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Marriage and Family as a Way to God: Part II

Family life is full of major and minor crises— the ups and downs of health, the stresses of success and failure in career, and in marriage itself. It is inhabited by all kinds of characters. It is tied tightly to places and events and histories. With all of these felt details, family life etches itself into memory and personality. It's difficult to imagine anything potentially more nourishing to the soul.

— Thomas Moore

Everyday Household Spirituality

"I can't schedule anything on Wednesdays", I tell my friends, "it's my house cleaning day — one of the most important days of the week for me." I am being neither funny nor facetious in saying this. Nor am I expressing my "feminine side," I actually don't have much of a "feminine side" to express. No, my Wednesday house cleaning, like walking the dog three times a day, putting out the trash or making sure the dishes are washed before Brenda gets home in the evening, all have to do with what the Thomas Moore quotes used here as well as at the beginning of the last chapter say: "The ordinary acts we practice every day at home are of more importance to the soul than their simplicity might suggest." In a true spirituality of the heart "all our endeavors can become deeply spiritual acts." Cleaning house is, therefore, a spiritual endeavor for me; that is, as long as I allow it to carry me into a silent awareness of love, humility, and presence.

Wednesday house cleaning is, in fact, written down in my personal rule of life, along with other disciplines like prayer, meditation, sacred reading, and communal worship. A woman in our parish who is a former nun, says that in the convent they tried to tell her that ordinary chores like dusting, mopping or scrubbing toilets was inner spiritual work. "But," she says, "I

didn't ever buy it." And one does, of course have to "buy it," buy it as a mystical manifestation of love in search of Sacred Presence, in order for any act to become a spiritual practice.

I remember reading decades ago in Keith Miller's *Taste of New Wine*, of a pivotal moment in his own spiritual growth. From the time he and Mary Ellen were first married they had argued over who should take out the trash. Then one night as he reflected on what he could do, in the spirit of Christ, to be a more loving husband to Mary Ellen, Miller's glance fell on the wastebasket. "No Lord," he groaned quietly to himself, "not the wastebasket! Take my income, anything." But he knew within himself, that for him it and to be the wastebasket. Without saying a word he took it out. He had taken it out before when he wanted to manipulate her into doing something he wanted to do, but this time, and from then on, he took it out because he knew this was the place where his "pride was fastened." Whatever is done in love and for love is a genuine spiritual practice that brings us closer to God. "Marriage and family is a way to God."

Two More New Testament Wisdom Sayings

With this in mind, then, there are two more pericopes worth reflecting on in understanding marriage as a part of the Christian contemplative life. They are both quite short and need little comment since their similarity to what has already been said about the fifth chapter of Ephesians is so obvious. But each further supports marriage and family in its own way as a path leading into mystical communion with God. They are both from the little Epistle of I Peter and are my own translations. Although far from literal word for word renderings I think they nevertheless reflect accurately the meaning of each.

The first reading is from 1 Peter 2:15-17 and says:

God's will for all of you is that by doing good and showing kindness to everyone you might be the cure of ignorance — especially the ignorance of those who think

you are a threat to the common good. Live your life so that it is obvious to everyone that your freedom in Christ means serving God, and is not an excuse for doing evil. Be loyal to the beloved community, honor the dignity of everyone you meet, be respectful of government officials and reverence God. . . . Wives, in this same way, honor your husbands so that even if they are indifferent to the deeper spiritual life they may possibly experience a change of heart and mind as day by day they see the compelling beauty of your inner life in your outward behavior.

This text will remind anyone who has read modern Family Systems Therapy, of one of its central tenets; namely, that the healthiest persons psychologically and emotionally know who they are, know what they feel, think and believe, and where they are going, without attempting to coerce anyone else into thinking, feeling, believing, or acting as they do. They may invite others to join with them, but the very nature of invitation respects the freedom of the other to choose otherwise. Indeed, no one can change another person against his or her will — not by lecturing, not by moralizing, not by bribery, and not by "nagging" or logical argument. In fact, such attempts tend to be counter-productive — usually serving only to further entrench the other individual in the negative behavior. The only person we can really change is our own-self; sometimes, not always but sometimes, the other person will then change in response to the change in us. The kind of "submission" or "subjection" Peter has in mind here is not a weak or cowardly acquiescence to the whims of another, but a letting go, a moving with the currents of the Spirit, a losing of the self in the mystery of Divine love.

