A Primer on Individual Family of Origin Work

“To the extent leaders are successful in their differentiating efforts in their own family of origin; there is immediate carry-over to their functioning in the organizations (or families) which they lead. The reciprocity between leaders’ ability to be less avoidant of emotional factors in their family of origin and their ability to function likewise within the emotional system where they worked was exactly the same for managers, clergy, therapists, physicians, or parents.”¹

“I must be about My Father’s business,” was His reply when Jesus’ anxious parents found Him in the temple after 3 days of panic. (See Luke 2:41-50) Jesus, even at the early age of 12, was well on His way to differentiating from His earthly parents. There appears to be an awakening (an emotional separation) already in progress as Jesus embraces His identity and purpose while respectfully redrawing the lines between Himself and His earthly parents.

A God-given process of maturity, every adult must embrace their own identity as an individual, though the patterns and effects of childhood are always present.

Family of Origin

- “I think most pastors lead their congregations functioning out of their position in, and as a result of the emotional process, of their family of origin than most would care to confess.”²
- “It is the basic level of differentiation that is largely determined by the degree of emotional separation a person achieves from his family of origin.”³
- “Learning more about where we came from and engaging with our families in a more neutral way will help us know our purpose more clearly. Our families give us our first teaching on what our purpose should be, and working on difficult family of origin issues can help us clean our adult purpose.”⁴

Benefits of Doing Family of Origin Work⁵

- We take personal responsibility for our own lives
- We blame others less.
- We experience a greater acceptance of self.
- We accept what has not been a part of our family life that we wish could have been.
- This work offers us hope for growth as individuals, as families, and for our churches.
- This work gives a clearer sense of love as something that we do and give to others, rather than something we don’t have and have to get from others.
- Many discover a clearer sense of their own convictions and beliefs and a willingness to stand for them non-reactively in the face of opposition.
- This work reminds us of the organic body of Christ, close and connected and yet with each part different.
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Considerations when working on YOUR Family of Origin Genogram

1. **Birth Order**, are you...
   - Only child
   - First born
   - Second born
   - Middle child
   - Youngest

2. **Variations** to Consider:
   - Adopted child and sibling position
   - Oldest male
   - Oldest female
   - Youngest male
   - Youngest female
   - Blended families birth orders and sibling position

3. What was your role in the family system?
   - “Often, roles are assigned of necessity, by default, because of birth order, or as a way to ensure that a certain function is provided to the family as a whole.”
   - The Golden Child
   - The Scapegoat
   - The Black Sheep
   - The Victim
   - The Hero
   - The Fixer
   - The Problem-solver
   - The Caretaker
   - The Family Chaplain
   - The “Glue”
   - The Godfather: Matriarch or Patriarch
   - The Elder
   - The Baby
   - The Standard Bearer
   - The Screw Up
   - The Princess
   - The Peacemaker
   - The Sick One
   - The Strong One
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4. Choose the “Family Theme” or motto(s) that comes closes to describing your family of origin:
   - “Peace at any price.”
   - “All for one and one for all.”
   - “Us against the world.”
   - “We are the perfect family.”
   - “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.”
   - “Father knows best.”
   - “Mom wares the pants in the family.”
   - “Too many cooks in the kitchen.”
   - “Too many braves, not enough chiefs.”
   - “The family that prays together stays together.”
   - “Don’t tread on me.”
   - “I’ve got a secret.”
   - “Let’s you and him/her fight.”
   - “You’re not the boss of me.”
   - “Walking on eggshells.”
   - “I hear you knocking but you can’t come in.”
   - “Lost in space.”
   - “The family that plays together stays together.”
   - “Friday Night Fights.”
   - “Home Sweet Home.”
   - “Publicize our success; hide our failures.”

5. Where do you see the major triangles in your family of origin?

   “Triangles that are formed through the relationships of three family members are very important in family systems theory and the analysis of genograms. In fact, you should spend a lot of time discovering where your family triangles exist and how they came about. These triangles are both positive and negative effects on the family as a system. Triangles are neither ‘good’ not ‘bad,’ they are just a way to handle anxiety in relationships. When instability or conflict is present between two family members, a third family member will often be pulled in to stabilize the family relations in an effort to achieve homeostasis.”

6. How did your family handle crisis?

   “A family’s capacity to handle crises is indicative of, and dependent upon, many factors related to emotional process. The healthier the family, the more resilient it can be when faced with a crisis. Healthy families have within them the resources to regain homeostasis or to adapt to new and challenging circumstances. Families that do not handle crisis well can get stuck, engage in
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blaming, or scapegoating, spawn new triangles, feel victimized and powerless, and can be done in by even minor crises."⁸

- Look at your genogram and identify members of your family (past or present) that responded to crisis well?
- What strengths do they possess that allowed a positive response from them?
- Do you see patterns in your genogram that tend to identify this type of person

Similarly, look at your genogram and identify members that responded to crises poorly.

- How did they respond differently from you?
- Do you see patterns in your genogram that tend to identify this type of person?

Because we develop our unique reactive patterns in our family of origin, changing how we relate to that family clears the way for changing our relationships with our spouse, children, and congregation. The goal is to stay connected to our family of origin without being absorbed by it, and remaining less anxious and less reactive in the face of old patterns. In so doing, some people may increase their repertoire of responses and find a way to change the patterned reaction they have to their family of origin. This work often empowers them to live and minister more freely and more effectively. By giving attention to the impact that the family of origin has on current functioning, leaders decrease their own anxiety and allow those they lead to do the same.⁹

"In a well-differentiated person, fewer repetitions occur. Those that do are less intense and are better understood by the person as being rooted in the original relationship system. Better definition between thinking and emotional inner guidance systems enables one to tell the difference between reality and patterned functioning originating from within. Thus for the well-differentiated person, fewer emotional reactions from old patterns can be triggered by stimuli from other people."¹⁰

Remember: be cautious, respectful, patient; always seeking to define self (not others).

The process becomes a lifelong project for most people who begin it, and it often follows several predictable steps that are repeated over and over again.

1. A useful beginning in such a process is to try to develop a one-to-one relationship with every person in one’s family of origin, becoming aware of and working through the triangles, conflict, distancing, or overfunctioning/underfunctioning patterns that are in place or that develop.
2. Next, after making contact, it may be useful to step back and observe the emotional processes and patterned emotional behaviors in the family.
3. After seeing how emotions are processed in one’s family, a thoughtful plan can be made as to how to relate to that emotional system in a more mature way.
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Playing one’s part in the old family patterns differently is the important next step. That is, in interactions with members of the family, one makes the effort to respond calmly, as planned and rehearsed, when the old emotional patterns begin to snap into their accustomed places.  

1 Friedman, Failure of Nerve, 20.
2 Galindo, Israel. Perspectives on Congregational Leadership: Applying Systems Thinking for Effective Leadership. (Published by Educational Consultants, 2009), 75.
5 Richardson, Ronald W. Becoming a Healthier Pastor. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 146, 147.
6 Galindo, Genogram, 32.
7 Galindo, Genogram, 41.
8 Galindo, Genogram, 46.
11 Gilbert, Extraordinary Relationships, 121, 122.