



Articles for the LIOS Core Track

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LIOS Core Curriculum – Family of Origin **A PROCESS GUIDE FOR FAMILY OF ORIGIN WORK** Sherry Willis 7/07

We encourage you to use these steps *in the order presented*.

1. **Begin by reading the articles on this section of the website.** They will help you become familiar with the purposes for doing the work and some history and techniques. Please note there is also a very long article by “Anonymous” in our library. It is Dr. Murray Bowen’s fascinating article about early work in his own family, and by today’s standards that work is harsh. It is included because of the power and clarity of the moves he made, but it is not a model to emulate. See Diane Schachter and Tim Weber’s writings below on contemporary ways to approach this work.
2. **Use Diane Schachter’s *Changing Self with Family of Origin: A Checklist Prior to Interviewing Your Family Members*.** Study these strategies again. Take your time to understand them well. We strongly encourage you to do taped interviews with your family unless the taping might deter someone from talking to you. You may want the perspective of your mentoring or learning partner to check in with as you proceed.
3. **Step into *Conversations of Love and Truth*.** Having done the prior steps, you are now ready to move more deeply into the heart of the matter. Use these guidelines and your mentoring or learning partner to keep your direction clear.
4. **If needed, use the *Family of Origin Interviews* guidelines.** These questions are only a back up. If you need more neutral conversations to begin the conversations, look through this series of questions. Perhaps there is an area of your family’s life that is a mystery to you and you think it would be particularly helpful to know about it. Perhaps you have strained relations with you family and some neutral inquiry would be a helpful warm-up. One would be unlikely to ask all, or even very many of these questions, but they could provide a springboard for more meaningful conversations.

Changing Self with Family of Origin

A Checklist

Diane Schachter

The following is a checklist of strategies for changing oneself in one's family of origin.

I. Become an astute observer of your family:

A. Learn all the facts you can:

1. Emphasize who, what, when, where and how, not why.
2. Ask yourself questions, such as:
 - a. Do you know and relate to all members in all branches of your family?
 - b. Are you equally fair to all, including self?
 - c. Do you accept all members, although not necessarily approving of what those members do?

B. Become aware of:

1. Your family process: the traumas, myths, patterns, rules, and binds.
2. The part you play in the process—the myths you believe and the rules you follow—and decide, of those rules you follow, which ones you like and want to continue following and which ones you want to change.

II. Make a plan which can be implemented slowly in an ongoing campaign:

A. Contacting members:

1. Contact family members on a one-to-one basis. When you spend time with your family in a group in its usual setting there is a patterned way of relating which keeps a homeostatic balance. When you meet with each member alone, you are less likely to become stuck in the patterns.
2. It is often easier to contact peripheral members first to gather more information and gain a richer perspective on your origins, before making contact with central figures, especially if there are long-term cutoffs. It is most important, however, to develop a person-to-person relationship with each parent and sibling.
3. Any cutoff member in the extended family is very important, well worth getting to know and forming your own opinion about. A cutoff member is often one who broke the family rules, and knowing this person gives you important information. Also, it shakes up the rest of the system when you contact a cutoff member.

B. Letters, phone calls, visits:

1. Writing letters can open up emotional issues from a distance. If you predict the response you expect in a letter, it may diffuse some of the intensity.
2. Writing to one parent at a time about one emotional issue can focus your effort. Then you can follow up in a visit.
3. Take responsibility for writing or calling, asking yourself if you are following the checklist.
4. Initiate both the beginning and ending of phone calls.
5. Plan each visit, determining how long you will be able to relate without getting sucked back into destructive patterns.