The second reading is from 1Peter 3:7:

The same goes for you husbands: Be good husbands to your wives. Honor them, delight in them. As women they lack some of the social, cultural and legal

advantages and resources you have as males. But in the new life and order of God's grace, you are equals. If you are equals then treat your wife as a true spiritual fellow so that your prayers will not be hindered.

Notice two things. First, the wife is not a "weaker vessel," as the King James Version put it, because she is inherently inferior to the man, but as a woman faces cultural challenges and difficulties not experienced by her husband or other males. Second, notice that if the husband is not living in consideration of his wife's feelings, dreams, and needs it obstructs, or interferes, with his prayers and impoverishes his spiritual life. This can only mean that marriage is, as contended here, a genuine spiritual practice.

Marriage and Sex

One of the first things that needs to be said regarding sex and marriage is that sex is intended for pleasure. There is no book more erotic, not pornographic but erotic, than the Old Testament's *Song of Solomon*. It is most likely a compilation of the songs used in the week-long celebration of an ancient Jewish wedding, and as such sings of the joy of sex and its spiritual implications, but it does not mention the conception and birth of children. That occurs in other passages but not in the *Song of Solomon*. Sex is for joy. It is obviously also for procreation, but that it is the way in which new life may be brought into the world, does not negate it as a gift meant to bring happiness and physical pleasure. Psalm 104:15 says, "God made wine to gladden human hearts, oil to make their faces shine, and bread that sustains them." The abuse of both wine and sex may wreak havoc in a human life, but that doesn't mean they are not intended for pleasure. Or, how about Proverbs 5:18,19? I quote it with Wheat & Wheat's explanatory notes: "Let your fountain [your body parts which produce life] be blessed, and rejoice [or ecstatically delight] with the

wife of your youth. . . . Let her breasts satisfy you at all times, and be ravished [or filled] always with her love.” I especially like Proverbs 30:18-19:

*Three things are too wonderful for me,
four that I can't figure out:
the way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a snake on the rock,
the way of a ship out on the open sea,
and the way of a man with a woman.*

I like Proverbs 30 because it catches the mystery of the pleasure of sex. I think it was the popular evangelical author of the late twentieth century. Francis Schaffer, who noted, “Animals mate, but people meet.” Whether we are aware of it or not sexual intercourse involves the whole person — body, mind, and spirit. Sex is never a matter of indifference, but for better or worse affects who and what we are. It is good and beautiful but becomes ugly, perverted and evil when it is coercive, exploitative, abusive or uses another person purely as an object of self-gratification. Marriage itself offers no guarantee that sexual intercourse will be either genuinely pleasurable or healthy. In the physical intensity and ecstasy of sexual pleasure, and partly because of it, the mystery of intimacy occurs. And so Saint Paul wrote to the Corinthians, the first truly urban Christians of the first century: “Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, The two shall be one flesh” (1 Corinthians 6:16).

There were some people in the Christian community of Corinth, that were what might be called “proto-gnostic” in their thinking. They thought of themselves as spiritually ascendant. If they had lived in the twentieth century they might have claimed to be more “spiritually evolved.” The physical body and its actions were therefore, they asserted, irrelevant. Jerome Murphy-

O'Connor, O.P. in his brief but fine commentary on 1 Corinthians writes insightfully of the above verse:

The body is, therefore, morally relevant. . . . The divine purpose was that the act of intercourse should found a permanent union of two persons. They should become interdependent parts of a single entity. The act of intercourse, therefore, implies the acceptance of responsibilities for the other. Union with a prostitute on the contrary, is intended to be transitory. Permanent commitment is positively excluded and this is what makes it impossible for a Christian. . . . In casual fornication with a prostitute the other person is not empowered to grow; the other person is used for selfish gratification.

