

Tim Sullivan Family Life Director

Adventure of life has to be accompanied by sense of order

I recently got a letter from one of my sons. He asked me a couple of pretty good questions. One was whether I thought my parents really understood me. The other was whether I fully appreciated the road he was on in life even though it was different from my own.

Just a few days after I received this letter, I attended a presentation on parenting by Lisa Lickona, a writer and lecturer on marriage, family and women's issues. Lisa's comments gave me some helpful insights on the issues my son had raised.

These days, everyone acts and talks as if education is the key to human fulfillment and success, however success might be defined. By education, they mean formal, institutional education. Education will no doubt be a major issue in this year's presidential election.

In stating that parents have the primary duty to educate their children, Lisa defined education as introducing a child to reality, a different kind of reality than can be addressed effectively in schools. The role of parents is not necessarily to instruct children on math, science and literature, but to convey basic notions about the meaning of life, the value and dignity of being human and fundamental virtues.

The most essential function of parents as educators is to convey to each child that the child is a gift, the child is loved



and that the child is unique and precious. Every child must have this knowledge. These messages initially come from the mother. Her love is intimate. Lisa described a mother as "God's smile upon a newborn child." Over time, the child encounters the love of the father, which is intimate as well but also has a transcendent quality, coming in a sense from the outer world.

In a healthy home environment, the children are freed by the love of the parents to become who they were meant to be. They blossom and flourish. As Lisa put it, "God wants them to do something that is all their own." The role of the parent is to be a servant of their child's destiny. Lisa described the parent as "in awe before the mystery who is your child." So a fundamental function of the parent is to help each child discern what is God's will for their lives and to prepare them to live out the direction that God intends for them.

This preparation requires a second element from the parent, which Lisa Lickona called consistency with regard to the vision. By consistency, Lisa is referring to a solid religious and moral foundation, which includes a sense of order and self-mastery. Without these consistent, objective elements, the child will be lacking in discernment and is far more likely to stray from the path God intended.

Now here's the best part of all this. I have gone through this myself and know other parents who have had the same experience. Just as your children enter their teen years and

get tired of your consistency, which they see as unreasonable inflexibility, you begin to ask them about the vision they have for their lives. You ask them what special gifts and qualities they have, what desires they have, what unique contribution they can make to the world.

In doing this, the parent conveys an openness to the vision and a willingness to provide support. The basic attitude communicated to the child is that life is a great adventure, I want you to live out the adventure that is meant for you and I want to help you make it happen. It is critically important that the process continue to be regulated by religious and moral standards and by a sense of order. The child should understand that conforming to God's plan for his life is accompanied by supernatural grace, which makes all the difference in the world.

The result of this process is that, just as the child is starting to feel suffocated, you open the door to exciting new possibilities. The child appreciates the fact that you, who may have come across as all-knowing up to this point, are now acknowledging that you don't know God's specific plan for the child but are willing to help your child discover it.

Our closing verse is from the Letter to the Colossians: "May you be filled with the knowledge of His will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding"