

## A Message to Parents of Unification Church Members

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While traveling here today and also while attending several previous meetings like this in other parts of the country, I have been thinking that I can probably sum up much of what you have been feeling about your children's involvement in the Unification Church by sharing with you a few of the experiences that I have had with my own mother and father. Thus, I'd like to begin by telling you something about my relationship with my parents.

I was raised in a Lutheran home on Long Island, New York, but we weren't a very doctrinal family so we didn't pay very much attention to the fine points of Lutheran theology. Our particular church was not at that time affiliated with the Missouri Synod, which is strict about many things, but we believed in God and we went to church and the children went to Sunday School, and it was a wonderful experience. I'm very grateful I was raised in a Lutheran home.

When it came time for me to go to school my mother, who had been teaching me at home, sent me to the local Catholic school because they had a lower admission age than the public schools, so right from the beginning when I started school I was intermixing religious concepts and ideas. It wasn't at all a disadvantage to me, and I never understood why people were so concerned about what your particular religious background was. During the week we studied very hard in school from the Baltimore Catechism, and on weekends in Sunday School we studied Luther's Little Catechism. They're very similar in that both use a catechismal or question and answer format, which is very satisfying because you feel you're really growing and expanding in your understanding. The questions are arranged according to topic, and you don't really question the form of the question as it's posed but rather you just try to understand the answer.

I can still remember those questions and answers very clearly. When I was going through confirmation classes, for example, we discussed angels. Billy Graham recently wrote a book about angels, and one reason he wrote the book is that he's afraid people don't believe in angels anymore, and yet the Bible is filled with references to angels. The problem is that very few people have seen an angel, and since they haven't seen one and since the Bible was written such a long time ago, the belief in the existence of angels is gradually dying out. Billy Graham's book may stimulate people to reinvestigate angelology. Anyway, we learned that angels had one purpose: to adore God. Everything has to have a purpose, and the purpose of angels was to adore God. But then the question arose as to what angels are made of -- you know, they're not like man, and they're not exactly like God either. My Lutheran minister solved that. He said, "Angels are made of ectoplasm." That was an element of my religious faith: I knew that angels were created to adore God and they were made out of ectoplasm.

I did have a few religious problems when I was young. In Catholic grade school we used to pray with our hands pressed together, fingers pointed straight up, but then on weekends when I would go to the Lutheran Church we would pray with our hands clasped. I didn't think so much about it in the beginning, but from time to time I would wonder. I finally asked one of the nuns why we prayed like this in school and on the weekends I prayed the other way. I was having a little trouble, so I asked her which was the right way to pray. She said that either way to pray was okay but actually the way taught in the Catholic school was a little better. That isn't the answer I got from my Lutheran Sunday School at all, but obviously it was a fairly superficial thing.

I began to think that the differences in religions were based on things like that, and thus the differences didn't bother me. I had friends from all different religious backgrounds, and I never thought of religion as a force which divides people. I thought of religion as something which helps people to do something

better with their lives. The word religion actually comes from a Greek word which mean to "bind back," and means to draw man back to God.

Throughout high school my friends and I belonged to many different youth fellowships. In the 9th grade we all went to a Presbyterian fellowship. In the 10th grade everybody I knew went to a Methodist youth fellowship, and it went just like that. We interchanged, attending whatever was most popular at the moment, and everybody was welcome to all the groups. In fact, in my small hometown during the summer the different ministers would coordinate their vacations, so in July all the Presbyterians would worship at the Methodist Church while the Presbyterian minister was away, and then in August they would reverse. I felt there certainly couldn't be things they were afraid to expose one another to, and there must be many similarities, so I felt good about religious diversity, and I do now, but I want to tell you about something that happened to me in between.

When I went off to college I encountered for the first time a number of people who were not only not Protestants and not Christian, but who didn't even believe in God. They were atheists and agnostics, and I'm sure they were in the majority, particularly in my engineering school. We'd have discussions late into the night about God, about the world, and about our purpose for being. It was a very difficult time for me because I realized that there were many assumptions that were never challenged in my home community and thus we had reinforced our own beliefs, not realizing they were not universal. But when I left that community and entered a wider sphere it was ridiculous for an engineering student who was talking to an atheist to say that angels were made to adore God and were made out of ectoplasm. I did say it, but it didn't hold up, and I began to feel that somehow I had been hooked, that I'd been had, that something had been put over on me. They didn't warn me when I was little that not everybody believed those things. You were just so busy learning them that you never really thought about it.

