, sweet or rough, correct or incorrect; my voice, loud or soft; and all my actions, whether they be to others or to myself.

I own my fantasies, my dreams, my hopes, my fears.

I own all my triumphs and successes, all my failures and mistakes.

Because I own all of me, I can become intimately acquainted with me. By so doing, I can love me and be friendly with me in all my parts. I can then make it possible for all of me to work in my best interests.



I know there are aspects about myself that puzzle me, and other aspects that I do not know. But as long as I am friendly and loving to myself, I can courageously and hopefully look for the solutions to the puzzles and for ways to find out more about me.

However I look and sound, whatever I say and do, and whatever I think and feel at a given moment in time is me. This is authentic and represents where I am at that moment in time.

When I review later how I looked and sounded, what I said and did, and how I thought and felt, some parts may turn out to be unfitting. I can discard that which is unfitting, and keep that which proved fitting, and invent something new for that which I discarded.

I can see, hear, feel, think, say, and do. I have the tools to survive, to be close to others, to be productive, and to make sense and order out of the world of people and things outside of me.

I own me, and therefore, I can engineer me.

I am me and I am okay.

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