HOME AS A CONTEXT FOR INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

Our homes are powerful contexts for individual and family development that we may not fully recognize. If we did we might not disregard or devalue activities that used to be an essential part of everyday home life. Perhaps our inability to appreciate the power of our homes has contributed to a curious dichotomy we are experiencing in America today. On one hand, our homes are more beautiful and full of modern conveniences than ever before. Yet, on the other, our families in these homes are disintegrating. Why are our families falling apart? In these beautiful homes we are outsourcing the activities that help families stick together; we overlook the loss and the subtle attack on our families that is taking place.

It is easy to overlook the losses in our homes. With the unprecedented prosperity, access to information, travel, and communication that characterizes our daily life, we surely would not want to return to the way people used to live. Home front battles were different then; people could more easily see and combat enemies that threatened their families. An example of the type of battles that were fought just 140 years ago in Utah is found in Ann Howell Burt’s journal. Ann Burt emigrated from Wales as a child, then later married and lived in a dugout in Utah during the summer of 1863. As a young mother, she had to work hard to keep order and see to the needs of her family. This is what she recorded in her journal:

For several mornings I was puzzled to find my milk-pan skimmed . . . So the other evening I sat down behind the door with my knitting, to watch proceedings, and what was my surprise to see a huge bull-snake come crawling out from the head of our bed and
[sway] gracefully toward my crude cupboard . . . to skim my cream. Now I cover my milk tightly.  

Personally, I think I would have done more than cover my milk and maybe she did, but this was just one of many episodes during that summer. Her journal continues:

This is a hideous place. Some days ago, I killed a rattlesnake with my rolling pin, as he came crawling down the steps. I was just cooking supper and the baby was on the floor or rather the ground . . . I was badly frightened. . . . A few days ago, while keeping the flies off the baby’s face as he slept . . . I discovered . . . a large tarantula crawling toward the child. I seized the broomstick, thrust it at the tarantula and when it took hold . . . I hurriedly put it into the fire.  

We usually don’t have to worry about actual tarantulas and snakes invading our houses; instead we have more dangerous influences threatening us. Unlike Ann Burt’s invaders, our tarantulas and snakes are moral ones and they are subtle—it would be easy if we could beat these invaders back with rolling pins and broomsticks, but literally it’s not possible and figuratively we’ve lost many of our rolling pins and brooms. The purpose of this paper is to briefly describe the decline of American home life, explain a working definition of home, and suggest three strategies for reclaiming our domestic heritage. It is urgent that we revitalize our home life and see our homes as powerful contexts for developing individual, families, and ultimately our society.

Declining Home Life

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2 Hedges (1999), 121.
Our modern advances have contributed to the ease of our daily lives, but also to the decline of family life in our homes. We have the Internet, TV, CDs and DVDs, the erosion of marriage through divorce, cohabitation and same sex marriage; abortion; the difficulty of holding family mealtimes; extremes in clothing expenses and fashions; cultural disdain for household work; and changing roles for mothers and fathers. In 2005, it is normal to hear young American women describe their goals for the future in terms of exciting careers they plan to pursue. These girls most likely also desire to be wives and mothers, but today it seems more appropriate to announce career goals first.

While we value expanded educational and career opportunities for women, motherhood and homemaking suffer. Mothering and creating homes are knitted tightly together, but in recent years they have disappeared from American society as a natural and valued pathway for women. Instead the message seems to be that if mothers have access to modern conveniences to care for their homes and families, then they can outsource work in the home and be free to seek their own fulfillment. Women and men often end up in conflict over the seeming burdensome work in the home in order to pursue personal interests and activities. Home is often erroneously considered a place from which women need to break free. Some ideologies would have women think that home duties limit their full potential and women and men are tempted to disregard the important partnership connected to everyday aspects of home life.

Modern conveniences have delivered us from the days of dugouts, chamber pots, smoke, fleas, mud, rattlesnakes, and tarantulas; but, at the same time American home life often operates on an ad hoc basis. Author Cheryl Mendelson explains,

Washday is any time anyone throws a load into the machine . . . meals occur any time or all the time or, . . . never . . . Many people lead deprived lives in houses filled with
material luxury . . . As people turn more and more to outside institutions to have their needs met, our skills and expectations . . . diminish, in turn decreasing the chance that people’s homes can satisfy their needs. The result is far too many people who long for home even though they seem to have one.”

Although we would like our homes to satisfy our souls and be a place of refuge from the storm, today it seems that we live in houses without walls, or at least not walls that offer protection from the outside world. Social restraints that have helped reinforce family life are eroding and creating openings that devalue and dismiss precious time and activities in our homes. In one recent study of 32 families in Los Angeles, in several of the homes the entire family was never in the same room during the entire observation period. On average, the rest of the families gathered in the same room just 16 percent of the time.