Time passed and I had many different types of experiences. I wanted very much to understand the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, and I had a good friend who was Jewish so I took him for his first visit to a Lutheran church. As either coincidence or providence would have it, on that particular Sunday the minister chose to preach on antisemitism. In the beginning I thought this would be very good, to show that we didn't have any anti-Semitic feelings -- and it was true that the members in our church didn't. But as the minister began to preach I suddenly realized that my minister, whether he realized it or not, very definitely did. He was preaching about why anti-Semitism was wrong -- so far, so good -- and about why we shouldn't exhibit anti-Semitic attitudes -- that's also good -- but his conclusion stunned me. He said, in these exact words which I remember because they're burned into my skull, "So we have to hide our anti-Semitic feelings in order to make harmony in the religious community." I looked at my friend sitting next to me and I was humiliated. I couldn't understand how anybody could get up and say that, and not even realize the significance of what he had said.

My friend didn't go back to that church again, and I didn't go back either. Instead I began searching among many different groups. At that time the philosophy of Ayn Rand was very popular and Nathaniel Brandon, one of her disciples, was travelling around preaching something they called objectivism. It's an atheistic philosophy, and it doesn't hold up under a lot of tests, but it was interesting to me at the time because I was beginning to find that I couldn't justify the various things that people believed. In every case they were taking many things on faith, and I just couldn't find things that were rock-solid. And in order not to be caught short again, I refused to accept or believe anything if I couldn't prove it at least to myself. Often you can prove things to your own satisfaction that you can't really prove to somebody else, but at least for you it's solid. But many of those things I couldn't even prove to myself, and so I pushed them out of my mind and I didn't think about them too much.

But when I went home on visits I explained to my parents that I no longer believed in God -- or at least I was no longer sure. My parents had been very supportive of me all along -- let me say here that they're really wonderful people. They're Scandinavian, and both are the first generation born in America. Anyway, they were troubled that I had lost my faith, but they didn't feel they should try to force me to believe the same things they believed. My mother and I had several discussions about it. I remember one time she looked out the window and said, "Don't the trees and the sun and everything that you see out there prove to you that God exists?" And I said, "Well, it doesn't to me, even though it did once," and it does to me today. But it didn't then, when I was talking to her. She looked troubled and said, "Well, you'll have to find your own way. We can't force you to believe the things that we do." I know they didn't like it, but I also know they realized that this was an important question to me and I couldn't just accept blindly.

During the next several years, although I wouldn't exactly characterize myself as being on a religious search, I met many different kinds of people and I noticed that either they seemed to have -- or they were trying to find -- a focus or a direction. In order to be happy, I thought, you have to have some purpose. Some people in college were devoting themselves totally to their future careers, but to me that seemed rather shallow because later on you might change your career or lose your job. So your work couldn't be your ultimate purpose in life, however worthwhile it might be.

I saw many other people centering their lives around their families, and yet I also saw many early

marriages of both high school and college friends falling apart within a few years, and the heartbreak and sometimes the separation from their children was often worse than if they had waited or hadn't married in the first place, so obviously marriage in the external sense wasn't the entire solution either. So I really began to wonder what it is that you're supposed to do with your life.



Perhaps at this point I can share with you one fact that is very disturbing to me, which is that in the last 200 years we have experienced a tremendous breakdown of many of our social institutions, and it just isn't true to say that things are the same as they used to be. A few years ago it was very popular to say that the generation gap existed 2,500 years ago and would exist 2,500 years hence, so there was no reason for people to get excited about it now. It's true that certain problems have certainly been recurring, but in the last 20 years the rate of suicide, for example, has tripled; and even worse, during that time the suicide rate for young people between the ages of 20 and 24 has become the highest of any age group in our society when it used to be the lowest. Young people today are asking the same questions but not finding enough answers to go on living for just one more day. This is really tragic.

During this time I was thinking deeply about all these things and watching my friends go in many different directions. Some even got involved with hard drugs. In each case I examined and saw through their solution and I was certain it was only a matter of time until they would, too. For myself, I didn't want to wake up one morning and find out that my life was hollow.

I don't know what my life might have been like if I hadn't met this church, but it was very fortunate for me that on Easter morning in 1967 when I was living in Washington, D. C., my mother called to tell me that my oldest sister had just given birth to her first child -- my parents' first grandchild and my first nephew. I was exuberantly happy, and since it was Easter I thought I would go to church. I did go to church from time to time, but I was going culturally. Even when I didn't believe in God, I did like to go to church, and I couldn't explain that to anybody, not even to myself. I don't know why, but it always felt good to go to church, and so that Easter Sunday I found myself once again in church.

