

SUMMARY - The Shelter of Each Other

Mary Pipher, Ph.D.

February 4, 2008

A snowy, cold evening in February with soft sounds of the Edina String Quartet was the perfect backdrop for the Edina PCN National Speaker, Dr. Mary Pipher, PhD. She began her talk comparing her grandparent's upbringing in Nebraska with a contemporary American family. Her grandparents had the stress of financial worries, health problems and weather/farming unpredictability. The contemporary family has the stress of so many demands on their time, corporate downsizing, parenting concerns and the influence of media. Today's families have to navigate technology which is a two-edged sword: it offers easy access to so much information but it also is another demand for our precious time and can have many unintended consequences.

We need permission to say 'no' and opt out of some energy-draining activities. She told the story of a little girl who had an imaginary friend named Mr. Ravoli to whom she spoke only on the phone. Her parents eventually figured out that she was mimicking them as she spoke to Mr. Ravoli, "I'm so busy, maybe we can catch up next week. Sorry to have to cancel again." How are we modeling friendship?

The comparisons of these two families continued. Mary's grandparents had the support of a large extended family. Mary stressed the importance of the grandparent's role of providing the moral lessons and offering a different perspective to children. If grandparents are not able or willing to play this role she suggested that parents seek older neighbors, or church members to fill this void because intergenerational relationships are so important. This leads to the importance of the greater community and Mary suggested that we intentionally reach out to our community's kids, especially teens, to let them know that adults, other than their parents, are watching them and value them.

Mary then offered some suggestions for families wanting to grow closer and be a buffer from the media-centered broader culture. She praised the City of Edina as an "enlightened community" where there is beautiful green space, parks and even our "Unplugged Night." She suggested that parents be vigilant about media, movies, and internet. Viewing movies and television together with your kids offers excellent opportunities to point out good and bad choices. She also made the point that computers and cell phones are neutral items which can be helpful in their intended uses, but damaging with their unintended uses. Electronic games, TV, and the internet are not "bad" but evaluate which activities your children may be missing such as outdoor play, imaginative play or reading.

The very essence of Mary's talk suggested that she values calmness, nature, and the outdoors and many of her books point to the intrinsic value of providing these experiences to children. They reduce the stress of our fast-paced culture. These experiences give perspective and even if children do not feel they fit in at school; animals and nature provide self esteem and a quiet place to be yourself.

Finally, Mary reminded parents that humans are social and we all need social interactions. She suggested that parenting groups, formal or informal, offer parents reassurance, advice and support against the "but everyone is doing it" phenomena. Family meals, vacations and outings will be the forever memories for both parents and children.