III. Beginning of Change:

A. Take an "I" position in the family:

1. Take responsibility for and make clear statements about your own feelings, thoughts, and actions without blaming the other for the way you are.
2. Control your own emotional reactivity. Stay between serious and humorous so that you can move either way, like the zoom lens on a video camera that moves in for a close-up and out to observe the whole group.
3. Humor, fantasy, and the recognition of the absurd can be valuable allies in detoxifying tense situations.
4. Keep yourself detriangled in the family:
 - a. Insist on one-to-one communication.
 - b. Avoid taking sides.
 - c. Avoid listening to negatives about a third person.
5. If you become locked into an emotional triangle with your parents:
 - a. Move laterally and focus on others who are emotionally important to your parents in their generation—aunts and uncles.
 - b. Move vertically and focus on those in the generations above and below your parents (i.e., your grandparents, your great uncles and aunts, or your siblings or cousins.)
6. Find ways to communicate clearly and openly about matters that are barely or never referred to, making the covert overt. Secrets are often withheld or differentially shared, forming a boundary between the secret holder and the unaware family member, which can perpetuate mystification and foster cutoffs.

7. Use your feelings as signals to yourself that you are getting sucked in when old feelings, such as anxiety, hurt, and anger, surface.
8. Take advantage of birth, marriage, divorce, illness, and death as prime times for family contact. It is easier to change one's actions in the family when the family is in crisis or transition.
9. Be aware of the realignment of emotional forces following death, and how the family balance shifts to fill the void. This is a time when new emotional alliances can form or members may cut off, or those who have cut off can rejoin the family.

B. Differentiation is a three-step process:

1. You make a differentiating move.
2. You expect opposition from the family togetherness forces.
3. You know what you will do in response to the opposition forces in the family so you are not taken by surprise.

If you keep on your own calm course, eventually the family members will give up their struggle and accept that "that's the way you are." At that point, another family member, following your example, may make a differentiating move.

C. Bowen's three rules for communication with family of origin:

1. Avoid counterattacking when provoked.
2. Do not become defensive.
3. Maintain an active relationship with other key members without withdrawing or becoming silent.

Conversations of Love and Truth:
Developing Intimacy and Real Talk Within the Family of Origin
Tim Weber

As we live out our lives, we often live at a distance from one another. Relationships of "realness," relationships of authenticity where there is trustworthiness and a commitment to conversations of "love and truth" are rare, but deeply yearned for as we journey through life. Within our family of origin over the years, we have evolved relationships and stories that are powerful and continue to shape and influence who we are and who we might become. Relationships within this family do not disappear, regardless of the emotional or geographical distance that separates family members. Even death may end a life, but it does not end a relationship that we continue to carry in our heads and hearts. Because of the power of the family of origin and its deep roots in previous generations, these relationships are not only worth thinking about, but merit attention and discovery. What might happen as we engage in live encounters of direct address about our relationships with other family members in the past, present, and future? What possibilities might emerge as we commit ourselves to conversations of "love and truth"—speaking our truth or experience, hearing the truth/experience of the other person, doing all this with respect and care, with a commitment to learn from our conversations with each other?

The following questions are intended to help spark these kind of conversations. The questions are intended to be "doorways" to further questions, **discoveries**, and explorations. Use these questions to stimulate your thinking, to help you clarify your own sense of your history and relationships, and to help you begin and deepen your learning with other family members. The family of origin is a very rich, usually untapped resource for discovery and learning. Authentic conversations are often avoided because of one fear or the other. You may need time to "set the stage," to begin to seed opportunities for deeper conversations. I do encourage you, however, to move forward with intention and good will with a spirit of curiosity and discovery. This kind of spirit mixed with courage can open many possibilities and, surprisingly, may impact other parts of our lives in ways we never imagined.

The Yearning

*We show up only partially,
But we yearn to be known more completely.
Faint our frail voices speak,
To be sought, to be found, to be heard
We seek, we seek.
And in that unexpected moment
Of the unexpected gift*

—T.Weber, LIOS, April, 2001

From Parents to Sons and Daughters

Note: These questions are intended to stimulate parents in giving feedback to their sons and daughters. The questions focus on the parents' view of their sons and daughters history and especially the relationship with the parent. These questions are intended to open up a richer conversation of "love and truth" between parents, sons, and daughters that may lead to new discoveries and learnings.