Easter is a most joyous holiday, and as I sat there listening to the choir singing, the atmosphere seemed electric. I was enjoying the service, and as I looked around I was struck really deeply with not just the smiles on everyone's faces but with the feeling of deep joy that I was sensing from the congregation. I thought to myself, "How is it that I'm so smart, studying engineering and analyzing everything, and I couldn't be satisfied with religion, but I'm not happy; and all these people, who don't know all these tremendous intellectual things that I've been learning, are satisfied with religion and are happy?" Nobody else I knew was happy, but somehow there in that Easter service for the first time in a long time I sensed a deep and genuine happiness, so I thought that there must be something in the church that I hadn't touched before. Perhaps the church I left was not the real message from God, from Jesus Christ, but rather the church as it was explained to me by people that were themselves unclear or unsure of their faith. Moreover, I might have left the church as an institution, but I hadn't left God, because I hadn't ever known Him. So I made a real commitment at that time to seek Him.

In the Unification Church we believe, as I'm sure many others do, that man's relationship with God is a

mutual one, and so in order to reach God you must first take a step towards Him, and then God comes running to meet you. But until you take that first step, even if God were to keep running right in front of you, He would have no way to even knock, until you can be open to Him. That's why it says in the Bible to knock and it'll be opened to you. Just knock. It doesn't say stand in front of the door and it'll be opened to you; just knock.

I knocked really loudly that day, and God answered me, though not as I expected. I filled out a little card hanging on the back of the pew in front of me that I signed to indicate "I want to transfer my church membership to this church," and I expected that the minister or someone would come to visit me, and I was wondering what would happen if he did. But he never did. Someday I'll go back to that church and remind them that they never had me join when I was ready. So my life became very different, because the next day I met members of the Unification Church.

At that time the Unification Church in Washington, D.C., was situated in a very humble house. I didn't know that it was also our national headquarters. It was just a rented row house, very sparsely furnished, located in a medium section of town, one that has since that time gone somewhat downhill. There wasn't anything to make that particular building outstanding from others, but when I walked in the door I felt something entirely new. Not only was it spic and span in a physical sense, but there was a spirit of warmth and love inside the house that seemed to jump right out and embrace you. Even though I had only walked in there for the first time, I felt that I was home. I felt the same way I do when I actually go home to New York, just as comfortable and just as completely at ease. Later on I realized that we should feel that way everywhere, as members of the one family of mankind that God wants spread throughout the world.

I felt so close to all the people in the house, yet they were very different and they came from a wide variety of backgrounds. It's very popular these days for the press to characterize all Moonies as being well-scrubbed, shorthaired, all out of the same mold, but those of you who have met members of our church know that of course we're not. Often we don't have very much in common with each other at all, except that we've come to believe in the same universal concepts about God and His relationship with mankind. We often feel our very diversity is one of the strongest verifications of our lives and our beliefs, because they are big enough to encompass everyone. To me, that's an important part of any religion.

I continued to visit that little house and I studied with them the Divine Principle -- the revelation received by our founder, the Reverend Sun Myung Moon. At first I resisted very strongly. I said, "If I'm going to believe in any religion at all, I'm going to believe in the Lutheran religion in which I was raised. Why should I join with you? All you have is a little house and a few people."

But something about it kept drawing me back. I often wondered why I went back, because I usually just criticized, complained, protested and attacked. But I went back again and again.

With all the things I had difficulty understanding or accepting, it seemed like every visit there was at least one positive thing that seemed to outweigh all the other things in their favor, and it was something different each time. As I studied the teachings of Reverend Moon, what I found was not that there were so many new and different things, not at all, but that the things I had learned when I was young were now explained in a way that I could understand and accept. As we talked about Jesus and his mission, for the first time he became a living reality to me. When we talked about all the prophets and disciples, they, too, became real people to me, because I finally understood what God was crying to accomplish through them. So I have never felt that by joining the Unification Church I was repudiating anything in my past; quite the contrary. The things that I had been taught came alive for me in a way that they never had before.

In every religion people pray, but I hadn't prayed so much, and probably most people in my generation didn't either. In church we had to read printed prayers which were very beautiful but which became very routine. One of the first things I learned at the Unification Church was that if you ever expect to have a relationship with God you must pray. You can't expect to have your relationship through somebody else's prayers. You have to be the one to reach out, if you are ever to establish a personal relationship with God.

