

THE FELLOWS' FORUM

AN “INTERGENERATIONAL SENSE OF SELF” IS A SOURCE OF STRENGTH FOR KIDS AND FAMILY MEMBERS

In a magnificent passage in his book *God in Search of Man*, the Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel states that the reason why it is important for Jews (or any people) to know the Torah (or Bible or Koran) is so that each individual, in his or her own time, can “locate himself between the receiving of the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai and the coming of the Messiah” (or any other creation stories and eschatology). In other words, by having a sense of what has gone before and by believing in a continuing future, people are able to know where they stand in their history, and this is a good thing. The work of the family-narratives group at MARIAL—Robyn Fivush, Jennifer Bohanek, Amber Lazarus, Kelly Marin, and I—has uncovered the same phenomenon, albeit within the context of American families.

Specifically, we have found that the more children know about their family’s history, in the form of ongoing coconstructed family narratives (e.g., dinnertime conversations) or family stories (intergenerational tales of the past told by parents and grandparents), the better the families themselves function and the more psychologically resilient the children. We have found, for example, that the more children know about things like where their grandparents grew up and what jobs they had, the higher the children’s self-esteem, the lower their levels of behavioral disturbance, and the more they believe that they can affect the world around them (internal locus of control). Locus of control is especially important in that it reflects kids’ beliefs in the degree to which they can affect what happens to them in the world. It turns out that the more they believe in their own capacity (internal control), the better they do in all sorts of things such as achievement in school, social interaction, vocational success, emotional adjustment, etc. We psychologists know that anything that makes people more internally controlled is a pretty powerful thing.

That there is a relationship between knowledge of family history and adjustment is now well established. However, the how of this relationship is still unclear. It is at points like

this that we psychologists turn to theoretical concepts in hopes that we might come up with testable ways of thinking about what is going on. I am happy to report that my wonderful colleagues, Robyn Fivush and Jennifer Bohanek, have come upon just such a concept: the intergenerational self that we believe will not only make things clearer for us but also help families realize the importance of telling their stories.

In a recent paper, we wrote: “Family stories, stories about shared family experiences, about the parents’ lives before the children

applying meaning to the moments they encounter; and means for deciding what would be the best or right thing to do. In like manner, a child who knows his or her place in the history of a family also carries with him or her a set of standards and values, a way of arriving at meaning, and a means for deciding on a best (moral) course of action. People of faith often are guided in their own minds by a sense that “a Christian would not do that” or “a Jew would do this.” Similarly, in intergenerational families, children might hear statements



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were born, what parents’ childhoods were like, and stories of previous generations, may be particularly frequent. These various kinds of family stories create meaning beyond the individual, to include a sense of self through historical time and in relation to family members. . . . Through the telling and sharing of family history stories, children develop a sense of self as connected to previous generations. By anchoring oneself in family history, one has a sense of place and security that may facilitate self-confidence and self-competence.”

These ideas sound pretty close to those put forth by Abraham Joshua Heschel, don’t they? And, in fact, they seem also to share in the implications and import of Heschel’s ideas. As Heschel realized, the sense that one exists through more than one generation provides people of faith with a set of standards and values that transcend the moment; ways of

such as “The Smiths don’t do that sort of thing” or “Our family gives to charity.”

What we seem to have come to is this: the mechanism whereby knowledge of family history contributes to resilience and adjustment in kids is by instilling an “intergenerational self.” It is then this intergenerational self that allows family members to see their current concerns in larger context and provides a source of strength and stability that helps them through difficult times. The more our kids know about their families, the more their sense of place in history and the deeper their sense of an intergenerational self.

Enough said. I need to go tell my grandchildren about the time that I blew it in that spelling bee in fourth grade. ■

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