1. What gifts to do see in your daughter/son? What particular talents, attributes, personality traits are you particularly pleased with and, moreso, do you believe your daughter/son is gifted with so that these gifts may be used to serve, help, contribute, bring life to others and the world?
2. How has your daughter/son helped you, led you to learn more about yourself, helped you grow into a more complete person? Give some specific examples of how your daughter/son has challenged you to grow?
3. How do you wish your daughter/son could be different and why? What characteristics, personality traits, habits do you believe could benefit your daughter/son?
4. How do you believe you have contributed to your daughter's/ son's development? What do you believe you have added to their lives?
5. How do you believe you have contributed to your daughter's/son's difficulties in living? What habits, personality characteristics, attitudes, behaviors do you regret having modeled for your daughter/ son? What do you need to apologize for and how do you wish you could have been different? How do you need to be forgiven and what do you want to do differently?
6. How do you want things to change with your daughter/son? What are you prepared to do differently in order to correct for your regrets and create a relationship of greater well-being? What do you think your daughter/son would like you to do differently? Are you prepared to possibly modify your behavior based on feedback from your daughter/son?
7. What would you like differently from your daughter/son in relationship with you? How would you like your daughter/son to change their relationship with you? What might you do differently to help that change take place?
8. How open are you to feedback from your daughter/son without having to explain or defend your behavior? Are you open to inquiry and possible influence?

Between Parents, Sons and Daughters

Note: These questions are for the son and daughter as they engage in conversations with their parents. These questions are intended to start and stimulate conversations in a more free wheeling manner. The overall goal is one of deepening "love and truth"—the core dynamics of intimacy and integrity in human relationships—and learning that leads to life and well-being.

1. What credits would you give to each parent and to both of them as parents? What gifts have they shown? What are their strengths? How have they contributed to your life?
2. What do you want to "take away" from each parent into your own character and life? What traits from each parent do you want to embody and develop in your life?
3. What are the core struggles or "pinches" you have had with each parent? What traits or personality habits of each parent have distressed you over the years?

4. What do you want to "take away" from each parent? What traits do you want to "leave behind" as you develop your own life or at least significantly modify as you live out your life?
5. What regrets do you have-apologies-of how you have treated and responded to each parent over the years?
6. Ask each parent: "What is your feedback for me about how I have evolved my life? What do you like about how I have developed? What don't you like? What do you wish I would change about my life? What are you most concerned about? What are you most proud of as you review my life?"
7. Ask parents questions about their lives using the attached document on "life review". What questions do you have for each parent about their lives?
8. How would you like to change your relationship with each parent? What do you want to maintain, what do you like? What do you want to be different and how? What are you willing to do to change your relationship with each parent? What do you want your parent to do differently?
9. If this is your last conversation and you never see each other again, what would you want to say so that you would have said the most important things to each parent?

Between Siblings

Note: These questions are intended to stimulate siblings in conversations of love and truth as they review their past, present, and future together. These questions are intended as "doorways" to richer and deeper conversations of authenticity and learning. What might you learn about yourself as you think about these questions, discover your thoughts and feelings about these ideas, and listen to feedback from your sibling? If you stay open to learning, if you are dedicated to speaking the truth, hearing the truth, engaging in live encounters with respect and care, and learning, then you will increase the possibilities for evolving something new, not that it will be finished, but that your relationship and you will be more real than before.

1. What gifts and strengths do you perceive in each other? How have you appreciated the other's gifts over the years? What are the ways you believe the other has contributed to the lives of others over the years?
2. How do you think your sibling has used his/her gifts on behalf of your family of origin? How do you believe you have brought your gifts and talents into the family to support and strengthen the family?
3. What values, ways of living, rituals from your family of origin have been most important to you as you have evolved your life? What have you kept and expanded?
4. What particular habit patterns, values, ways of living have you worked to discard and leave behind? Why?
5. Are there any experiences, events, incidents during the course of your history with each other (including your early years before leaving home) that have been particularly distressful, confusing, unclear, unfinished that you want to talk about? What questions do you have? What statements do you want to make? What do you want to say that might not be clear? What needs to happen differently for you to be able to move on from those distressing or difficult memories?

