

THE KINSHIP GAP?: FAMILY GROUP DECISION MAKING AND FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCING—BRIDGING THE GAP

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When I was a young man, the community that I was nurtured in was a lot different from what I see today. In my childhood community—the city of Los Angeles, California, the second largest city in the United States—although we lived in the 1960s, we had a sense of ‘the village’. Today the sense of village has been replaced by the sense of isolation. In our village everyone was related, not by blood, but by similarity. We were all poor or struggling to save our money to buy a home or a business. We were all from the Old South and just two or three generations from slavery, and we all had indigenous roots.

We had everything in common. We pooled our resources and we loved and cared for one another. If someone lost a



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job they never had to worry how their family was going to eat, because the village would come together and support the family until employment was found. If utilities were turned off, we would run extension cords or water hoses from the neighbour's house to supply utilities until the money was collected to pay the bill. When there was a problem with a child or family member, we would meet at the church or at a neighbour's house to discuss solutions.

I WAS NEVER ALONE

One of the biggest problems facing children today in the United States is a lack of supervision. On any given day over 15 million children are left alone after school hours. More juvenile crimes are reported between the hours of 3 and 6 pm. National Center for Health statistics show that 28 per cent of all children in the United States live in single-parent homes, and in 84 per cent of those homes there is a mother raising children alone. There are usually other siblings in the home, and the mother has to work overtime or multiple jobs to support the family. As a result the children are left alone. The proof is a rising juvenile crime rate and the fact that children are committing more serious crimes than ever before. While overall crime statistics have dropped, crimes committed by youths under the age of 17 have skyrocketed. The age at which a child can be tried in a US court as an adult has been lowered to 14 years old.

When I was a child, I was never alone. Although both my parents worked and we didn't have after-school programmes, I was still never alone because no matter where I went in my neighbourhood someone was watching me. I couldn't get away with anything. Whenever I tried to misbehave I would hear a voice from a window or doorway calling me by name saying, 'Benjamin, you know that's not nice,' or 'I'm going to tell your mother,' and each voice had permission from my parents to discipline me as they felt necessary. There was kinship in the village; they were not my relatives but everyone was my guardian.

DISENFRANCHISEMENT

I believe the reason we depended on each other so much is because we couldn't depend on anyone else. Racism was running rampant in our country. We were in the middle of the African-American Civil Rights Movement and the government was not to be trusted. The only reason public agency officials came into our community was to start trouble. The Department of Children and Family Services was taking away children; the police were taking people to jail or beating them up, or shooting them; welfare workers were assessing people's homes to cut their benefits; Water and Power was turning off people's utilities—and they were all white people.

Those were the years of the Voting Rights Act, the Civil Rights Bill, the Fair Housing Act and other bills and acts that were supposed to make black people feel equal to whites. It looked good on television and in the newspapers, but on the streets where I lived it looked totally different. There was still discrimination and prejudice. The white people still came into the neighbourhood looking for trouble and finding it, which led to the 1965 Watts Riots. The riots were used as an excuse to further disenfranchise African-Americans. Then there were assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the Kennedys, Medgar Evers and other black leaders, which was the icing on the proverbial cake. Whites could not be trusted.

THE AMERICAN DREAM

With all the mistrust, abuse and murder, the fact remained that we were only two generations from slavery and it was very difficult for our people, yet we still believed in 'the promised land'. We still believed in the Constitution of the United States, the Bill of Rights and the promises of the founding fathers that all men are created equal. We believed that one day, from a lot of blood, sweat and muscle, we would become a part of the dream that had in the past been a nightmare for us. We believed that God in His infinite wisdom created a country in which all men can live as brothers and be treated equally under the law. We believe that America is our baby; she is the

child of each and every citizen who loves her and believes in what she stands for.

THE JOURNEY

Our American child must grow. Growth is a journey that each of us must take. Our American child is no different than any other child; she has to experience all the bumps, bruises and growing pains associated with life. She has to experience the attacks from bullies who try to take her lunch money and her dignity. She has to experience attacks from those who are envious and jealous of her wealth. She has to make mistakes and learn from them to develop her character. She has to experience the trials, tribulations and setbacks of growing up in a world filled with greed and prejudice. She has to build immunity to the internal attacks from the diseased festering evil that tries to destroy her from within.

America is just over 200 years old; compared to other civilizations she is still an infant. I believe in what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. visualized in his dream prophecy of America growing into a mature nation, becoming an example to the world of the true meaning of freedom, living up to its full potential.

THE TOOLS

Family group decision making (FGDM) and family group conferencing (FGC) is like a vaccine being administered to our American child, helping her to overcome the disease of separation and isolation. Separation and isolation are destructive forces that have burned down the village. By reducing isolation and building support, we are rebuilding the village. The Bible teaches that 'two are better than one, because if one should fall the other can lift him up' and 'one can put a thousand to flight and two ten thousand.' Think of what a million can do. Family and community together are a combination for success and healing.

In our community the social workers that bring FGDM into our community are welcomed and not feared. FGDM is allowing us to return to our indigenous roots. Many people are fearful of

the word 'indigenous' because they visualize uncivilized natives who are ignorant of modern technology and culture. When it comes to understanding family, unity, peace, love, emotional stability, health and longevity, I have discovered that the indigenous cultures of the world are far ahead of us. They have all things in common, they support one another and they live in unity with the environment. It wasn't until the interference of modern civilizations that the indigenous cultures began to decline. Indigenous people created FGDM, based on principles and reasoning that should come naturally to us, but we have modernized and educated ourselves to the point that we must be taught the simple basics of the human heart.

THE VICTORY

In my community FGDM has helped countless families to become self-sufficient and self-reliant. We are learning to work together with social workers and to share knowledge and experience. My organization, L.A. FACES, has partnered with them on several occasions and we have worked with community members side by side. With the Department of Children and Family Services, we have co-developed 'Family Partners', a group of FGDM alumni who advocate the expansion of FGDM. L.A. FACES has developed a community model of FGDM that works as a preventive tool to help families in the early stages of conflict before the problems escalate into court cases.

We have used the concept of the village to unite. I realized that I don't have to wait for the agency to change the way it engages families in my community, but I am obligated to respond and get involved and advocate for those processes that will effect a positive change in our lives. This principle has helped us to create advocates and partnerships in our community that helps to expand the work started by the Maori people, that small group of indigenous people who were disenfranchised by the European settlers. Modern culture is too quick to dismiss anything different. We consider other cultures insignificant and inferior to our own. We are ready to destroy those people we need to study and learn from. Who would believe that the in-

digenous Maori would create such a powerful tool that would help unite people all over the world?

Family group decision making is one of many tools being used in our community to help to close the 'Kinship Gap'. Some of the others are 'Team Decision Making', 'Family to Family' and 'Point of Engagement'. The processes we use are just tools, but what is most important is the attitude of the public agencies to utilize these tools. Without the willingness to put these processes into action the 'Kinship Gap' will grow wider. We must recognize the need to know that we are all connected and that we are all valuable and we all have the same origins. This concept must be taught if we are to return to the village from whence we originated—not in the sense of going backward, but we must adjust our attitudes towards one another and embrace the simple things in life. We must not only strive for that which is physically difficult and for the treasures that are outside of ourselves; we must look within, for there is a greater treasure inside of us.