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Creating a Strong Family: Talking About Religion and Spirituality in Families

By John DeFrain, Extension Specialist, Family and Community Development

When David and Marian welcome us into their home, it is readily apparent that religion is important in their lives. The first thing we see in the foyer is an ornate antique cherrywood table covered with an elaborately crocheted white cloth. A large family *Bible*, passed down through several generations, rests on the table, opened to a favored passage, 1 Corinthians 13:4: "...Love is patient and kind." The message intended upon seeing this altar and reading these words is quite clear: The family's home is a sacred place and we will be treated with kindness.

While conducting research on strong families in Australia, my wife Nikki and I have had the honor of living with 11 different families for periods of three days to a month. It has been a rare opportunity to see happy families from the inside out. Each family has been special to us, and all in very different ways. David is a kind, deeply religious man with a gentle sense of humor. On the second day of our visit with his family, I hear him chuckling in the living room. I walk in and sit down.

"What's so interesting?"

"Oh, it's a letter I just received from my son James. He's 23 years old now and away at graduate school back East.

It's an eight-page letter and he's telling me in detail why he doesn't believe in God."

David's comments grab my attention right away. Working with college students for 27 years has given me countless opportunities to hear about religious disputes in families from the young person's perspective. Usually the story is one in which the son or daughter goes off to the university, begins to question the family's faith and ends up in a fierce argument over Thanksgiving turkey when he or she comes home to visit.

James is expressing his need to create a belief system that is meaningful to him personally. David's response comes from a perspective that I don't commonly hear.

"Eight pages on why he doesn't believe in God?" I respond, gently digging deeper.

"Yes," David continues. "See how well he writes, and his thinking is very logical ... You know, when I was young I went on my own spiritual journey and found a way that works for me. James is clearly on his own spiritual journey right now." "You aren't going to write back an argumentative, angry letter?" I ask.

"Oh, no. I don't want to ruin our friendship. He has expressed some very personal thoughts. He is finding his way in the world. I can share my own beliefs, which are very, very important to me, and different from his. But I can't make him believe something that makes no sense to him. The best thing I can do is love him and listen to what he's thinking. It would be terribly sad to me if he couldn't talk with his father about religion. It's such a vitally important topic."

It's been two years since my conversation with David. I hope to get a chance to sit down with him in his living room again sometime and see how the theological discussion is proceeding. I'm confident that David is keeping the lines of communication open with his beloved son, for David has found a way to maintain family ties without stifling individual differences. In fact, I believe that by stifling individual differences in families, the ties are not made stronger but start to unravel.

What often happens is that young people, fearing an angry or sorrowful response from their parents, simply close them off. When parents overreact to a young person's searching questions, the young person quickly learns not to bring up anything important - "It will just make my parents mad." Parents may feel that different beliefs are a sign of disrespect and betrayal. More likely, they are evidence of human intelligence at work: By searching and questioning, we create new ways of looking at the world, and sometimes the quality of life is dramatically improved by using our natural human curiosity to good advantage.

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