6. What particular behaviors in the other have been most bothersome to you over the years? How have you been irritated at the other, perhaps even angry with the other? Why? What would you like differently?
7. Do you have any regrets about how you have treated or related to your sibling over the years? What are your regrets?
8. How do you think you have helped and supported each other (and other members of your family of origin) over the years? What do you want differently from each other? What are you willing to give?
9. Do you think you have fairly shared in the burdens and benefits of being in this family through the years? Why or why not? How have things been fair in the family? Where have there been areas of unfairness in your relationship? How do you want things to change?
10. How satisfied are you with how each other has responded to critical issues, illness, crises within the family?
11. What are your thoughts and feelings about how each of you has related to your parents? How do you think each of you were treated by your parents or other extended family members (e.g., grandparents, aunts, uncles)? Did either one of you seem to get more benefits and privileges than the other, or more burdens and responsibilities than the other? How were you treated alike and differently?
12. How much do you know about your parents' will and inheritance? Do you want to know more and from whom? Do you care? Do you believe all the issues regarding inheritance and the distribution of assets has been, will be managed fairly? Do you have any concerns? If so, what are they?
13. What are your thoughts about how each of you celebrate family holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, weddings, graduations, family vacations, and other family of origin gatherings and rituals? What works for you, what doesn't work, and do you want to make any changes?
14. Do you call each other just to "check in" and inquire about each other's life? Who takes the initiative to do this? Do you want more or less of this? Do you believe the other has an interest in knowing about your life? How much of the important dreams, aspirations, desires, happenings in your life is your sibling aware of? Do you have any interest in knowing the other more and being known by the other more? If so, how do you believe this could happen?
15. What do you want the other to know about you that you think is not known or misunderstood?
16. Do you want any feedback from your sibling about how you have evolved your life-your work, relationships, the way you use money, choices in life, future goals, etc.? How open are you to this feedback without having to defend yourself?
17. If you could change anyone thing in your relationship with each other to make it more satisfactory to you within the next couple of months, what would that be? What are you willing to do to help that change happen?

The Top Questions for Life Review

As you think about your life and all that has happened to you and all of the decisions you have made, these are some of the questions that hopefully will help you reflect on what has been most important, influential, and meaningful in your life.

1. What are you most proud of having done or contributed to the lives of others? What do you believe have been your most important gifts as you have lived your life?
2. Who have been the most important people who have shaped and influenced your life inside the family...and outside the family? How have they been important to you in shaping the kind of person you have become?
3. What have been the three most important decisions in your life and why?
4. What decisions have you regretted or wished that you could have taken back and redone? Why?
5. What personality characteristics or values of yours are you most happy about and cherish? Why?
6. What habits or personality characteristics have you struggled with the most and wish you could have changed?
7. What have you been most disappointed about in life? More specifically, what dreams did you have that you have not accomplished or realized?
8. If you could go back to the age of 19 and make new decisions about your life based on what you know now, what different decisions would you make and what decisions would you keep the same?
9. Regarding me what has most pleased you about my life, how I have developed, choices I've made, values I hold, etc.? And what regrets do you have about how you parented me? If you could change anything about my life, what would you have changed or change now?
10. Concerning your life now, what gives you most meaning? What do you look forward to when you get up in the morning or think about the week ahead?
11. Regarding our relationship now and in the future...do you want anything different between us, how we relate, how we interact? If so, what?
12. If I take away anything from your life and live it out in my life as a legacy or memory to you, what would you want me to live out? What values, commitments, goals in my life best represent what is most important to you?