In the beginning they told me very strictly that I had to pray at least 20 minutes in the morning and 20 minutes at night. I don't know where that rule came from, because I haven't heard it much since, but it was the rule when I joined. At that time I was sharing an apartment with several other people, and they certainly were not interested in my new religion, much to my surprise, so it wasn't easy for me to kneel down and pray for 20 minutes twice a day. And if you haven't ever prayed very much in your life, 20 minutes is a long time. It seems like forever. So it was a problem for me to fulfill this. I solved the problem by taking long showers. I would go into the bathroom, lock the door and turn on the shower, and then I'd kneel down inside the closet and pray for a while. I didn't pray to convince myself of the things I was hearing but I really prayed to know if these teachings were true, if this was really from God. I bet I didn't pray 20 minutes the first afternoon -- it was probably more like seven or eight minutes, although I convinced myself it was 20 minutes -- but I really felt something when I prayed. It was just like a little seed inside me had started to grow. My life completely changed, not with bombshells and fireworks, but

all of a sudden I began to feel, to be much more sensitive. I began to realize things, and I began to have a direction and a purpose.

Naturally I was very excited about all this, so after a few weeks I went dashing home to New York to share everything with my parents. It took me several days even to begin to understand that I was determined to convince them of and convert them to my wonderful new theology. I sat down at the dinner table and talked nonstop. I stripped away all that I thought was nonessential and condensed the really hard points into about a five minute speech. To my astonishment, instead of being completely electrified as I had expected, they just looked at me a little strangely and said, "Well, if you believe in God again I guess that's nice, dear."

My friends all protested my involvement in the Unification Church and said, "Don't you realize what's going to happen to you? If you move in there, you'll never come out the same." I said, "Well, isn't that the point? How are things ever going to change if people just remain the same? You have to change to grow and I want to grow."

Eventually I moved into the community and that little house which had felt so different to me then became my home. I often used to bring new people to visit and as we'd come to our street I'd point down the block very proudly and ask, "Can you tell which one it is?" They never could, so it wasn't a physical difference but there was a definite spiritual difference.

At first my parents were really happy, but then after a while they began to wonder just exactly how much time I was going to be devoting to this new church. Sometimes I think it's a mistake for us to call ourselves the Unification Church because people often think of a church as something you belong to and maybe go to on Sunday and perhaps a few times during the week for meetings. Our concept of a church, however, is much more like a religious order. Those who feel they've been called to join and help with this work really want to devote themselves to it, because they feel a responsibility to bring to many other people the same message which so excited and completely changed them. And just like life in a religious order, it's a very inspiring and demanding experience.

So my parents would talk to me from time to time, not saying much, but finally my mother just had to speak out. She said, "Neil, it's good to be religious, but do you have to be a fanatic about it?" I said, "Mother, you have to understand something: if there's a God at all, then I really want to serve Him; if there's no God, then I'm not going to go to church, period. Maybe it's not that way for everybody, but for me, at least right now, it's one way or the other." She said she would try to understand, and I invited her and my father down to Washington to visit us, because there was no way they could understand the Unification Church if they didn't experience it.

They came down to Washington for a visit, and we had our little house sparkling clean and we had a wonderful Thanksgiving weekend planned for them. After they arrived we had a meeting and we told them about our life there, and then we had entertainment, fellowship and skits, a wonderful and joyful time, and then we prepared a big dinner for them. As we sat down to dinner, I was really excited inside. We had a big spaghetti dinner, and all of a sudden my mother and father grew very quiet and didn't say anything. Lacer as they left I said, "Well, what did you think of your first visit?" My mother looked at me and said, "You made your father eat spaghetti on Thanksgiving!" "Mother, that's not important," I said. "What did you really think of the visit?" She said, "What I think of the visit is that you made your father eat spaghetti on Thanksgiving. If you don't even celebrate Thanksgiving, what kind of a church are you?"

But I continued to work very hard and I sent them all our books and literature, and I invited them to come visit again, but this time I told them they couldn't come until they had read the Divine Principle book. Isn't that strong talk for someone in my position! My mother said, "Well, we'll try," and once again they drove down to Washington. Both my parents are very honest, but my father is in a sense more bluntly honest than my mother, so when they arrived in Washington and got out of the car my mother would have been happy to avoid the question if I didn't bring it up, but my father couldn't even look at me. Then just as we were going to go inside he said, "We didn't read the book." He said, "We cried in the car on the way down. One would drive and the other would cry to read, but it just didn't seem to come a live to us."