The lack of commitment constitutes a similar problem for sex outside of marriage. In our society sex is generally far too premature, so that it “short circuits” the whole process involved in a couple coming to genuinely “know” each other. What they experience is the sensate pleasure without any idea of the depths to which given the requisite leisure, that experience could have taken them. And having known sex only as this short circuited experience, may never know the heights it is capable of helping them reach. It should also be noted, that since sex is the rhythm of two becoming one, the act of intercourse without consideration or love for the other is a hindrance to the growth of both persons.

Basic Principles of the Practice

Since this is not a paper on how to have a happy marriage, but on marriage as a spiritual practice I will try to do my best not to stray into marriage and family therapy; however, there are some basic principles you might want to reflect on that may be both therapeutic and helpful to the work of spiritual formation at the same time. At least I hope so.

First of all, there is an immeasurable difference between a marriage begun without reservations and one entered into with reservations. “Until death do us part,” leads not only to a different final destination, but to a different experience of every moment than, “for as long as our love lasts.” But let me be clear. I am not saying there are no Biblical grounds for divorce. That is simply not what Scripture says. Jesus’s words in the Gospels have often been quoted to rigidly assert adultery as the only grounds for divorce. There are a couple of problems with this interpretation and assertion. The Greek word *porneia* which is translated as “adultery,” actually means something more like “sexual immorality. “It is the word from which the English word “pornography” comes. Not only does this broaden the so called exception clause considerably, but 1 Corinthians 7:8-17 provides a second and different exception clause. This seems to suggest, that the Biblical injunctions, whether in the Old or New Testament, were never meant to be used as a doctrinal club for mercilessly battering those whose marriages fail. Indeed, this is further demonstrated by the fact that Mosaic Law provided for divorce. While Jesus says that the Mosaic provision falls short of the ideal will of God he does not set it aside. What he does do is to expose its use as a justification for a kind of serial polygamy. Isn’t it “funny,” that historically rather than dealing with the divorced harshly and judgmentally, there has not been more of a resort to Jesus’s response to the woman at the well (John 4:4-26)? The ideal, the will of God, has from the very beginning, been that a couple embrace one another lovingly, and then in that embracing, in that holding to one another, become one while paradoxically and mysteriously each not only remains but becomes his or her true self. This simply can’t happen where there are reservations, for every reservation means I want you today but I may not want you tomorrow; and, therefore, whether aware or unaware must always hold you at arms-length.

At least in passing I want to note that many marriages would have gotten into far less difficulty if people had simply remembered to treat and speak to one another with common courtesy and ordinary civility. As previously noted, the Apostle Peter urged that in marriage we treat one another with consideration so that our prayers are not hindered. We can't be chronically inconsiderate, self-centered, or angry without it affecting our ability to pray and our capacity for mystery. At work people approach difficulties as problems to be solved – problems that they are perfectly capable of solving. When I worked in a counseling practice, clients would frequently call to say, "I have to reschedule my appointment for this evening. There is a crisis at work and we have all been asked to stay to solve the problem." But at home problems are framed as battles to be fought – and the person to whom we are married as an uncaring adversary. Far from being adversarial marriage ought to be an ever growing friendship. Cicero said, "friendship is complete sympathy in all matters of importance plus genuine good will and sincere affection." I'll leave it to you to ponder what this may mean in terms of shared values and desires. And, what it may have to do with what Scripture imagines as "friendship with God."

We, of course, need good boundaries, and if we are incapable, in any relationship, of saying, "no," then our "yes" really means nothing. Good boundaries mean that there is some sort of internal self-regulation of what we let in and out of our heart and mind. It means that we know how to be assertive without being angry or selfish – we are able to say what we mean and we mean what we say. And, we are able to see and to acknowledge, the needs, hopes, and fears of another as important. So, it has been said, "Affirmation builds a relationship, assertion defines it." I don't like all the silly proof-texting of Cloud and Townsend's book, *Boundaries*; however, if this is a problem area for you it does articulate a number of helpful principles. Here I will simply acknowledge that we are talking about love – *agape*. And, love has to do with our

working for the legitimate best interest of another without seeking to fulfill our own personal agenda, even our personal desire to be loved, when and where we have the power to do so.