The decline in home life illustrates how we have lost our rolling pins and broom both literally and figuratively. In America today it is possible to outsource everything that we do in our homes. As a result the power of physical work is not operating in our lives to relieve stress and connect families; instead the pace of our daily life and the pressure to go places and get things adds stress. We fail to see the value that daily activities such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, yard care, and others have in cementing individual and family development inside our homes. Instead, we dismiss this family work as unimportant and distasteful and replace it with individual pursuits. Thus, is it possible for our own type of tarantulas and snakes to enter right to

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our bedrooms, kitchens, and living rooms. Our children lose out when skills for creating a home are not passed on. As author Jean Zimmerman writes:  

You can buy takeout because you choose not to make dinner, but when your child grows up, he won’t have that choice, simply because he won’t have learned to cook—in one generation, a broad swath of culinary know-how and experience cut to the ground. Yet we’re not paying attention to the loss we suffer by this development. We’re huddled in the basement, too psychically impoverished to reclaim the rich, beautiful pieces of our domestic heritage (xiv).

The Meaning of Home

Every person creates a home. We can value a wide range of families in our homes as we reclaim our domestic heritage and renew the possibilities for individual and family development. Again, author Jean Zimmer writes:

…reclaiming the pleasures of domesticity in no way implies reviving a cookie-cutter notion of family…every person in every circumstance needs a home. . . . No matter who lives in a home, the value of domesticity, it seems to me, is just the same: to offer sanctuary and shelter, to give comfort and creative satisfaction and the assurance of connection (p. xiii).

“Home” is not only something in the far distant future or a place you are from. Family researcher Sarah Allen suggests that home is a geographic center (1) where you have feelings of comfort, familiarity, and safety; (2) where meaningful people and things meet; (3) where significant events, memories, and routines take place; (4) where you develop specific knowledge, such as where to shop and find a bank or what sounds at night are normal; and (5) home is a space that “fits” with who you think you are and meets your expectations for a home place.

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Where we live right now can qualify as “home” and we can begin now to value it and use it as a context for individual and family development.

*Protect Home Life*

To protect our home life, we can do three things. First, we can rediscover and preserve the sacred nature of the home and its purposes. The dictionary meaning of “sacred” means: belonging to or dedicated to God, worthy of reverence, set apart for or dedicated to some purpose, must not be violated or disregarded, properly immune from violence or interference.\(^8\)

Apply this idea of “sacred” to everyday activities in the home such as mealtime, family worship, and music, caring for the home and yard, recreation, laundry, and everything else that takes place in and around the home. These activities have purpose and must not be disregarded or interfered with because the home setting gives us opportunities to develop and practice character virtues and ethical behavior. Family members can learn about moral truths and then practice honesty, patience, brotherly kindness, and charity in their daily interactions. The settings of everyday work and recreation in the home provide rich contexts for children and adults to make choices and practice. For example, a child, spouse, or even a roommate may choose to contribute in the home by seeing what needs to be done and doing it happily. Or they may wait to be asked, and then complain about the inconvenience.

Everyday events in our home like this can seem so simple that we overlook the importance of them—but because they are simple, frequent, and repeated they offer important opportunities to build individuals and families. Mealtime provides a good example. Our modern technological age has created a speeded up sense of time and everything we do seems accelerated—what we do, good or bad, can be done faster, easier, and cheaper. It is easy for us individually to graze in our kitchens, dine from our dashboards or go to the nearest restaurant for

a quick meal rather than go to the trouble of preparing a meal and sitting down together. One executive vice president in Chicago noted that “Meal preparation time dropped from three hours per day in 1960 to twenty minutes in 1998.”

Author Beverly Zimmerman comments,

Americans seem to have bought the argument that we no longer have time to cook—and, even if we did have time, it was drudgery we’d rather avoid in preference of leisure activities . . . . What are we rushing off to? PlayStation, movies, Internet??? Dispatching the pleasures of cooking good food in order to slay dragons on EverQuest.com seems not that rewarding a trade-off. We buy illusions of taste, satisfaction, comfort, nutrition and health; we have trained our taste buds to savor fat, salt, chemical additives, synthetic flavors.

Besides good food family meals have numerous beneficial effects. Evidence suggests that family meals with parents present contribute to better nutritive intake, fewer psychological problems, and less risky or self destructive behaviors. Family meals in a positive environment also play an important role in preventing unhealthy weight control practices. One researcher suggests that it appears to be more promising to establish rituals of meal preparation and eating than to provide cognitive knowledge of nutrition.