Family of Origin Questions

Brenda J. Kerr

Revised 2006 by Sherry Willis

Again, these are **backup questions**. If you need a fairly neutral introduction to begin your conversations, let your parent or other family member know that you are interested in knowing more of your family's history. Be selective as you choose from the following questions. Choose a few that would be the best springboard for further conversations of particular interest to you. This document assumes you will tape these conversations: you may or may not choose to do so depending on how open to the possibility family members are. Tapes are very helpful.

Instructions: *First Interview Questions:* It is important that the parent (or other family member) be alone with you at the time of taping. Request that the first parent interviewed not discuss the questions with his/her spouse. It is important that you not get emotionally hooked by what a parent might say. Avoid over-explaining the questions. Allow whatever emotions arise to have their own life. Do not disagree; do show empathy. Use your best Carkhuff helping skills. We suggest a maximum taping time of 30 minutes per session.

Note: It is important that you have a clear agreement with each person to conduct the interview before beginning. Ideally this should be made clear a few days before the interview. Before beginning the interview, check in again with the person.

Interview Questions

- Who was around when they were children—3-4 years old?
- Earliest memories, i.e., grandparents, toy, event, etc.
- Early school memories—did they like school; their parents' attitude toward school.
- Memories of their house(s) and neighborhood.
- What they did for fun—family fun activities.
- What chores did they do around the house?
- Who of their parents was the disciplinarian?
- Who listened to their feelings when they were sad, happy, angry, etc.?
- Early memories of relationships with siblings.
- Favorite ways to get into trouble.
- Who among parents gave permission to go anywhere?
- What did you have to do, or how did you have to be, in order to be on Mom's or Dad's "good" list?
- Who lined up with whom in family squabbles.

- Anyone from whom they were always on opposite sides.
- Is there any discomfort in talking about these things?
- Any family mottos or rules frequently repeated by parents.
- What was it like for you as a teenager?
- Who was your first girl/boyfriend?
- How, where, and when did they meet their spouse?
- What was their attraction—what did they like most about them?

Before conducting a second interview, it is good to review your first tape for any specific areas or issues to focus on in more detail with an individual parent. Once you get into the marriage years, you can speak to your parents together.

The Marriage Years

- What do you recall of the events leading up to the decision to get married?
- What were your parents' feelings around your decision to marry—also siblings' reactions?
- How long had you known each other before making the decision?
- Who asked whom to get married? Where did it occur? What were the circumstances?
- Memories of that first year of marriage—activities, friends, living together.
- Memories of the first house and neighborhood.
- What did you do together and apart for fun?
- In your new relationship, how did you deal with conflict, sadness, anger, happy feelings?
- How did you divide up the work around the house—who took on what jobs and roles? How did you feel about the division of labor?
- What was it like during pregnancy (expectancy period)—health, feelings, concerns, fears?
- What were the circumstances (events) around the arrival of the first child?
- What was it like for you being a mother/father—feelings, concerns, anxieties, joy in your new role and responsibilities?
- Memories of first-born and your developing relationship—things you did with child, attitudes, hopes, expectations.

- How did your marriage relationship change with arrival of child?
- How did you deal with conflict, disagreements over new roles, money, raising children, wants, needs, expectations?
- What happened when you could not agree on something—did someone always give in or could you agree to disagree?
- Is there any discomfort in talking about these things?
- What was going on in your life outside of the home?
- Did you have anyone you could talk to about personal things and feelings?
- What was happening around the arrival of the next born—circumstances, events of note—feelings?
- How did this addition to the family change your relationship with your first child, husband/wife?
- Memories of second born and your developing relationship—things you did with child, attitudes, hopes, expectations, feelings, awarenesses of differences between first and second child.
- Memories of siblings' relationship as children and teenagers—how did they get along—how did you deal with sibling conflict, resentment, jealousy?
- What things did you do for fun as a couple (without kids) and as a family?
- Sum up your views of married life and personal life: joys, disappointments, feelings. Generally, how were things for you after 10 years of marriage?
- Recollections of major events that occurred during those 10 years, and how they influenced you.

Note

- Repeat appropriate questions around arrival of other children.
- Before conducting any subsequent interviews, review prior tapes.