None of us can change another human being against his or her will. We can't really control other people – not even if our motives are good and what we want for them would truly be in everyone's best interest. The best we can do is to discover who we are and where we are going, leaving others free to join us or not. While we can't control life or other people we can change ourselves, and when we have done that the people around us and close to us will very likely also change. For one thing, free from the need to resist being controlled, they have the space to reflect on what they genuinely want, and believe best; for another, the whole emotional and spiritual dynamic of our relationship will have shifted so we are simply no longer the same person and must be related to differently. However, the changes we make in ourselves, must not be mere techniques or methods employed to change the other person. They must be genuine.

The Household Codes

Read Ephesians 5:1-21 again. Well, you really ought to read the whole book – it's just six short chapters. It is a wonderful book about what it means to be alive in Christ and for Christ to be alive in us. It is about husbands and wives and children, and even slaves and masters in that first century world seeing their existence and all of reality as animated by reciprocity – mutual respect, consideration, and love. In his epistles, Paul utilized Greco/Roman household codes as a culturally relevant way of communicating this principle to first century families. But if we cannot see how what he says actually transcends that world, and ours as well, then we have seen nothing

At the most basic level we ought to be able to recognize how, in the way he utilizes the ordinary household codes, Paul demonstrates how our life in Christ changes the trajectory of our

entire existence. Compare Ephesians with Xenophon who said the aim for the respectable upper class Greek woman was “to be seen as little as possible, to hear as little as possible, and to ask as little as possible.” Demosthenes stated as the accepted rule: “We have courtesans for the sake of pleasure; we have concubines for the sake of daily cohabitation; we have wives for having children legitimately and serving as faithful guardians of our household affairs.” Talk about fragmentation.

Roman fathers were endowed with nearly limitless power over their family, including grown children. This *patria potestas*, "the father's power" gave the father legal rights over his children until the father's death. These powers included the right to arrange marriages or force divorce, expose a new born child, disown, sell, or even kill his child. Of course, even though a father had these legal rights, it did not mean these acts were common. But it does say something about the underlying assumptions of parenting. In contrast, Ephesians 6:1-4 speaks of the family relationship of parent and child as having to do with listening, that is the meaning that lies behind the word “obedience,” respect, and teaching in a way that is positive and encouraging rather than a way that is harsh and provokes resentment.

Children, we know, thrive best where expectations are high but reasonable, and where there is a lot of support in meeting expectations. It's like the parent is always saying, “I know this may be difficult but you can do it, and I am here to help you succeed.” Many years ago a group of boys on their way to high school in an old VW Bug, distracted by a white rat that had gotten loose in the car, ran off the little road that ran along the hill right above our house. They crashed through our back fence, broke off a water hydrant, and stopped just short of the house itself. That evening the young driver and his father showed up at our house with tools. “Good evening,” said the father, “we are here to repair the damage done this morning.” He wasn't

angry, or upset with his son. “We like to clean up our messes,” he said. There was nothing punishing in what he said or did. He was trying to teach his son that when we create a mess, we have a responsibility to clean it up. And here is how it might be done. That’s what Paul is talking about, and that is the everyday spirituality of family – not all of it, but a big part of it.

Seeing Real

The spiritual practice of marriage and family ought to result in seeing the other, feeling the other, experiencing the other, as real. That’s what the fictional character of Lizzie in *The Rainmaker* is talking about as she describes watching and truly seeing her father. Marriage and family are a way to God. They are way to God because they are a practice in the spiritual art of deep seeing. The ideal of all spiritual life is to see God, to feel God, to experience God, to know God as real. Now I don’t know if Richard N. Nash, the author of *The Rainmaker*, ever actually had Lizzie’s experience himself, but I know for certain that it is not merely a dramatic literary image. I have had such an experience on several occasions in more than five decades of marriage. Usually in the midst of the most mundane moments and ordinary events – the two of us getting ready for work, doing dishes, her playing the guitar and singing as I quietly read at the end of the day. I am talking about profoundly spiritual experiences, mystically gifted moment in which I have looked at my wife Brenda and thought how astonishingly beautiful she is, how good and how wise, and how utterly blessed I am that someone like me could be joined to someone like her. And in those moments when I “see” her, I feel that my hope of realizing the beatific vision has drawn closer. How does that song go?

