

CARING FOR OUR FAMILIES

Marianne Larned, Founder of the Stone Soup Leadership Institute

Caring for others has always been a tradition in the Carey family. We greeted new neighbors with a loaf of Grammie Carey's pecan rolls. New mothers would find my Aunt Betty's lasagna on their doorstep. Lonely friends were invited to share a Thanksgiving meal, and grieving families got sweet treats and warm hugs.

As children, we often begrudged the exporting of goodies from our kitchen, calculating that someone else's gain must be our loss. But whether we realized it sooner or later, we were learning one of life's most important lessons. Caring for others multiplies love, like the loaves and fishes.

For many years, our extended family came together for christenings, graduations, weddings, and funerals. Since the four Carey siblings had twenty-eight children, there were lots of special occasions to celebrate. We laughed and cried, ate and drank, sang and danced together. Together, pain was more bearable, joy more wonderful; those gatherings were like glue.

Like many families who grew up between the 1950s and the 1990s, we struggled to find ourselves. As each of us searched for his or her own uniqueness, our differences sometimes collided. Often, we'd end up confronting each other on the happiest occasions and parting with deep resentments. As the years went by, we lost track of what we had in common, forgot how much we needed each other, and somewhere along

the way, our family's tradition of caring seemed to fade.

But, as a wise friend once told me, if we want to change the world, we can start with our families. They're the best place to start learning how to care for our communities. I wasn't sure how to begin with my own family, but I knew I had to try.

One day my mother, my Aunt Betty, and I confided in one another our concern, sadness, and sense of loss. Over the years we had had our share of heartaches. Loved ones, fathers and children, had been taken too soon, some before we got to say good-bye. We couldn't bear to lose anyone else, and we couldn't wait any longer for healing to happen on its own. We longed to put the family together again.

We decided it was time for a family reunion to revive the true Carey spirit. We sent a flyer inviting all twenty-eight cousins (and their thirty-five children) to a Fourth of July celebration at Aunt Betty and Uncle Connie's camp on Lake Champlain in Vermont. We were eager to see how our family would respond, and to our great delight, they came! From California, Florida, and all over New England, they came to see if the magic was still there. Some hadn't seen each other for years. Many had never met their cousins' new spouses or children. People who hadn't spoken in ages gave up their resentments and renewed old friendships. An annual tradition was born.

Pretty soon we outgrew the camp. Now, each year, we search for the perfect spot, somewhere in New England: a secluded campground with a big fireplace, picnic tables, and a swimming hole for the kids. There'll be no shopping for thirty miles, and no televisions or telephones. Instead, for a few days we chop wood, carry water, cook over fires, pitch

tents, and sleep on the hard ground. Each family brings their favorite food, and vegetables from their garden. Out of a basket someone pulls a tablecloth, some candles, and good wine. *Voilà!* Stone Soup! Somehow nature demands that we all pitch in.

After dinner around the campfire, everyone listens as people tell stories from their childhood. When my Uncle Francis was a teenager in the 1930s, he worked with FDR's Civilian Conservation Corps to build these campgrounds. I, who grew up in the idealist sixties, exchange notes with Nancy, who came of age with sex, drugs, and rock and roll in the seventies. Ben, a teenager now, helps us prepare for the future. As we share our stories and responsibilities, we renew our common values and vow to raise our children with them.

We welcome new babies into the clan. In such close quarters, their early-morning whimpers trigger instincts in other mothers. One mother takes another's cranky child for a walk, or for a swim in the lake. Last year's toddlers are running with the "big kids" now. Two five-year-old cousins meet and become friends.

"Mom, that boy keeps following me," says Simon, a bit confused. His mother patiently explains, "That's your cousin, Taylor, and he wants to play with you." Once Simon understands he has a new playmate, they are inseparable. They explore the woods, play monster in the water, and bury themselves in the sand. They giggle and laugh, and tease and torment each other. Their contagious friendship causes aunts and uncles to smile, remembering the fun they had together with young cousins. Our family spirit is reconnected and rekindled. There are hugs—lots of them: We stock up for months.

When it's time to leave, everyone is too busy packing to notice that Simon and Taylor aren't around. Suddenly, Simon's watchful mom calls out the alarm. The entire family joins in a frantic search for the boys, until someone follows a trail of Hershey bar wrappers to the hiding place of two chocolate-covered smiling faces. The boys are surprised by all the fuss. They're just "packing up" the eight candy bars left over from last night's s'mores.

And then, it's time to say good-bye, but the boys don't want to go. As Taylor walks off and cries quietly to himself, Simon is puzzled once again. Not knowing what else to do, he sits beside his cousin and puts his tiny little arm around his shoulder. We never know what words, if any, transpired. He is just there with him, caring. After all, that's what cousins do.

How many years has it been since your extended family got together? Take the time to organize a family reunion, and try to make it a regular event. You'll be glad you did.