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TOWARD A WORLD PERSPECTIVE

by

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During World War II an American G.I. and a Japanese soldier found themselves together in a shell-hole while a big battle was raging. Their countries were at war, and their duty was to kill each other. But the Japanese was already dying, and the American was badly wounded. So for a while they just lay together in the shell-hole, glaring suspiciously at one another.

Then the American became aware that the Japanese was struggling to get something out of his pocket. The G.I. reached over and helped him, it was a wallet. The Japanese opened it and took out a faded photograph of his wife and children. The American helped him to prop it up so that he could look at it. Then the American brought out a photograph of his wife and children. He showed it to the Japanese soldier, who smiled appreciatively. Suddenly all the barriers between these two men - the barriers of language, of culture, of national enmity - were swept away. There in the shell-hole together, with the battle raging round them, they realized that their fundamental values, their fundamental loyalties, were not different, but the same.

I believe that the family provides the great unifying force that can bring all the people of the world together. Whatever our color, race or creed, as members of families we share the same experiences, the same feelings, the same hopes. My wife and I have proved this over and over again in 25 years of working for better family life. During those years we have traveled all over the world. Altogether we have now visited 48 countries. When we explain that our interest is in family life, we are always received with warm friendship. This has happened on all the six continents. We have spent this summer behind the Iron Curtain, and we have had the same experience.

In our travels we have often told people about the International Union of Family Organizations. It was our privilege to be present in 1947 at the Conference in Paris out of which, a year later, the Union developed. We believe in the I.U.F.O. - not because it is a perfect organization; but because it aims to bring together, in a sharing fellowship, all who work on behalf of the family. It is the only organization in the world that is working for this goal; therefore we are pledged to support it. We have watched it grow through the years. These meetings in New York represent an important milestone in its progress. For the first time, it has been possible to organize an international conference on the family outside the Continent of Europe.

In our shrinking world of today, I believe we must become international. This summer we drove to Russia in our car. Apart from a 3 day stop in Dusseldorf we passed through different countries at the average rate of one a day - Britain, France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Finland. We were camping, and each morning I woke to find people round me speaking a different language. Each day I paid for gasoline and food in a different coinage. And I was traveling by car, which is a very slow method. A pilot of a jet fighter tells me that he has to cover the whole width of Holland in order to make a turn!

I am not arguing for the elimination of our national differences. There is richness in the variety of our cultures. But I am pleading for a world perspective, for an international way of thinking and acting toward one another. In our work for families, I believe this will have three implications:

First, it means freeing ourselves from prejudice. When I went on an excursion round the Kremlin last month, there was an American tourist in the group. This man kept complaining to the Intourist guide because so many things were different from what he was accustomed to at home. This is the essence of prejudice - a refusal to acknowledge that other people can be different, and yet be worthy of our friendship and respect.

We all meet this problem when we go abroad. When I visited the Marriage Counseling Center in Lagos, Nigeria, I was startled to find that the African counselors there were working with polygamous marriages! This at first disturbed me, because I don't believe in polygamous marriage. How could marriage counseling be done in such a situation? I asked this question. The answer was that since polygamy is the custom in Nigeria, the marriage counselors are working for stable polygamous marriages! When I thought it over, I realized that if I were a Nigerian that would be exactly what I would want to do too!

If we are to have a world perspective, we must be prepared to work with people who think differently, and feel differently, and act differently, from ourselves. This need not involve any surrender of our principles. This summer I have been living with citizens of the Soviet Union. I have found them very delightful and lovable people. I have made many new friends. But that doesn't mean that I have accepted Communism, or that they have accepted my philosophy of life. It means that we have become friends in spite of our differences.

This is not only possible. It is absolutely necessary to a world perspective. If I disagree with your concept of what makes a good family, I can act in two ways. I can tell you I think you are wrong, withdraw myself from you, and refuse to communicate with you any further. Or I can try to establish the kind of relationship with you in which we can recognize each other's differences, but still respect one another.

Until recently, most people took the first way. They divided themselves up into hundreds and thousands of separate little groups that lived together in their own little corners, each group believing that it was right and that all the others were wrong - like the proud mother who saw her son's regiment marching past and said - "My goodness! They're all out of step except our John!"

Today we can do that no longer. We must live with our differences, believing that time and experience will prove which of us is right. In the parable of the wheat and the tares the owner of the field said - "Let them grow together till the harvest. Then we shall know what is good and what is bad." So if I believe that monogamy is a better form of marriage than polygamy, as I do, I must be content to wait until my Nigerian friends discover the truth for themselves. If I reject them because I don't agree with them, I cannot gain a world perspective.

Secondly, a world perspective means being willing to study other family patterns than our own. It is possible to go to Russia as a tourist, and to be friendly with Russians, without knowing much about the Soviet philosophy of life. Up to a point, people of different cultures can get along together by ignoring the differences and pretending that they don't exist.