In addition to the physical benefits of family meals, the simple domestic act of creating a meal and enjoying it together is an important connector. But, like author Beverly Zimmerman,

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you may ask, “Can’t we bond equally well over a Whopper as with a home-cooked meal?” She answers, “The rewards of the experience are not the same.”\(^ {15}\) The Stapp family in Alpine makes mealtime a daily event. Everyone participates and “What’s for dinner?” is an exciting part of the day. Dinner is always homemade, not purchased from a store. It doesn’t have to be elaborate to create a time to connect and get a feeling for each person’s day. At home outside distractions can be managed so emphasis is on passing food, talking, and interacting. Children learn to share family food instead of asking for individualized orders as they do in a restaurant. At home the regular mealtime experience gives children a sense of security as they know what to expect at the end of each day. Indeed, Robert Bellah has called the family meal the “family sacrament.”\(^ {16}\)

Second, we can recognize the importance of developing individual character through everyday activities in the home. All our actions have consequences. The things we do shape the person we become. We learn lessons of life at home that build strong character. Family researcher Enola Aird reminds us that at home “we learn how to work, how to govern ourselves, we learn manners, and morals, we learn how to become self-reliant, or not. We can be smart, educated, and successful, but at the same time, also be selfish, self-centered and uncaring—unable to live in a spirit of community.”\(^ {17}\) If we realize the value of everyday life we can see that even the smallest child can feel like a valued and competent individual through something as mundane as folding laundry. Little children can match socks, sort colors, fold towels, and be recognized for their accomplishments. Over the years as the complexity of the tasks increase, children can gain confidence in their ability to choose and do worthwhile things.

\(^ {15}\) Zimmerman (2003), 241.
The integrative nature of everyday living provides opportunities to gain strength in many ways—physically, intellectually, socially, and spiritually. Clothing is an example—we all cover and protect our physical bodies from the elements. We develop intellectually as we learn to budget and care for our clothing. We grow socially as we choose clothing that represents who we are and gain a sense of being and belonging. And, we develop character as we choose clothing that shows respect for our bodies and creates a personal environment that contributes to healthy relationships and responsible living. It is easy to take clothing for granted because as one scholar put it, it is our “second skin”\(^1\) but there is a connection between appearance, behavior, and social outcomes. Our everyday responsibilities are not vague; they are tangible, daily activities with form and meaning that have power to develop individual character. When we neglect and/or outsource these responsibilities without replacing them we lose valuable opportunities for growth.

Third, recognize the role of daily routines to help individuals and families create positive outcomes. In the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, members profess to follow Jesus Christ and let His light increase in their daily lives. When we follow the precepts of a higher power we learn that obedience to law yields consequences. A prominent church leader referred to the opportunity to receive light and truth by the temporal and spiritual nature of God’s commandments. Temporal pertains to this life only. The example of tithing, or returning ten percent of one’s increase to the Lord, illustrates that obedience to the law of tithing may lead to temporal blessings there are also spiritual blessings that come. One of these is the opportunity to “bring us back to the warmth and light of God.”\(^2\) There is a link between receiving light and

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truth, learning obedience, and our homes. In our homes, family duties are opportunities to practice gaining light and truth through obedience.

We can teach our children at home by paying attention to our family duties. For example, by learning to do chores regularly, spouses and children can learn obedience and exactness in small things that have less severe consequences. To illustrate, one of our daughters told me a story about going to a school dance. She waited until I was distracted with company, then she changed and hurried off while I wasn’t looking in a skirt she knew I wouldn’t like. At one point during the evening boys started paying attention and she remembers vividly how it made her feel. It wasn’t the kind of attention she wanted after all—at that moment she decided to get rid of that outfit. Her experience and the consequences with clothing helped her learn an important lesson about personal choice and consequences.

God has always commanded His people to attend to their family duties at home. In Deuteronomy we read, “And ye shall teach [the commandments to] your children, speaking of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, when thou liest down, and when thou risest up” (11:19). When we think about family duties we should remember daily activities of the home like feeding or clothing ourselves and their power to help us practice obedience, service, love, and cooperation.

Opportunities to learn and practice in the home are times to grow closer to the Divine. This process of growth is a life-long quest and our home environment gives us repeated, sustained chances to practice becoming better individuals and families throughout the different seasons of our lives. Nel Noddings, Lee Jacks Professor of Education, Emerita, at Stanford University reminded us that “there may be nothing more powerful that a society can do to advance the well-
being of its people (both male and female) than to strengthen their commitment and competence as homemakers.”

To create positive outcomes of home life, individuals will need to be deliberate about protecting daily activities. Noted family scholar, William Doherty, coined the phrase “intentional family.” We can extend this idea to an “intentional home.” The opposite of the “intentional home” is the “entropic home.” Entropy is the tendency of a physical system to lose energy and coherence over time. Think about daily life—what happens when we don’t plan and prepare? It quickly descends into chaos—Will we drift and experience entropy, or will steer as we establish intentional daily life? Whether we drift or steer, we will create daily life in the home and specific outcomes will follow.

Conclusion

In our modern world it takes effort to protect home life. Virtual tarantulas and snakes want to rob us of the sacred time, space, and activities within our homes. Rediscover and preserve the sacred nature of the home and its purposes. Recognize the importance of developing individual character through everyday activities in the home. Promote the role of daily routines to help individuals and families create positive outcomes. Our home is the essential context for individual and family development.

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