Faithful Becoming

Forming Families in the Art of Paradoxical Living in a Fragmented and Pluralistic World

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Social, cultural, and religious diversity in today’s society offers many challenges to the beliefs and stability of the Christian family. The author explores strategies to deal with this diversity, foster mutual recognition of equality, promote training in tolerance and fidelity to our basic values, and encourage a hospitality which opens the domestic church to the public mission of a globally oriented faith.

My mother was raised in rural western Minnesota at the beginning of the twentieth century in a context of ethnic and religious homogeneity. Some of that uniformity still existed when I was a child sixty years ago. Everybody I knew then had been socialized into the same worldview and shared values in which I was being formed. Parents raising children and children growing up at the beginning of the twenty-first century and the third millennium will face a much more diverse context with fewer certainties. Adults in families face the same challenges as they seek to continue to be formed for faithful living. The society in which we live is increasingly less homogeneous, stable, localized, and predictable because we live in increasingly heterogeneous, changing, translocal, and unpredictable globalized contexts. We can no longer assume a common worldview in the primary contexts of our lives, even including the church. When the world appears disjunctive or when we participate simultaneously in very

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different social or cultural networks, we need to be formed to live in uncertainties, contradictions, ambiguities, and conflicting interests.

The challenge facing families today is to forge patterns of faithful living in a fragmented and pluralistic world. There are at least ten unavoidable tensions that families will face as they learn the art of paradoxical living:

1. How will families balance the demands of the workplace and the obligations of home?
2. How will families foster respect for difference in order to form people for living in an increasingly pluralistic world?
3. How will families of the future continue to be havens of hospitality in a world that has become increasingly dangerous?
4. How will families manage the technology that makes them simultaneously more porous to influence from the world outside the home and more isolated?
5. How will families strengthen the practice of commitment in family living when the society is dubious of the value of long-term commitment?
6. How will families form future citizens with a commitment to the common good in a society that is preoccupied with individualism and privatism?
7. How will families respond to the increasing religious and cultural diversity within our own midst?
8. How will multitasking affect the quality of relationships within the family? What will be the effect on childrearing of dictating corporate memos while nursing an infant or consulting by cell phone while watching a child’s soccer match?
9. How will marriages be sustained and renewed as the life span increases and the years of childrearing decrease proportionately?
10. How will families continue to form disciples of Christ for the sake of the world?

Each of these questions is worthy of longer consideration. The intent of this essay is to suggest ways of forming faithful Christians that take seriously the paradoxical nature of family living at the beginning of a new millennium. In the space available for this essay, we will examine only the first three questions.

**The Paradoxical Spirituality of Family Living**

The spirituality that embraces paradox is particularly necessary for modern family living. By paradox, I mean a contradiction that does not seem to be
true but nonetheless is true. The Cross is the ultimate paradox for the Christian. If we live the way of the Cross, we will live the contradictions that only God can resolve. The last are first, the meek inherit the earth, and in order to live we have to die. Paradox is not only the Christian way; it is inherent in human nature, in human community, and, particularly, in the family. Marriage is sustained by holding in vital, paradoxical tension the fundamental human need for intimacy and the equally fundamental human need for autonomy.

In *The Bonds of Love*, Jessica Benjamin describes a new ‘logic of paradox’ that arises when marital partners see one another as equal subjects. “Perhaps the most fateful paradox is the one posed by our simultaneous need for recognition and independence—that the other subject is outside our control and yet we need him or her” (221). There is no theme more necessary or more complex for a vital marriage than the paradox of mutual recognition of equal subjects. Each person in a marriage may be a fully defined self, but the recognition of that unique self by the other is necessary for the marriage to work. This experience of recognizing and being recognized is not only prerequisite for community; it is fundamental for human growth and identity. Marriages that endure and flourish have achieved a kind of mutual recognition between husband and wife that honors each one as a unique and separate subject.

