

## To Make a Meaningful Difference: Teaching About and For Families

Terrance D. Olson, Ph. D.  
Brigham Young University

**ABSTRACT.** To become effective as a family life educator, I didn't foresee the possibility of eventually rethinking the very foundations of my approach. I knew the task could not be limited to teaching **about** families (providing knowledge grounded in research and theory), but to teach **for** families (showing the roots of quality relationships and how to nourish them). But my search to understand why some people benefitted from family life classes (or from marriage and family therapy) and why some seemed immune to the knowledge I was offering led me to examine philosophy and theory more carefully. The result was a focus on something more fundamental than knowledge or skills. My starting points shifted to offering a view of what it means to be human—what humans are capable of. Our view of what it means to be human can alter our ideas of how change is possible and what the roots of fulfilling relationships are grounded in. As a consequence, I found myself more realistic and more confident about how family life education (FLE) can make a difference in the quality of relationships people long to experience.

Forty plus years ago I embarked on a journey as a family life educator thinking I knew what to do, but not knowing exactly how to do it. I quickly discovered that although the content of my presentations was typically grounded in research evidence, the audience would (or would not) resonate with the material for completely different reasons. I began to examine the features of audience responsiveness and acceptance of content. I discovered, generally, that participants could care less about research statistics, but do care about how relevant various ideas are to practice, and that stories and examples helped their understanding of the ideas being offered. Participants also were more likely to receive what I thought were substantive ideas if the examples I used were from everyday life. Although “hard case” examples and dramatic life and death stories also had their place in my efforts, they were used sparingly. I would rather have a parent or husband or wife begin to say to themselves, “I could do that,” or, “Whoa, that has been my experience also—he is talking about me!” than to be in awe of someone in a story whose superhuman response to an extreme situation left the audience feeling “I could never have done that.” I sensed that as soon as a person saw themselves realistically in the circumstances or challenges in my illustrations, they would more likely see the value of how the ideas were applicable to problem solving and improving relationships. Philosophically and practically, Coles' work (1989) on the use of stories was extremely practical in helping my colleague and I refine how we invited audiences to see themselves and understand the view of human being we were asking them to consider. The work of Flyvbjerg (2001) on how our theories and philosophies either help or obscure possible solutions to relationship problems has also been valuable.

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Direct correspondence to Terry Olson at [tdo@byu.edu](mailto:tdo@byu.edu).

We also came to understand that whatever we do in family life education (FLE) programs to foster quality family relationships does depend upon our beliefs, not only about where problems originate, but also about how and why people are capable of creating relationships of mutual benefit. We also realized, in our focus on why some people were not responsive and not benefitting from an FLE program, that our explanations of why we were successful with many had to be parallel to our explanations of why we failed with the few. Any philosophy or theory worth its weight in words should be able to account for both outcomes.

I also was able to take an alternative philosophy of human being into corporate training sessions, where we were addressing solutions to management problems. That is, we saw humans as capable of acting on the environment in creative, surprising and ethical ways, and not being merely acted upon by the past, by current circumstances, by the norms of their culture, or by thoughts and feelings that were out of their control (Warner, 1997). We found most audiences—including adolescents—resonated with the idea that their attitudes, beliefs and even emotions in the present moment are not necessarily hostage to the past (See Muller, 1992). Specifically, we proposed that humans often experience a “Felt Moral Obligation” that precedes and informs how we use our knowledge and skills to address or solve relationship or corporate difficulties

We discovered that managers in our seminars were applying our starting points at home almost more regularly than on the job (Arbinger Institute, 1999, 2000). This gave me hope that the philosophy of human beings as agents was generic enough to apply across relationship contexts (Williams, 1992).

