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Defrain, John, "NF01-481 Creating a Strong Family: Life As A Soap Opera" (2001). *Historical Materials from University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension*. 330.

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Published by Cooperative Extension, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources,
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Creating a Strong Family Life As A Soap Opera

By John DeFrain, Extension Specialist, Family and Community Development

When I was 7 years old, I was playing tag with my cousins. After slapping one on the back and happily screaming, "Tag, you're it!" I took off around the corner of our house at a dead run. It didn't occur to me that right around the corner was our family's hulking 1952 Chevrolet, packing a couple thousand pounds of steel and chrome.

I smacked into the Chevy head down at full 7-year-old speed. When I woke up on the living room couch soon after, I had a sore face, bloody lip and most of one front tooth chipped off, leaving a nasty, jagged opening in my dental structure.

Forty-seven years later I still have a carefully reconstructed "thousand-dollar front tooth," as my parents called it well up into my adolescence. Dad made \$350 a month at the time, and the tooth was no doubt burdensome to family finances.

I wanted to talk here about how we human beings often tend to over-react to life. We get too wound up about things. We pump too much adrenalin, and little things become big too quickly. Life becomes a soap opera when it really doesn't have to be one most of the time. This is what I wanted to say to "we human beings," but in reality this commentary really is focusing on me, though I'm assuming a lot of other folks can relate to it.

For as long as I can remember, I've been emotionally reactive to life. As a man I have learned to mask this to some degree, but I've never been able to mask these feelings from myself. Frankly, it gets irksome at times, and whenever I come across something that gives me insight into my very human condition, I enjoy re-thinking this part of my personality.

My friend Yun Lu from China came across an ancient Chinese saying about marriage that I find useful in this regard. In my emotionally reactive way, I wrote, "Wonderful!" in the margin:

Twixt you and me
There is too much emotion.

That's the reason why
There's such a commotion!

Take a lump of clay,
Wet it, pat it,
And make an image of me,
And an image of you.

Then smash them, crash them,
And add a little water.
Break them and re-make them
Into an image of you,
And an image of me.

Then in my clay, there is a little of you.
And in your clay, there's a little of me.
And nothing ever shall us sever;
Living, we'll sleep in the same quilt,
And dead, we'll be buried together.

This process of smashing and crashing and sloshing around that all relationships go through to varying has been called, dryly, the process of marital adjustment. It takes most couples several years before the delicate blending of personalities occurs. The process tends to work its wonders quicker and more efficiently if we can control our emotions and not get carried away when emotions run high.

Cybernetics is the science dealing with the comparative study of human control systems, such as the brain and nervous system. Cybernetics also refers to complex electronic systems. In cybernetics there apparently is a delicious phrase, *uncontrollable cybernetic feedback loops*. It describes how electrical impulses can get totally out of hand, feeding back and forth on each other, unable to stop. I don't really know anything at all about the cybernetics of electrical systems, but when I came across a psychologist's description of a group of excited teen-agers entering into an uncontrollable cybernetic feedback loops, I couldn't help but smile. The kids get so wound up sometimes that they feed off of each other's frenzy and can't stop.

When I broke my tooth at age 7, I was clearly a victim of an uncontrollable cybernetic feedback loop among cousins running amuck in the backyard.

And one doesn't have to look far to see loopy behavior among adults, either. Meetings at the office occasionally get out of control as we feed off each other's emotions, both negative and positive. Citizens in this country - and many others - often view national politics as one gigantic and long-running uncontrollable cybernetic feedback loop.

As we strive to communicate effectively with each other in our families, the delicate balance lies in how we manage to keep the sparkle of positive emotion alive in our very intimate relationships with each other, while minimizing negative emotional interchanges that can easily get out of control.

Issued June 2001

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Elbert C. Dickey, Interim Dean and Director of Cooperative Extension, University of Nebraska, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

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