

Does democracy begin at home?

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Reflection on the Theme by Wendy Raunig

As I look back at my childhood and integrate the theme for this month “Democracy”, I definitely don’t think my family structure followed any democratic process. On the other hand, it certainly wasn’t authoritarian. From an early age, I knew my dad was “head of the household”. He always sat in one chair at the “front” of the table, and my mom took on the role of preparing a delicious homecooked meal, my brother and I slid into our roles as well-behaved, helpful children by “doing our part” and setting the table. My mom did all the cleaning and sewed all our clothes, she was the homemaker and stayed home with us while my father was the only one who went out into the “world” as he called it, to work, make money, and provide for his family.

When my brother and I were young we were indoctrinated not by choice but by the religious values set in front of us by our parents as the ones “in charge”. Our household in my early childhood was that of the Jehovah’s Witness faith and my early memories are that of a calm and peaceful environment. My perspective on the views of democracy within my family unit felt closed. If I had a thought or an idea my voice had to be approved by my dad, even if I took it to my mom first.

As I grew older, I began to question why my dad referred to himself as “head of the household”? He would go on to explain to me through direct quotes from his bible that he was emulating what a man’s responsibility was in the family arrangement. I have never been able to accept his reasoning but out of respect for each other, we have come to a place where he follows his morals and biblical beliefs and I follow the values and practices that are important to me.

My dad is an amazingly kind-hearted, loving person I care deeply for. My dad doesn’t vote, he doesn’t celebrate birthdays, he is pro-life and believes that a man and woman are the only two people that can truly love each other. As an adult, my dad and I have had to set our differences aside to preserve our father-daughter relationship.

When my parents divorced, my mom went to college and experienced for the first time a life she had never known to exist which in turn expanded her views on most things. This mindset filtered down to my brother and I and we began to have experiences different from our earlier years and as a result, our thoughts, ideas, and voices developed. It’s odd but my parents’ divorce has forced me to continue to expand my view of the world, and its complex processes.

Does Democracy Begin At Home? © by Deborah Willoughby

This November, we've been focusing on democracy, which is fitting for a month that started with elections. It's also fitting, in my mind, because November brings Thanksgiving, the holiday that for many people launches several weeks of family celebrations that highlight the relationships and cultures that, for better or for not, helped make us who we are. As Ram Dass said, "If you think you're enlightened, go spend a week with your family."

I've been thinking a lot about the concept of family democracy, because I think there's a lot riding on how we relate to people and institutions. If we're concerned about the effects of authoritarianism in Washington, D.C., and state and local governments, maybe we should be looking at authoritarianism at home.

Because they are linked. Authoritarian governments, as we've seen, attack democratic institutions. Voting rights, and the orderly transfer of power after an election, for example, are hallmarks of democracy.

Authoritarian governments benefit the people in charge, to the detriment of those who have less power. They are taking away reproductive freedom. They are cruelly outlawing health care for trans teenagers, and attacking immigrants. And they are removing the true history of colonialism and slavery from schools.

Similarly, authoritarian households are generally male dominated, and at their worst they demand that children demonstrate complete obedience to rules they can't even understand, and subject women to disrespect and abuse. The people with power aren't willing to share it with the less powerful.

The civics lessons I learned in school said we were lucky to live in such a fair and principled society. Everyone had a voice. Compromise was valued. Institutional checks and balances helped to ensure that minority viewpoints were heard and respected.

The American exceptionalism I was indoctrinated in, of course, ignored the disenfranchisement of all sorts of people and the danger that followed marginalized individuals who tried to speak out. Despite decades of evidence to the contrary, and the frightening political excesses of today, I know I'm still affected by the civics lessons I learned through my school years.

It's a similar story about the rosy cultural messages I learned about family life. I was raised at a time when authoritarian family structures were the norm. There were TV shows like "Father Knows Best," and common phrases like "Wait until your father gets home." Popular culture showed us families in which men were benevolent dictators, more rational than their overly emotional wives and strict but fair with their children. I didn't see TV shows or read books about BIPOC households, or children being raised by single mothers, or LGBTQ+ people, or

pretty much anything except for white families with a dad and a mom. (The exceptions mostly involved the struggles of widowed fathers who relied on the help of grandparents or nannies.)