What is necessary for marriage is equally critical for family living. A family is a community in which the well-being of the whole and the well-being of each part must be held in almost sacred tension. The family’s capacity to be intimate and caring and its capacity to be separate and different are paradoxically linked. A family’s capacity to be together depends on its ability to be separate and honor the autonomy of each member. Even when we want to be emotionally free, we still depend on others in the family for recognition and intimacy. Solitude and community are paradoxically connected. We leave our families of origin in order to go home again; if we can’t go home again, we probably have not left. Couples who are comfortable with the paradox of marital intimacy and distance will work toward forming families in which commitment to the whole and commitment to each separate person are held as a sacred trust.

Embracing paradox is not easy, even in the safe intimacy of family living. It requires humility about what is right and a willingness to entertain the possibility that two things might be true. Because there is another side to everything, as
Thomas Merton once observed, we need to practice listening to the other side in our families so that no one’s idea or contribution is left out. Embracing paradox is difficult because it is messy and a little like fuzzy-mindedness and too much like ambiguity. Because we would rather believe that things are this way or that way, we are tempted to foster a family belief system with absolutes that exclude or divide.

Pat Parker articulates very clearly what I mean by the truth of paradox in the opening lines of her poem “For the White Person who Wants to Know how to be my Friend.”

The first thing you do is to forget that I’m Black.
Second, you must never forget that I’m Black (297).

Families need to embrace paradox as a way of faithful Christian living in order to respond constructively to the challenges they face at the beginning of the new millennium. If a family’s belief system includes paradox at the center, it will be able to understand that contradiction, ambiguity, and uncertainty are part of life and not alien to becoming and being a faithful Christian.

How Will Families Balance the Demands of the Workplace and the Obligations of Home?

Couples who are determined to work toward an equal division of household and parenting responsibilities often find themselves torn by the limits of time. Even when the intent is to establish equality between women and men in marriage, there is simply too much to do and not enough time in which to do it. When both partners in a marriage work outside the home, they often experience a clash of callings—the calling of work and the calling to family living. This conflict is implicit in the organization of modern, industrial, market-driven societies. Although many changes have occurred, like flextime, job sharing, or personal leaves, the old demands for single-minded devotion to the workplace have not changed significantly. It should not be surprising, therefore, that the family is constantly juggling multiple obligations and expectations to be in several places simultaneously. Sometimes the tensions are of our own making because families have overscheduled their children with too many worthwhile activities. Some couples run out of time because they need to work two, three, or four jobs in order to afford the house they never have time to enjoy. Honoring the vital human needs for community and autonomy is the paradox embedded in the conflict between work and family.

Resolving the tensions between home and work will require a new way of thinking about the marital bond. If we understand equal partnership for women
men at home and in the workplace as a sign of God's longing for justice and mutual respect for all people, then the marital promise will need to include a commitment to be just with one another as well as loving to one another. Pauline Kleingeld, in an essay in *Mutuality Matters: Family, Faith, and Just Love*, has proposed that we reconceive the ideal of marriage as "not only a matter of love, *but also* of justice. On this view, married couples ideally would think of themselves as sharing at least two overarching aims: a loving marriage and a just marriage" (30). What Kleingeld has proposed changes the framework for negotiating role equality in marriage.

Positive changes in some aspects of society and in many marriages have not eliminated injustice from marriage nor have they eradicated injustice toward women in the church and at work. Women are paid less for the same or equivalent work. Household labor studies consistently show that women continue to do more housework than men even when both work outside the home. We need to work for laws and policies that are just, but just laws do not guarantee just action in the privacy of family life. Becoming and being married in a way that honors the unique gifts of each partner in a marriage depends on a commitment to forming a just bond.

A combined sixty-hour workweek for couples with children has been proposed as one way to relieve the tension between work and family. The proponents of this ideal acknowledge that it would only work in wealthier modern societies. To accomplish this ideal, Don S. Browning suggests that "market and government must work with culture-making institutions such as church, synagogue, and mosque to create a new philosophy of leisure and new restraints on the consumerism that drives our compulsion to constantly earn more money" (27). Rather than expecting families to adjust to the demands of the marketplace, the vision embodied in the sixty-hour combined work seeks to reform the world of work so it conforms to the scale of families with children. Even if the demands of a market economy were transformed, the sixty-hour workweek for families with young children would still require couples to be committed to a just distribution of responsibilities within the marital bond.

