

Connecting the Distracted Family

Every once in a while a billboard boasts, “The family that prays together stays together.” I loathe that expression. I am leery of reducing Christian faith to a slogan, especially if it rhymes. Religion is too rich and too important to be used as a commercial. And, of course, families praying together inevitably staying together is not only a misguided claim, it’s a bald-faced lie. Statistics show that religious faith is not in and of itself a guarantee that families will not break up.

I am also uneasy because this proclamation feels vaguely threatening and oppressive. On a scary note, I remember how a friend was repeatedly abused by the head of her household, who was also in charge of the family’s worship. They prayed, but theirs was not a healthy togetherness. There are dangers in imposing prayer.

In spite of my uneasiness about the slogan, I do see a sliver of merit in the claim that “the family that prays together stays together.” Even though it is wrong and misguided on many levels, it points to a very real need and concern, a loss that many feel keenly. Less and less do we find that there are interests or activities or priorities that bind us and build us up together. As Robert Putnam pointed out some time ago, we’re all “bowling alone” now. As a consequence of the decline of civic-minded community organizations—bridge clubs, service organizations, charities and, yes, bowling leagues—people are increasingly disconnected.

One might say that our social disconnections are technologically enhanced. Central heating displaced hearths so that individuals can now disperse and disappear to separate spaces in our houses. Such heating decentered home life. And

other technologies also gut opportunities for relating to one another. Having air-conditioning and television inside the home has meant that we no longer linger outside on porches—cutting us off from visiting with family members, neighbors and passersby. Television supplants visiting and hospitality. As a pastor visiting homes, I often had to ask people to turn off the television as we tried to talk.

Not long ago, when families watched television, they did it together. I have good memories of watching TV with my parents and sister and various housemates along the way. Granted, there are better ways of spending time together, many of which our family enjoyed (meals, barbecues, church, vacations). But now our homes have so many screens—from multiple television sets, to desktop and laptop computers, to various kinds of MP3 devices—that even that formerly common activity, as unsatisfying as it may have been, is disappearing. Family members watch television programs separately, isolated in their different rooms.

What now holds the potential of helping families or friends, communities or neighborhoods grow together? Borgmann is the thinker who has best helped me come to grips with these matters, and thus you will see that I am often interpreting, appropriating and applying his ideas. Borgmann recommends commitment to focal practices, focal things, focal places. This commitment, he demonstrates, is a key way to begin living lives that are rich, fulfilling and meaningful. This can be key to living the good life.

Focal living does not need to be about huge endeavors and initiatives, but about reclaiming priorities that are ignored or threatened. Activities suggested by Borgmann—eating meals together, sharing tea, playing board games, making live music in a group, hosting neighbors, exercising hospitality, hiking, cooking, reading together, gardening—are all small, normal and easy to do.

Now that our children are out of the house and we look back and name the best memories, some of those are once-in-a-lifetime events and experiences: their births, their accomplishments and graduations, trips to Scotland and the Netherlands where their grandparents once lived, their struggles with major life decisions. Yet we also recall many mundane and daily occurrences: eating meals, conversing over tea, going to the playground, hiking as a family, entertaining guests, hosting visitors from overseas. Those prosaic practices stitched us together as a family and formed each of our characters. They were convivial and life-giving.

My friend Nelson grew up as one of the younger members in a large farm family. He told me recently that they never went on vacation, at least not the days or weeks away that most of us associate with that term. There were several reasons: their farm needed careful daily tending, they could not afford expensive travel, and his thrifty parents never were convinced of the need for vacations. But once a year they would all go on a daylong excursion. Nelson began anticipating it months in advance. They would get up early in the morning and be gone until late at night. It was usually a trip to a nearby large city to visit a zoo, museum or historical site. And they would have the unmatched luxury of eating in a restaurant, something rare for this large family. When Nelson recounts this, he glows with the good memory. He also tells how full his family's life together was; not ever being able to take a multiday vacation was not a deprivation. He did chores, wrestled and argued with brothers, played games with the family, and spent time outside. There was no television, and children developed an extraordinary breadth of hobbies, from woodworking to amateur radio to launching rockets. Nelson's parents delighted in the children's diverse interests, and helped them buy cameras or rockets or shop tools or artists' paintbrushes. Even though the whole family worked hard, there was a sense of Sabbath and creative play. There is no question that the person Nelson is—a gifted man of talent and

character—was shaped by small practices in his family of origin. It is no surprise that his own family now, his spouse and children, together value meals, hospitality, reading aloud to one another, games, intellectual pursuits and engagements, poetry and art.

When I thought of hiking as only a hobby or of our congenial kitchen as merely a luxury, it was easy for me to overlook their importance. But when I understood that they were focal practices, I began to take them more seriously, to be committed to them, and to make sure that I made space for them in my life.

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