My household was definitely authoritarian, although it was manifested in a fairly low key way. Dad wasn't particularly involved in parenting or considering our views when making decisions. The phrase "because I said so" was common, and I well remember what my mother said when someone was whiny: "I'll give you something to cry about." I was fairly obedient. My brother, meanwhile, would do a cost-benefit analysis, considering whether it was worth a spanking to get into whatever mischief he had planned, and factoring in the odds of getting caught. One day he slipped a piece of plywood in the back of his pants just before Mom delivered a swat on his rear. I was sure he was going to get into more trouble, but Mom started giggling. He was an especially cute kid, which didn't hurt. I think that was the last spanking in our house.

Most of the people I knew in my small town were from white, two-parent households. I didn't know many men who could have been described as tender or nurturing, although I know they existed. But what I observed and heard from friends more commonly involved dads who were busy, strict, impatient and bad-tempered. I knew kids whose fathers threw away their toys if they weren't put away neatly. I heard from my friends about teenagers who were kicked out of the house for breaking the rules. Dads delivered spankings that hurt.

When I lived in Montgomery, Alabama, nearly 20 years ago, I was surprised to find out that public schools still used corporal punishment. I had to write a letter every year to tell the schools they were not to hit my kids. One day I was standing outside our neighborhood elementary school with my daughter, waiting for a bus. The principal came outside holding the hand of a little boy, possibly a first-grader but maybe in kindergarten. The boy was crying. A truck pulled up in the parking lot, and a man stormed over, taking off his belt as he approached the boy. I thought, if I were back in Washington, I'd be dialing 911

right now. The man held his son up by his backpack straps as he whipped him, then the principal took the little boy back inside the school.

Just like I remember with amusement the day my brother got out of a spanking by making my mother laugh, sometimes people whose parents spanked them, and worse, remember it as normal and effective parenting. I heard coworkers laughing about the times their parents came to school to spank them—they didn't sound traumatized. I knew a man who, in the process of offering me unsolicited advice about child rearing when my son was an infant, made this statement, without irony: "My old man beat me all the time, and I turned out fine. I've only been in jail twice."

And while women participated in this kind of parenting, they often weren't in an equitable partnership with their spouses.

I knew women who had to have dinner on the table when their husbands got home from work. Who seemed really uptight if their house was messy, if their children were being noisy, if there

were unexpected bills. When I was older, my mother sometimes mentioned men we knew who beat their wives.

In other words, I knew children who were afraid of their dads, and women who were afraid of their husbands.

It's absolutely true that not all men were like that. Absolutely there were warm and caring men. I'll never forget a friend's dad who gave her his toolbox as a birthday gift when she was a teenager. Tucked inside next to the wrenches and screwdrivers was a poem he had written for her. Such a loving gift, and a vote of confidence that she would be able to fix problems that came up in her life.

But the authoritarian family culture I was raised in tolerated bullying and abuse of people who were powerless.

That approach to family life has changed. Women have benefited from better laws governing divorce, contracts, health care, and employment, for example. Authoritarianism still shows up in many aspects of family life, including decision making, budgeting, raising children and housekeeping, but there's movement toward more democratic structures. I've read about families that have weekly meetings to discuss and vote on household rules affecting the kids.

However, research shows that U.S. women earn a little over 80 cents for every dollar a man makes. Claudia Goldin, who won a Nobel Prize in economics for her studies of women in the workforce, found that women and men who are doing the same jobs generally make the same amount of money—until the birth of the woman's first child.

In a New York Times story last month, Goldin said, "We are never going to have gender equality until we also have couple equity." While there has been "monumental progressive change, at the same time there are important differences that often tie back to women doing more work in the home."

And a New York Times story from 2017, which cites Goldin's research, said the big reason that having children, and even marrying in the first place, hurts women's pay relative to men's is that the division of labor at home is still unequal, even when both spouses work full time.

It's not a given that the person in a household with the greatest earning power becomes the person with the most power. But Sari Kerr ("sorry car"), an economist at Wellesley College, said it's logical for couples to decide that the person who earns less, usually a woman, does more of the household chores and child care. And that becomes a reason why women earn less in the first place. "That reinforces the pay gap in the labor market," Kerr said, "and we're trapped in this self-reinforcing cycle."

Maybe you've seen the book and cards called Fair Play, by Eve Rodsky. She gathered input from hundreds of people about the gendered division of household labor—also called emotional labor, the second shift, or invisible work. She made cards for domestic tasks and encouraged

couples to divide them. These were chores that seemed to fall to women by default, like buying and wrapping gifts, making school lunches, driving carpools, picking up children who feel sick at school, planning for all manner of shopping and maintenance.

There's some research that indicates that, at least in this country, authoritarian family structures are linked to people's politics and more specifically to their views toward unfamiliar ideas and people who are different from them. Some political scientists just say this: one of the biggest predictors of whether someone votes for Donald Trump is whether they spank their children.

Ideas and terminology about home life change all the time. At one point, philosophies about child rearing broke down into four categories that were used for research purposes: authoritarian, authoritative, permissive and neglectful.

If you are currently raising children, you may well use different concepts. There's peaceful parenting, which tries to limit family stress. Caretakers model calmness, active listening and collaboration.

There's gentle parenting, in which parents act like a coach, with a focus on connection, communication and consistency to produce empathy, respect, understanding and healthy boundaries.

RIE parenting also relies on connection, trust and respect, but it has a special focus on treating children, especially infants, as unique people with their own identities.

I am impressed by people who are willing to change their family culture, to model respectful behavior, and to raise children in safe and encouraging households. And I have great respect for people who actively create equity in their adult relationships. It's hard work to truly transcend outdated practices in marriages and other partnerships. People who effectively embrace equality in their partnerships set a wonderful example for children, and that gives me a lot of hope.

I wonder what democracy will mean to children who are treated with kindness and respect, whose voices are heard and ideas are considered, whose parents are equal partners in safe, supportive relationships. I'm thinking that might create people who trust democracy, who are educated voters who focus on the greater good rather than their own prosperity, and who can support an equitable decision-making process even though they won't always get their way.

I wonder if children who are raised in authoritarian households can truly trust a democratic process. What if they rarely saw compromises at home? If you either won or lost an argument, and losers were ridiculed for being weak. If you had to pretend to support the person in charge because it wasn't safe to disagree.

What we used to call good citizenship or good sportsmanship doesn't necessarily show up in authoritarian households or societies. Disrespect, ridicule, cheating, violence and a winner-takes-all mentality damage institutions.

And to be clear, this isn't simply the divide between people who identify as politically conservative or liberal. It's people who carry so much distrust that they demonize people whose views are different and who just don't want to hear any opposing ideas. I think many of us sometimes struggle to maintain relationships with family members, colleagues, and neighbors because there are so many divisive topics. We don't have the energy to hear their ideas about politics, vaccines, self defense, immigration, climate change—I'll stop now rather than list every topic that leads to difficult conversations I've had with people I care about.

What to do? I'm a member of the beloved community working group here at church, and it is giving me hope. I've spent time on books like *Transforming Conflict*, which give me ideas and tools for deeply listening to people I'm in conflict with. It takes two people to build or repair a relationship, so I don't have an expectation that I can build or rebuild rapport with people who disagree with me, but I feel better knowing that I'm trying, that maybe my example will make a difference, that I can focus on the outcomes I want rather than angrily dismiss people as jerks because we vote for different politicians. I have so much respect for Wendy, who spoke about maintaining a caring relationship with her father despite the many differences in worldviews.

I'll end with a quote from Amanda Ripley in the book *Transforming Conflict*. Ripley says, "The challenge of our time is to mobilize great masses of people to make change without dehumanizing one another. Not just because it's morally right but because it works."