I took Richard Weaver’s (1948) dictum that “ideas have consequences” seriously, in that I felt the family life education content needed to be both logical and practical if the ideas were to invite participants to reconsider their ways of being with each other. It also mattered that I be compassionate, direct, simple, and practical. Simple vignettes became the vehicle by which the audience accepted my ideas as realistic for the “common” man or woman (in other words, all of us). I gradually realized that the major features of effectiveness as a family life educator (that I could do something about) were a) taking my relationship with the audience as meaningful and seeing each person as valuable, and b) using illustrations that showed how anyone could relate to, live by, or try out an approach to life that could enhance the quality of their relationships. I also realized that no matter how logical, practical, compassionate or skilled I was, some people would be turned off, feel left out, confused or outright frustrated with starting points offered. Out of years of reflecting on this, I concocted a heuristic device to help organize what kind of content I would teach participants in family life education programs, and which would also address the reasons people were responsive or resistant to the material.

I suggest that there are three sources of our “relationship troubles” about which we can do something: 1) Ignorance, 2) Incompetence, and, 3) Resistance. Obviously, other sources of relationship or mortal troubles operate in our lives (tsunamis, terrorist attacks and drunk drivers are a few that come to mind), but in FLE we need to focus on what can be done, not just be content to help all of us cope with those dimensions of our lives over which we have little or no control. I would suggest to an audience that before we can invite, demonstrate or be realistic about solutions to problems, we must have a sense of where those problems come from (Warner & Olson, 1981, 1983). Using examples from everyday life, I would note that the solution to ignorance is knowledge, while the solution to incompetence is

either personal skill development or drawing on the skills of others. The third source of difficulty, resistance, I first defined as “A refusal to act on the knowledge or skills one already has.” Resistance also seems to be linked with a person’s betrayal of their ethical or moral sense of how to treat others (Warner, 1997). I decided that if, in relationship difficulties, resistance was to be one of the three problems, I should address it first. Otherwise, what good would it do to offer knowledge or skill if it were to be incorporated by those in resistance? For example, I have dealt with people whose racial prejudice was always attended by what they saw as valid reasons, while others not sharing their prejudice saw those reasons clearly as excuses or rationalizations. To be resistant is also to refuse to live by your own ethical commitments or beliefs. In another example, marital conflict that includes emotional or physical abuse often includes a male perpetrator who complains that if his “wife weren’t so aggravating, I wouldn’t have to hit her.” To shift responsibility for one’s own bad behavior to others is resistance. His complaint includes his resistant justification for his attitude and behavior. In confronting such rationalizations in either marriage therapy or FLE settings, if I did not come up with a way of undermining such resistance, any communication skills I taught would likely be used as weapons of marital war instead of as tools of reconciliation.

I decided that, before I launched into offering knowledge or demonstrating skillful practices, I had to invite audiences to consider how they see themselves and how they see others. Our view of ourselves reveals our implicit ontological assumptions about what it means to be human. If we are willing to reconsider what our capabilities really are, we may understand more about how it is that we engage in destructive interaction, as well as how we can experience fulfillment and unity. If our view of others or ourselves includes seeing our troubles as just “human nature” or as proof that life is just hard, we do not have an auspicious starting point for change. Especially if we feel inescapably trapped (socially and emotionally) by our circumstances, we will feel incapable of relating to a family life educator demonstrating the possibility of marital harmony or the resolution of parent-child contention. Until we grant that we can do our part to make change both realistic and possible, the effect of demonstrations of knowledge and skills will be limited.

I also invite audiences to consider that we are *relational* beings, implying that we become who we are in part through interacting with others non-resistantly (acknowledging their humanity—their fundamental value) and that in the presence of others we experience a felt moral obligation to do right by them (Levinas, 1969; Warner, 1997). These concepts defining what it means to be human allows me to explore how quality relationships are symptoms of more than just knowledge and skill—they are features of how we treat others ethically (or not) and how we respond to (or help foster) both justice and injustice; both compassion and resentment. Most importantly, this view allows the possibility that human attitudes and behavior are functions of the ethical quality of life we are living in the present moment and are not just necessary products of past experiences—however toxic or nourishing they may have been. Finally, this view of humans makes our ethical approach to others central to qualitative change in both attitudes and behavior. This starting point stands in contrast to dictating specific behaviors or to adopting an individualistic moral relativism. These latter two strategies offer no grounds for relating ethically.