My wife Phyllis and I made an audiotape twenty-five years ago entitled "One Marriage, Two Ministries." Although the two ministries in our situation were both in the church, the issues we identified around autonomy and community
have application for all couples who think of their work in the world as a ministry. We were only beginning to understand then what Kleingeld has identified now as a just marriage. Since then, we have had to make complex choices that included painful sacrifices. Most of the time, the accommodations have been just, even when they were neither equal nor mutual. Phyllis and I never achieved the ideal of a sixty-hour workweek for couples when the children were at home or after they left home. There is a truth to the ideal, however, that is more important than legislating hours: family life requires time and attention. We have learned in these twenty-five years that the struggle for a just marriage depends on three central commitments: paying attention to one another even if the house is not clean, a willingness to live with the paradoxical reality of autonomy and community, and the desire and commitment to be gracious with one another along the way.

How Will Families Foster Respect for Difference in Order to Form People for Living in an Increasingly Pluralistic Context?

I was raised in a strong Christian family environment in which difference was regarded as dangerous and sameness was the place of safety. My context was so homogeneous that it was not until much later in life that I was challenged by the religious and ethnic diversity that is now everywhere present. The diversity of religions or cultures is not new, of course. What is new, however, is that human difference is no longer hidden by geographic distance or behind cultural walls or religious imperialism. Encounters with diversity that once were the province of missionaries, the adventurous, the open-minded, or those too poor to live where they wished are now an unavoidable and irreversible dimension of daily living for more and more people. The gift of diversity is that it enlarges our understanding of the world. The challenge of diversity is that there are fewer absolutes. Moreover, we cannot assume that neighbors or even fellow church members will share the same worldview. When honoring difference among us is a core value, disagreement and conflict among the people of God is unavoidable.

Two things are paradoxically true. Children and parents both need to know what they believe and why because our life-contexts are increasingly pluralistic and secular. At the same time, it is important to foster tolerance in everyone in the family toward those who believe differently. There was a telling exchange between John Kerry and President George Bush in the first debate that epitomizes the paradox necessary for families to honor difference and keep core values. John Kerry said, “Sometimes certainty can get you into trouble,” to which President Bush responded very quickly that he would continue to hold to his “core values.” Most people have core values and most of them would say that they try to keep
them. The debate is about which core values to keep. I am suggesting that tolerance must be a core value in this time of pluralism, alongside the commitment to peace, protection of the most vulnerable, and the needs of the poor.

What people believe is increasingly chosen rather than given. This presents families and the church with a new challenge in passing on the faith to the next generation. The authority of church teachings remains but it must be supplemented by age-appropriate internalization of those beliefs as one’s own. In order to be intentional about what it teaches, a family needs to be self-conscious and self-critical about its operational belief system. A family is often not aware how its view of life has operationalized a belief system that may or may not be compatible with official church teaching. But family members are more likely to be aware of maxims or sayings that embody family beliefs that are carried from generation to generation. If a sainted member regularly reminds the family that “halitosis is better than no breath at all” or “you can eat with only one spoon at a time,” gratitude without complaining is more likely to be fostered than if the family saying is something like “it only costs a little more to go first class” or “schöne Leute, haben schöne Sachen: nice people have nice things.”

James Fowler once described the family as an ecology of faith consciousness in which the interplay between individual and shared constructions of meaning and purpose honors the age and differences of faith development. “The ecology of consciousness arising from their respective stage-specific ways of contributing to and appropriating from the family’s shared meanings will necessarily be quite complex” (14). In order to provide a context in which tolerance of the beliefs of others is encouraged alongside a commitment to one’s own faith, families will need to strive for an ecology that is more egalitarian than hierarchical, more including than excluding, and willing to be committed to people and ideas in the midst of uncertainty. Creating a family ecology of openness is critical because the longing for certainty is so deep in this time of terror and uncertainty that people are willing to give up personal autonomy or sacrifice the freedom to doubt in order to feel secure and then pass it on to their children.

How Shall Families of the Future Continue to Be Havens of Hospitality in a World That Has Become Increasingly Dangerous?

