

Creating a Strong Family **Spiritual Well-Being: Sacred Connections**

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This is one in a series of NebGuides by UNL Extension Family Life Specialists and educators who explore the attributes and experiences of strong families.

The following discussion was part of research on strong families conducted by John DeFrain.

It seems only yesterday when my wife Nikki, youngest daughter Erica, and I were having tea with Bryson, an older gentleman, in the dining room of his modest home in Maitland, New South Wales, Australia. We were in Australia to work on a project supported by the Commonwealth Government to study the strengths of Australian families.

Bryson’s wife of many years, Joan, had died of cancer eight years before. “Do you still feel connected to Joan?” I asked. “Oh, yes,” he replied. “She’s right here in the room with us now.”

I found myself smiling. I had heard this many times before from people in strong families. “She’s with me a lot,” Bryson continued. “She comforts me and looks over me, and makes it possible for me to go on in life in this world without her. I would have ended it all a couple years ago if Joan wouldn’t have been with me.”

Bryson has a profound and deep emotional connection with his late wife, a connection similar to the one our friend Louise has with her mother. Louise’s mom died when she was 15 years old, but a powerful bond still lives in her heart today.

“Sometimes when I’m feeling sad, and sometimes when I’m feeling happy, I’ll go out to Wyuka Cemetery and talk with Mom,” she said. “I tell her how life’s going and tell her how much I miss her. I know it sounds crazy, and I don’t tell many people about it, but it gives me great comfort.”

Ordinary words don’t do this bond justice, and in developing our model of family strengths, we decided to use the words spiritual well-being to describe this sacred connection. Years ago we talked about religion as a family strength, but our thinking evolved and the term spiritual well-being seems to work better.

People tend to associate the term religion with institutions and doctrine. For many people, these associations are quite positive. For others, the term conjures up negative images, often going back to childhood. Besides, the term “religion” isn’t really broad enough to describe what strong family members have been describing to us through thirtysomething years of research.

Some families talk about faith in God, faith in life, faith in loved ones. They tell us that they are generally hopeful about life and believe that, in a broad sense, life works out pretty well for them. Some describe a feeling of oneness with the world; a connection to nature, to the land. Some people talk about how important it is to them that family members share important ethical values and beliefs and that they express themselves in these terms by commitment to important social causes. Spirituality can be seen as a person’s beliefs, including institutionalized values, personal values and perceptions, one’s own life experiences, beliefs about what is meaningful in life, and what helps one get through life’s difficulties.

And then there are the Brysons and Louises of the world who talk about their families in almost religious terms, describing the love they feel for one another as sacred and selfless. What profound force drives parents to dive into raging torrents to rescue a child in distress without the slightest consideration for their own personal safety?

Spiritual well-being comes from the caring center within each individual that promotes sharing, love, and compassion. Spiritual well-being is the feeling or power that helps people transcend themselves, rising above the mundane and petty to identify with the greater good: “I feel my family is a part of all the families of the world,” said one individual.

Membership in a religious or spiritual group can provide a caring, supportive community to help when illness strikes, a baby is born, or an accident occurs. Friends in the group are often quick to help each other. But many strong families are not involved with such an institution. In Australia we found that a relatively small percentage of families went to a church, synagogue, mosque, or temple on a regular basis,

but many families still nurtured a sense of spiritual well-being in their lives.

A minister, Charles Stephen, once described religion as, "The search for that which is sacred in life." Strong families find comfort in these sacred connections.

How can one develop or demonstrate spiritual well-being?

- Identify or connect with something that is greater than just you.
- Set aside time to think and reflect alone.
- Focus on how your spiritual well-being has developed as a result of life experiences.
- Find meaning from religious texts important to your family.
- Give time or money to charity.
- Volunteer to help in an important cause in which you believe.

- Attend religious services as an individual or together.
- Explore your spiritual heritage — what values and beliefs have passed down to you from your family and friends?
- Care for someone who needs help.
- Look for the sacred in the eyes and smiles of your loved ones and friends.
- Put life in perspective by going out into nature. Be still and take in the outdoor world around you. Problems may seem small when compared with mountains, oceans, or galaxies.

For more ideas see: DeFrain, J., (2007). *Family treasures: Creating strong families*. New York, Lincoln, NE, Shanghai: iUniverse/University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension.

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