

Family dynamics

The Virginia Gazette

By Columnist Frank Shatz – May 15, 2013

INTERVIEW



Dr. Ellen Kean Rudolph

Many people who have known Ellen Kean Rudolph for a long time call her a Renaissance woman -- a woman, who by definition, has broad intellectual interests and is accomplished in areas of both arts and the sciences. Rudolph has degrees in sociology and the humanities and earned a doctorate in counseling psychology at William and Mary. But after working in the mental health field, mostly in the Williamsburg area, for 25 years, she switched careers.

She became a highly successful photographer who combined artistry with technical skills and knowledge of how to use computers in photography. She served as host of AOL's popular online photography forums and mentored thousands of photographers. As a contract photographer for Environmental Research Inc. she traveled the world and created unique digital images of flora and fauna.

In recent years, Rudolph has been writing and publishing photo-driven children's books and was documenting the construction of a Custom Barna Log Home in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains. More than 900,000 people visited her web site during that process.

Rudolph has now finished a new project, a digital book entitled, *How Families Work*. "I have had this book in my head for almost 30 years," she said in an interview with the Gazette. "I decided it was time to do something with it."

She explained that writing about families online is as much fun as using her big old black chalkboards to graphically illustrate repeating patterns in families. "There is something inherently intriguing about family genograms," she said. "Diagrams ring lots of bells in people's heads."

In her practice as a therapist Rudolph used the Bowen Theory. It views the family as a multigenerational emotional unit that evolves predictable behavioral patterns over several generations. And it uses systems thinking to describe

the complex interaction between emotionally interdependent family members.

“Bowen’s interlocking concept provides a framework for understanding the family as the primary driving force in the development of personal and relationship problems in life,” she said. She uses diagrams to illustrate important relationship processes that engage and sometimes overwhelm families.

“Hopefully, readers will come to see families as self-contained wholes whose components repeatedly refer to each other in predictable and patterned order.”

Rudolph pointed out that the mental health field needs to be focused, not on prescription drugs, but on helping families prevent maladaptive behaviors and learn how to have healthy, nurturing relationships with one another. The target audience for her book is the general public. *How Families Work* taps into a visual mode of learning, and people come away with new ideas about what differentiates healthy from unhealthy families.

Responding to the question whether genograms could predict future behavior, Rudolph said: “Genograms clearly reveal repeating patterns when properly constructed. They highlight the ‘facts’ of a family’s experience over time, which suggest a repetitious future ahead unless steps are taken to change behaviors now.”

The example she cites would be repeating divorces in one's extended family. "The genogram process provokes thoughtful musings about how spouses have managed marital anxieties in previous generations," she said. "Anxiety is a time-tested indicator of rigid behavior. The more rigid one's behavior the more patterned and therefore more predictable their behavior becomes."

She says the fascinating thing about being part of a family is the pull it has emotionally. That pull is experienced time and again and the effect is to draw a person into someone else's problem; to "take sides" on some pressing family issues. "The end result of this emotional give and take is loss of self. This is how one gets sucked into an emotional morass that leaves a person struggling with high anxiety."

Illustrating and analyzing all those problems in words and diagrams is the substance of Rudolph's book. *How Families Work* is available online at www.howfamilieswork.com

In an effort to make this information more available to the public, the book is free.

Product: VABroadsheet

PubDate: 05-15-2013

Edition: Virginia Gazette

URL: <http://www.vagazette.com/>