I introduce this idea of what it means to be human by asking two questions. The first is, “Have you ever been in a situation where you felt or sensed something was right to do?” I have asked this question of hundreds—if not thousands—of adolescents and adults, and I

only rarely have gotten a “No” answer. Once people have said yes to this question, I ask for simple examples of an incident where they sensed to do right. I do not want the concept to remain abstract. If there is not a concrete example of what they are agreeing to, the idea is impractical or irrelevant to real experience. Here is one of my favorite examples from a 16 year old: “My mom was home late for work and asked me to drive to the store for avocados and lettuce, and get back so we could still have an on-time dinner with dad. I drove to the market and as I was entering the store, an elderly woman was virtually hobbling out of the store with two bags of groceries which were obviously too heavy. As I passed her, I had the feeling I ought to offer to help her with her groceries.”

This example gives us qualitative evidence that it is possible for humans to experience an ethical call, and thus sustains the fact that humans have a moral sense—especially regarding how to treat others. The second question: “Have you ever been in a situation where you felt or sensed something was right to do—and you simultaneously refused to do it?” Virtually everyone says yes to this question. We collect examples of this kind of experience also. Let’s return to the boy’s account of his response to the lady with the heavy bags:

I had the feeling I ought to offer to help her . . . but instead I quickened my step and headed for the produce section. Once I got there, I wasn’t even thinking of avocados and lettuce. I was turning thoughts over in my mind about the lady with the groceries. I was irritated, and was silently asking myself questions such as: “Why doesn’t that lady use a shopping cart? If those bags are too heavy, why doesn’t she make two trips?” (Olson & Wallace, 1984)

So now I had concrete examples of people who do not always live according to the ethical sense that they feel. In addition, the boy indicated the content and quality of his thoughts shifted after he had brushed by the woman. He was now irritated and rationalizing—symptoms of resistance. Thus, in my FLE workshops I first address the meaning of resistance, and how it would likely undermine the value of their knowledge and skills. I show how, when people are resistant, their knowledge and skills are turned from being tools for the solution of problems, to being weapons in the conduct of contentious, problematic interaction. I then begin the process of showing how change is possible.

I use contrasting stories—or tell two versions of the same story. One version is the resistant one. The other is the responsive compassionate one. Soon I used the concept of “two worlds of experience,” and I labeled one world the *humane* way of being, and the other the *inhumane* way of being. People who are resistant to each other (and thus to their ethical call to do right by each other) interact inhumanely—accusingly, resentfully and defensively. People who are living compassionately (are acting in accordance with their ethical call) interact humanely—patiently, nurturingly, empathically. The qualities are not skills but symptoms of living true or false to their own feelings of ethical obligation. Once resistance has been given up, an individual is ready to benefit from the knowledge and skills family life educators have to offer.

This analysis runs counter to many interpretive renditions of human interaction, but I found people resonating with both the situations and the ideas. A pragmatic benefit of adopting this paradigm was in showing that many of our despairing, conflicted feelings are

neither to be controlled nor expressed, but given up. This hope comes from the idea that the source of such attitudes is grounded, not in how others are treating us, but in how we begin to treat them. This means hope for change resides in who we are, irrespective of who (or in what way of being) others are. When we are living resistant to our professed love or concern for the other, we seek to justify and excuse ourselves by blaming others or the situation. We must see ourselves as victims of the situation or the other in order to say things like, “After what I have been through today, I just can’t help but be resentful,” or, “I’m just not the sort of person who can handle being demeaned.” In other words, instead of allowing couples in contention to hold on to the idea that the other person is “making me feel this way,” we suggest the possibility that we are capable, no matter how venomous the other person is, to admit that it is possible to either take offense at the offensiveness (and become like the person we now see as the enemy), and respond in kind, or we can seek to do what can be done that is yet humane even while we are under attack. So we can respond to a demanding day with an admission that “I sure hope I don’t experience many more days like today,” without being resentful and moping about it. We can, instead of disqualifying our abilities when being demeaned, see that, “It is no fun being put down like that,” without also deciding we are incapable of standing our ground or being confident in our competence. The issue here is not how typical (or heaven forbid “normal”) such resentments or putdowns from others may be, but that it is possible to respond *humanely* even to *inhumane* treatment. This does not mean becoming a doormat, either, but actually involves a boldness in ethical assertiveness that tells the truth about the situation in a non-hostile way.