The second visit was a much richer experience, and gradually they began to learn that the church wasn't built with some kind of people who were totally foreign to my background, but that it was filled with young men and women just like myself, living a life that they could really approve of, living in a way that made them proud. So without understanding everything about what we were doing, they came to really respect our movement and its members. They could see it was not only good for me, but good for the others as well, and it was an organization which wanted to do something good for the world. Thus my parents gradually began to support my involvement with the church. I'm grateful that they've had nine years -- I'm in my 10th year of membership now -- to come to that kind of understanding. And fortunately at that time there weren't all kinds of alarming reports about us in the newspapers and on television pushing and pulling them; instead they were able to form their opinions based on firsthand experience, and that's how they made their judgment. I'm very grateful for that, and certainly one of the reasons we

held today's meeting was to invite you to do the same.

After a while my parents began to wonder again, not whether or not I was going to devote all my time to the church, because they came to accept that, but they were concerned about my future. When I first went off to college several years before they had said very clearly, 'You're a young man and your whole life is in front of you. Don't be too hasty in getting married, or you 'll have a rope around your neck and a bunch of children and you won't even finish college. Your father didn't marry until he was 27 and look how stable and good our marriage is. Then look at your friends who married early and see the contrast. The thing is, don't get married at an early age.' I listened to them and I thought they were right, but suddenly only a year after I joined the church they were asking when I was going to settle down and get married.

The years went by, and finally in 1970 after I had been in the church three years the time came that there was going to be a large wedding in Korea, and I was one of the people qualified to participate. I was very happy to do that, and I called my family from Denver where I was doing missionary work at the time. My mother answered the phone and when I said, "I have a very important announcement to make," she said, "Lee me get your father on the phone." When my father picked up the phone I told them I was getting married. They said, "Why are you rushing? Take your time."

That was in April. The wedding took place in October in Korea. When we came back from the wedding we had a very wonderful opportunity for our families to meet. My wife's parents live on the west coast, and my parents live on the east coast, and they never travel, but just by coincidence a few months after that for the first time since World War II my wife's father had to go to the east coast, so he brought his wife along and our families got together. We had a tremendously wonderful time, and at last my parents could really feel some sense of fulfillment, some trust and confidence in our concept of marriage, in our beliefs and in our dedication.

Because our marriage customs are so different, I know it was difficult for my parents -- and I'm sure it's difficult for many of you at times. But people are the same, with the same needs and desires. It's just that we feel that in our way of life those needs and desires are met more deeply. That's been the case for me, and I'm sure that others have had the same experience. My parents have come not only to be proud of my family but also to believe in many of the concepts that we have.

A very fundamental concept in the Unification Church is the spiritual preparation for marriage. Today in America 40 percent of all marriages end up in divorce, but we don't have divorce in the Unification Church because we are so rigorous in preparing spiritually before getting married. We really feel that this will be an important key to change society, to raise the general spiritual standard and to create families which will reflect God's living presence.

We've come to follow a certain way of life which has required a tremendous investment of ourselves and tremendous faith. But the members of this church are your sons and daughters, and you know how strong-minded they are, how when you raised them they seemed to be very independent people, in most cases. Do you think they became any different after joining the Unification Church? Not at all. And contrary to the popular belief that we are all the same, think the same, talk the same, I think it's a testimony to the power and scope of our teaching that such strong-minded people have all been able to find themselves here and to make a commitment here, a commitment which endures a very difficult test.

Recently when my parents were visiting me here at our headquarters in New York, I was thinking how grateful I am that they have been so supportive and that over the years they've gradually been able to digest and accept what I've come to believe, the thing which has meant so much to me. My family is only closer as a result of my relationship with the church, because of the emphasis that we place on families. And that's generally true for most of our church members. Many times when young people join the Unification Church they're already estranged from their families, for whatever variety of reasons are currently prevailing in our society, and after being in the church for a while their relationships with their parents invariably improve and become deeper than ever before. So I honestly don't think there's anything in our church that divides families, if the parents can just accept their children as adults and respect their commitment. That's been my own experience and the experience of many of our members, and I know it can be true for all of them.

Some sociologists analyzed different families according to income, educational level, and so forth, and they found that the closest families were not necessarily the richest families. In fact, sometimes they had to struggle against incredible financial difficulties. But they were the families in which the father and mother loved each other. That love is a reflection of God's love, and if God's love is restored throughout America we can overcome all our problems.

This is the goal and purpose of the Unification Church. To accomplish it, we are determined to commit all of our hearts, all of our minds and all of our strength. By working together with our parents and our brothers and sisters, we are convinced that this ideal can become a reality - for ourselves, for our parents, but most of all, for our children.