Oh Lord, you're beautiful,

Your face is all I seek,

And when your eyes are on this child,
Your love abounds to me

Desiring Growth

In the movie *As Good As It Gets*, the Melvin Udall character played by Jack Nicholson is pressed by Carol (Helen Hunt), his romantic interest, to come up with a compliment for her. This is a real challenge for Melvin who suffers from an Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and is terribly self-absorbed. But Melvin who has been growing in his capacity for relationship as he has been forced to care for a little mutt of a dog, and as he has watched how Carol cares for her asthmatic son, respects everyone one she meets, and is so generous with her sympathy, has an amazing answer — it is the best compliment Carol has ever received. That brief part of their conversation goes like this:

Melvin : I've got a really great compliment for you, and it's true.

Carol: I'm so afraid you're about to say something awful.

Melvin: Don't be pessimistic, it's not your style. Okay, here I go: Clearly, a mistake. I've got this, what - ailment? My doctor, a shrink that I used to go to all the time, he says that in fifty or sixty percent of the cases, a pill really helps. I hate pills, very dangerous thing, pills. Hate. I'm using the word "hate" here, about pills. Hate. My compliment is, that night when you came over and told me that you would never... all right, well, you were there, you know what you said. Well, my compliment to you is, the next morning, I started taking the pills.

Carol: I don't quite get how that's a compliment for me.

Melvin: You make me want to be a better person. And that makes me feel good about myself. The more we practice love, respect, and presence beginning with those nearest and dearest to us, the more we grow in both our desire and capacity for intimacy and the more helpful we become

in encouraging others to awaken to the depths of love that may be slumbering in them. Marriage and family is a way to God.

A Question in the Dark Night

Let me suggest a question I found helpful one dark night decades ago. I had begun constantly complaining and grumbling to myself about what I was not getting out of my marriage and family. At the time we lived in a house built on the steep side of a coastal mountain forested by tall Redwood trees. Our bedroom was on the lower floor, and because the only windows were below the trees it was so dark with the lamps turned off that as the old worn saying goes, "You could not see your hand in front of your face." One night there in the dark I began my internal complaining, but this time there was a gentle realization that appeared — like the soft light of a candle. "Larry," my inner voice said, "you need to stop this. You are being sucked down into a black whirlpool. Maybe," it went on, "you would be better off asking not what you are getting, but what Brenda and the kids need from you." It had about it the quality of both question and invitation. It may have come from having reading Viktor Frankl some years earlier. Frankl said that in the Death Camp he learned to ask not what he demanded of life, but what life demanded of him. But, I am convinced that in that dark night it was ultimately God speaking, calling, inviting. And, I can say that taking that little trail has led to the most amazing vistas.

Two Final Disclaimers

Nothing I have written here should be construed to even suggest that marriage and family is essential to intimacy with God or the fulfillment of our spiritual longing. If you are unmarried, and have either no interest in or hope of marriage, then you will need to discover what the everyday living of the single life means in terms of the poetic, the mystical life. Whether you are happily or unhappily married the question is the same — how can the particular circumstances of

your life here and now become the means God has placed in your hands for your spiritual transformation — windows through which the light of Christ shines into your heart.

And finally, I worry that I may have written with far less humility here than I should have. There is in the Apocrypha wisdom literature of the Old Testament a wonderful meditation to be found — Ecclesiasticus 2:21-23: "Do not pry into things too hard for you or examine what is beyond your reach. Meditate on the precepts you have been given; what the Lord keeps secret is no concern of yours. Do not busy yourself with matters that are beyond you; even what has been shown you is above human grasp." So alas I must admit to my chagrin, that I have been talking about things that are really quite beyond me.