I have for some time thought that hospitality is a central theological theme for family living. Husbands and wives are able to be generous and hospitable with one another when they believe they already have enough. “The invisible boundaries that a couple create around their relationship in order to nurture and strengthen it need to be permeable enough to encourage their participation in worlds outside their marital bond” (Anderson & Fite, 157). Families practice
hospitality when adult children marry or when a child is born. The characteristics of hospitality essential for welcoming a child continue throughout a family’s history. When families are unable to welcome or at least receive new people and ideas, adolescent children may need to run away to grow up, college-age children do not bring home new friends or ideas, and adult children will find endless excuses not to go home if who they love or how they live is unacceptable. Hospitality is the spiritual heart of family living.

When the family offers hospitality to a stranger, it welcomes something new, unfamiliar, and unknown that has the potential to expand the world of the family. In ancient times, because wayside inns were scarce, it was a sacred obligation to show courtesy to the stranger at the gate. In our time, hospitality is not just a sacred obligation; it is necessary for our survival. The Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama has suggested that “the only way to stop the violence of genocide in our world is by extending hospitality to strangers” (169). Showing hospitality is not only the essence of the Gospel: it is necessary for survival in an increasingly pluralistic world. The family is the first and primary context in which we learn how to practice the art of hospitality.

We may need to redefine hospitality in order to understand how it might be the spiritual heart of family living. I suspect that most of us have had the experience of being in the home of friends who entertained us well with their stories but did not ask anything about our lives. In this pattern of entertaining, the host is the subject and the guest is the object. The problem with this approach to hospitality is that we are too concerned about what we are doing for our guest and not enough concerned about what we are receiving from them. When we extend hospitality in this way, we underscore the power of the host and diminish the guest. Our desire to provide hospitality, noble as it may be, keeps us in the power position and may in the end foster dependency and resentment.

By his table practices, Jesus revealed God’s own table practices by being both host and guest. Jesus is both insider and outsider, both stranger and the one who offers hospitality on the road to Emmaus. If we follow the pattern of Jesus, we not only welcome the stranger; we are the stranger who is welcomed. If we are to be a people of hospitality in the spirit of Jesus, we must also be both host and guest to the gifts that the stranger brings. The table may be filled with food but our hearts and minds are empty enough to receive what the guests have to give.
Paradoxically, it is emptiness (and even poverty) that makes the fullness of hospitality possible.

Being formed in the practice of hospitality is critical for our time because it invites us to explore different ways of thinking about what is public and what is private. In order to maintain the distinction between the public and private, we have kept separate the public sphere of work from the private domestic sphere, public laws and policies from the personal and private. Roman Catholic lay theologian Rosemary L. Haughton proposes that home is a place of encounter between the public and private and hospitality is how home functions. Here is how she describes her paradoxical vision:

I use the word hospitality in a wide sense that expresses the willingness to make common, at least temporarily, what is in some sense private, which is how we think of home. But hospitality, even in its most restricted sense, is about breaking down barriers. To invite another person into the space I regard as my own is, at least temporarily, to give up a measure of privacy. It is already to make a breach in the division between the public and the private to create the common—and it happens in the space called home” (208).

Hospitality, as Rosemary L. Haughton describes it, creates something new, something that does not fit the easy separations we make between the public and private spheres of life. And it gives new meaning to home. In this sense, hospitality is how we think as well as what we do. It is at the spiritual heart of family living. Home is no longer just a private sphere, because hospitality has made it something common. Paradoxically, it is both a haven from the world and a launching place for mission into the world.

**Conclusion**

The question for families becomes this: how will our being together as a family form us and empower us for faithful service in and to the world for the sake of Christ? Faithful becoming for family living in the new millennium must look outside the family as well as inside. Whenever the family becomes an end in itself, it is simply a slightly larger version of American individualism. The family cannot just be a haven from the world if it is understood as domestic church: it must also be in mission to the world. It is the vocation of marriage and families, John Paul II wrote in his Letter to Families, “to contribute to the transformation of the earth and the renewal of the world, of creation and of all humanity” (1994:653). Each family grows in its understanding of its particular mission in society and in the church through prayer, the study of Scriptures, and a careful reading of the signs of the times. Working toward a just bond, celebrating
difference as a gift of God, and practicing hospitality are other ways by which families are formed for ministry in and to the world in the third millennium.

References


