

An Uncle's Love

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Almost every day I wake up to the news of someone I know getting married; the pre-wedding photos, the invitation cards and the eventual wedding ceremonies: Traditional, Court and Ecclesiastical. Within one or two years another invitation will be issued: Baptism/Dedication of the fruits of the marriage. What follows subsequently will be the child growing up, rising in ranks and stature through the various academic cadres: kindergarten, nursery, primary, high school and university. In these growing up years, the child gets to make friends, amassing another group of people in the socialization process. Man is a social being after all – a being with and for others in the words of the German Philosopher Martin Heidegger.

However, in this growing up process, I have noticed a neglect which I really want to point out at least for the next generation. I said next generation because I have the impression that my own generation and the generation before me have already made the mistake. I am referring to the socialization that should take place within the family circus. It is true that family is a given. No one chooses a family to be born into. But that should not make us take our family and relatives for granted. Love them. Embrace them. Make yourself present to them especially in their growing up process.

In the African cultural experience for instance, it is very rare to meet a family with just one child. At least from two upwards. This affords the child to have at least a brother or a sister. This is very important and crucial in the growing up process – having someone to share early childhood with, growing up together. So, these guys (siblings) will also come of age, get married, get their own families and kids in the long run. This is where we often get it wrong.

I mean to say that my brother's or sister's children should be my children as well. I shouldn't see them as rivals to my own children. While they have their dad and mum; their uncles and aunts should also participate in the growing up process. As an uncle or aunt when you miss this crucial stage; if you don't earn the love of your nephews and nieces in their childhood and growing up it might be very difficult to earn it when they are grown up/young adults. When you take your nephews and nieces as your own children with all the love and affection; your own children will also see them not just as their cousins but as their brothers and sisters. When this happens, you have secured the future and unity of the family in its extended dimension.

You would not expect your brother's and sister's children to treat you with all the love and respect as their uncle and aunt when they never experienced that affection from you when they were growing up. Neither will you expect them to treat your own children with affection and closeness that should exist among cousins when there was no such bonding in their growing up process.

Why is this even important? It is because when we all grow old, become weak or retired, it is our children that will take care of us. You will be a happy man and woman as you grow old to realize that you had expanded your scope of children in the long run to include not just your biological children but also your nephews and nieces. So that you do not expect so much from people whom you have given little or nothing as they were growing up; it is better to begin now to take that your brother's/sister's child/children as your own child/children as well.

Children love and appreciate gifts as concrete expressions of affections. Each time you visit your brother or sister in their house for instance, it is vital to get, no matter how small, a gift for your nephew/niece; try to ask them how they are doing in school; you can offer to buy them a textbook, a school uniform or give them some pocket money for snacks in school. Don't miss out their Christmas gifts every year. These are some little gestures that can help build the bond with your nephews and nieces. They are not your responsibility but you are their Uncle/Aunt and they will naturally expect these gestures. When you miss this early growing up gestures never expect anything from them when they eventually grow up.

In the part of Africa where the writer comes from, in the past there have been so many stories of "Bad" Uncles and Aunts. There have been grave

accusations of some even having a hand in the death of their brother or sister either because they were doing better than them, or their children were the most successful than their children or about a family inheritance. Some have been accused of deliberately refusing to assist their nephews and nieces so that they won't be successful in life like their children. Some have even been accused of eliminating their nephews and nieces in what could be best described as a "family game of thrones." These stories are so many that one cannot easily dismiss them as mere speculations. I once heard a sad story of an Uncle who pursued his brother's wife and children out of their house and took possession of the house at the demise of his brother. He even accused them of killing his brother. Imagine how evil the heart of man can be!

Dear young uncles and aunts, love conquers all. Charity begins at home. I am writing this to my generation and the next. Let us not take the family for granted. Let's build family love. Not all fingers are equal yet all fingers are equally valid and valuable. Young uncles and aunts begin now to build the love that should exist between you and your nephews and nieces so that as they grow up the love would have been solidly established. It is not automatic. Never take it for granted. Build it up gradually. Take them as your own children and they will easily take you as their own father or mother. Love is reciprocal. Love is everything.

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