But this won't take us very far. A world perspective means not only an acceptance of the other fellow's feelings, but also an honest attempt to understand why he feels as he does.

- The human family has been a very flexible institution. It has appeared in many forms. The customs of other cultures often seem to us in the West to be strange and bewildering. My plea is that we should study them carefully before we make any judgments.

Recently my wife and I made a study of Asian family life. We soon found that some of the Oriental customs that had seemed so odd to us really had a great deal to commend them. For instance, when we had a chance to live in Asian homes we realized how much we are suffering in the West today from the lack of the emotional security that these large family groupings give to their members. Another custom about which we had to change our minds was the arranged marriage. When we saw how carefully responsible Eastern families seek suitable wives and husbands for their sons and daughters, we began to realize the dangers and disadvantages of our Western method of personal choice based on romantic feeling.

These are illustrations of our need to be willing to seek out the real values in systems other than our own, and to look more critically at our own family institutions as they appear to others. This conference has given us an opportunity to look at American, European, and to some extent at Asian family life, and to make stimulating comparisons. I hope we shall go on with this process. Especially I hope that we shall make further studies of Soviet concepts of the family. After our experiences of this summer, I can assure you that we are mistaken if we assume that the doors are closed. While we were in Russia, every request we made was granted. We asked about their divorce system. We were taken to divorce courts and sat for hours listening to cases. We asked to see how the people lived, and were given the opportunity to go, with an interpreter, and knock on apartment doors. We asked to attend marriage ceremonies, and the young couples were so cordial that we were embarrassed by their kindness and generosity.

Thirdly, a world perspective means a willingness to work with people of other cultures for the achievement of common goals.

In the field of marriage and the family there are some highly controversial questions, about which strong and even bitter disagreements sometimes arise. On such issues as birth control and divorce, for example, the members of this Conference would probably find themselves deeply divided.

However, when we gain a world perspective, we soon recognize that the areas of agreement are much greater than the areas of disagreement. There is a vast amount of work to be done for the well being of families, concerning which there need be no controversy at all. As I see it, the three great tasks before us are to give families all over the world economic security; to remove ignorance; and to provide community services to help in periods of crisis. Let me give you a few simple illustrations.

My wife and I lived for a month in Bombay. On the sidewalk outside our building there was an Indian family which we often observed. It was easy enough to observe them. They had no home except a few square feet of concrete which they had staked out as their domain. There the mother nursed and cared for her newborn baby - helped by the other children. There the father came back, after a day looking for work, with whatever he had been able to earn.

In many lands families live in desperate poverty. Often, in those same countries, there is also great luxury and wealth. The I.U.F.O. has tried to create a conscience about these gross inequalities. Some of its member organizations are groups of families which have banded themselves together to work and fight for their elementary human rights. As long as families anywhere are denied adequate housing, adequate food, adequate sanitation, this fight must go on. The strong must help the weak until the battle has been won.

We have another battle to fight against ignorance. In West Africa, for instance many parents believe that terror is the only means by which a child can be trained. Social workers have told me of children brought to them who have been beaten without mercy. Their parents said - "See what you can do with this child. I can't make him behave." Ignorance about child development is not confined to Africa. It is very widespread. And ignorance about the meaning of marriage is often as serious as ignorance about parenthood. We are making great progress today in our understanding of family relationships. But the spreading of this vital knowledge, through effective public education, is taking place far too slowly.

Even if we could deliver all the families of the world from the scourges of poverty and ignorance, they would still have their troubles. Families, like individuals, pass through periods of illness and stress in which they need support, guidance and counseling. Such services should be provided.

A world perspective means that countries with well-developed community services would help other countries to do more for the welfare of their families. I have seen this achieved, in the past eight years, in the I.U.F.O. Commission on Marriage Guidance. When we began our work, there were virtually no marriage counseling services in France, Belgium and Italy. Today, these countries have sound and rapidly developing counseling centers, set up mainly by dedicated leaders who are members of the Commission. Through exchange of experiences and mutual visits, the standards in all the participating countries are rising steadily to the level of those in the areas which are most advanced.

Now let me conclude. We who work for family welfare must strive to build throughout the world a common front. We must be ready to share our skills, to go to each other's help, to be striving always to make our services to families more effective. We need never doubt the great importance of what we are doing. In working with families we are building the fundamental units upon which the life of the world depends. The life of the community can be no healthier than the life of the families that make up the community.

So let us return to our several countries, to our several tasks, with new insight, new resolution, new dedication. Great issues are in our hands. As an old Chinese proverb puts it, "here there is harmony in the home, there is contentment in the community, when there is contentment in the community there is prosperity in the nation. When there is prosperity in the nation, there is peace in the world."