One philosophy expressed by Einstein (1956) seems to have accepted this possibility of not taking offense at offensiveness. He declared: “The bitter and the sweet come from the outside, the hard from within, from one’s own efforts. . . . Arrows of hate have been shot at me . . . but they never hit me, because somehow they belonged to another world, with which I have no connection whatsoever.” (p. 3).

Einstein offered these comments in 1934, which seems odd, given that he was well aware of the Nazi anti-Jewish efforts begun in the early thirties. He had the presence of mind to leave Germany well before the means to leave were systematically shut off. But given that his experience with a major evil of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was so direct, how can he claim to not have been touched by the arrows of hate? More specifically, how can he claim to have no connection to the world from which such hate springs? The answers may lie in his notion that the hard comes from within, “from one’s own efforts.” This comment seems to invoke the assumption that our own efforts help to create the attitude with which we meet the realities—beneficial or distressing—of everyday life. These efforts can be associated with the quality of our feelings, our thoughts and our attitudes. Granting the possibility Einstein seems to assume, our emotions are not necessarily imposed upon us by forces or factors we cannot control. The quality of our emotions can change and if so, implies we are agents in the present moment. If the “hardness comes from within,” from our own efforts, then surely the alternative is in our hands—is in our agency—as well. We may, when living ethically, sorrow for injustices and the reprehensible conduct of others without despairing. But once we move from a longing for justice and compassion to a pursuit of revenge, we have moved from a humane response to inhumane (unethical, poisonous) behavior and attitudes that are, in quality, like those being experienced by the people we are now blaming for making our lives miserable.

So my transformation as a family life educator went from focusing exclusively on

presenting knowledge and skills to proposing an alternative view of what it means to be human. That view includes the idea that we have a moral sense about how to treat others to which we can live true or false. When we are resistant to our ethical sense of how to treat ourselves and others, we help to create the problems we are trying to solve. Seeing the ethical domain of human beings as fundamental makes realistic the possibility that people can respond to the principles and practices recommended in FLE programs in ways that are not just expressive of disagreements, of cultural differences, of insufficient knowledge or of skills. It makes the first question in the pursuit of quality relationships, “Am I giving my best to the people I care about?” That does not mean others will automatically “be good to you if you are good to them,” but it does mean you are no longer part of the problem and have an ethical and practical starting point to seek solutions to whatever problems are at hand (Wallace & Olson, 1982).

I have discovered that people of all backgrounds can reflect on the possibility of resistance by examining their past experiences and asking themselves the two questions about when they had either resisted or yielded to their ethical sense of how to treat others. To imagine character as grounded in a certain quality of attitude affirms our ability to reflect on the meanings of our experience and perhaps to be capable of surprising insights and understandings, even those not dictated by our culture or habits. My own experience in making this approach work in FLE is that what matters most is not my experience as a family life educator, not my knowledge, not my skills—but whether or not when I deliver FLE content I am being humane. William James, in a related context, noted, “The best way to define a man’s character would be to seek out the particular mental or moral attitude in which, when it came upon him, he felt himself most deeply and intensely active and alive. At such moments there is a voice inside which speaks and says: This is the real me!” (James, 1920, as cited in Howard, 1986, p. 70). As a family life educator I seek to be and to invite others to be—real.

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### **Terry Olson Bio**

Terry Olson earned a Ph.D. from Florida State University in the Interdivisional Program in Marriage and Family Living. He taught at the University of New Mexico, where he prepared students to teach marriage and family classes in the public schools. From 1974, he continued to train public school teachers while at Brigham Young University and is currently a Professor in the School of Family Life at BYU and a Fellow of The Wheatley Institution. With a federal grant, he trained secondary teachers in several states to deliver family life/character curricula. He served on the NCFR committee that established the criteria for the CFLE designation. He helped create a curriculum and train social workers through a national grant to the National Council for Adoption.