

## Work in the Home: Building Enduring Relationships

*Kathleen Slaugh Bahr, associate professor of marriage, family, and human development, Brigham Young University*

I will focus on family work, by which I mean the ordinary, everyday tasks required to nurture a family: cooking, cleaning, planting, harvesting, repairing, tending, consoling, encouraging—the list goes on. My examples are drawn primarily from my own culture and from my experience in Southwest Indian culture, including interviews with Apache and Navajo grandmothers and grandchildren. Yet I believe that the principles these examples illustrate are applicable in other cultures.

I grew up in a little town in northern Utah, the oldest daughter in a family of thirteen children. We lived on a small two-and-one-half acre farm with a large garden, fruit trees, and a milk cow. We children loved helping our dad plant the garden, following behind him like little quail as he dug the holes, and we tossed in the seed potatoes, or as he cut the furrow with his hoe and we dropped in the seeds. Weeding was less exciting, but it had to be done. I was never very good at milking the cow. Fortunately, my brothers shared that task. I loved working with my mother: fixing meals, learning to sew, and caring for my younger brothers and sisters.

My mother did not leave home to earn money. She spent her day caring for the children and our home, and helping neighbors when needed. My father was a professor; he taught automotive technology at the university, and he often took us with him to the auto shop to play around while he worked. Well, I played around, but my brothers watched dad's every move, and learned to fix cars as they worked along with him.

Caring for our large family kept all of us busy. Mother was the overseer of the inside work, and dad the outside, but I also remember seeing my father sweep floors, wash dishes, and cook meals when his help was needed. My mother taught each of us—the boys and the girls—to cook, clean, and sew. Some mothers were afraid their children might ruin the sewing machine. Not my mother. It was more important to her that we learn to do things for ourselves and for each other.

When my older brother, Reed, was still young, perhaps nine or ten years old, he was sitting at the sewing machine one day mending his trousers when a neighbor stopped by to visit. She apparently felt sorry for him and said, "Let me do that for you." My brother said, "No thanks, I want to do it myself." It was a point of pride for him that he knew how to sew.

Years later, when Reed was a father with children in high school, one daughter needed a special dress for a school

activity. My brother is a talented engineer; in fact, he developed technology that transmits color photographs by satellite. He is also a father, who, while growing up, learned to make sacrifices for others. So when he came home in the evening he helped a daughter make her dress. Again, it was a point of pride, and also a matter of building good relationships with his daughter.

As children we often worked together, but not all at the same task. While we worked, we talked, sang, quarreled, made good memories, and learned what it meant to be family members—good sons, daughters, fathers or mothers, good Americans, and good Christians.

As a child, I didn't know there was anything unusual about this life. My father and mother read us stories about their parents and grandparents, and it was clear that both of my parents had worked hard as children. Working hard was what families did, what they had always done, to enable them to not only survive but to thrive. It was through work that we showed our love and respect for each other—and work was also the way we learned to love and respect each other.

When I went to Michigan State University to do graduate work, I learned that not everyone considered this pattern of life ideal. At the university, almost everything I read, and much of what I heard, belittled family work. In class lectures, in professional journals, and in the talk of liberated graduate students, I was told that family work, including nursing babies, cooking, and cleaning—all the ordinary everyday work of caring for a family—was a waste of an intelligent woman's time. A woman might choose to be a mother and care for her family as a sideline, but the message was clear—the work that really mattered was paid work done away from home. Historians reminded us that men had long been liberated from farm and family work; now, women were also to be liberated. One professor taught that assigning the tasks of nurturing children primarily to women was the root of women's oppression. Articles in the professional journals argued that women who nurtured their own children and received no pay were really no different from servants or slaves—they were slaves to their husbands and to their children. I was told that women must be liberated from these onerous family tasks so that they might be free to work for money.

This negative assessment of the everyday work of nurturing life in families—of devoted mothering and fathering—still prevails in much of American academia. Yet it does not square with my own experience, nor is it supported by the

research I have done since that time. Also, in my judgment, this negative view, while politically correct in today's society—who has not heard the woman's complaint that she will go crazy or become stupid if she has to stay at home with her children—does not fit with the findings of many other scholars and practitioners who have honestly researched the impact of family work on family life. I would like to review findings from my research that underscore the importance of family work by *all* family members.

I wish to emphasize three points: First, the primary worth of family work lies in its moral and relational value. Family work naturally and effectively promotes what many of us here seek: respect for elders, love for children, equality between husband and wife, and mutual assistance and unity among neighbors. Second, you cannot increase the status of, or people's interest in, family work by measuring its economic worth. And third, when family work patterns are changed, a whole culture is changed.

#### Moral/Relational Value

A book by D. E. Brown, *Human Universals*, contains extensive cross-cultural documentation for kinship universals.<sup>1</sup> Among them is the acknowledgment that everywhere family is an important group. And, despite diverse elaborations, everywhere the basic family core is mother and child (or children) (I assume that everywhere fathers are also important, even though less is said about them.). Another cultural universal is that “the essence of kinship comprises those sentimental attachments that distinguish kin from nonkin and close kin from distant kin.” In other words, everywhere one finds the social expectation that family members should love and care for each other, that they should be kind and generous with each other. Myers calls this the “morality of kinship.”<sup>2</sup> Responsibilities and duties to family members are given priority over self-centered interests.

Standing in opposition to the morality of kinship is the ethic of getting gain. In this view we are individuals first, and individual acquisition of power and gain is more important than loyalty to kin. Individual rights are of greater concern than responsibilities, and people are free to design their own “family” in ways that suit their own self-interest. Love is said to be important—but the emphasis is on love as a complicated emotional state, and it is understood that one can fall out of love about as easily as one fell into love if the relationship no longer serves one's self-interest.

Historically, the meaning of love, especially love in families, has been much richer, and has gone much deeper than this. The morality of love is represented in the willingness to make sacrifices in the interest of fostering the well-being of another. In the family, this means that parents should be willing to sacrifice their own self-centered interests to nurture and foster the growth of their children. While everywhere there are families who fail to love, and some who love too lit-

tle, nevertheless, the expectation that family members should love and care for their own is still in place.

Ruddick describes this quality of family love as “attentive love.”<sup>3</sup> It is love characterized by a willingness to pay attention to what is needed for another's growth, combined with the willingness to do what will help foster that growth. Fundamental to this quality of love is the willingness to sacrifice self-centered aims and purposes in order to see more clearly what the child needs, i.e., if I am irritated or annoyed at the inconvenience my child is causing me, I will not be able to see the real needs of my child. Myers identifies this quality of sacrifice as “the ready index to the moral quality of a relationship. If one is willing to sacrifice only a little, morality is small; if much, morality is great.”<sup>4</sup>

There are many today, particularly among university-educated intellectuals, who oppose the traditional family, who consider self-sacrifice a defect, especially in mothers. Curiously, for these same people, self-sacrifices made to push forward one's career are acceptable, even praiseworthy, perhaps because that is what is required in order to achieve power and gain in the world of paid work.

How is the morality of kinship learned? How is it developed? My research suggests that one of the most powerful ways for developing the morality of love is through family work. This is seen particularly in the relationship between a mother and a child. A mother sacrifices her bodily comfort, needed sleep, and precious time, as she first carries the growing baby inside her and later as she nurtures its fragile life. As the mother performs these tender services for her child, she learns to love her. As the child grows, it is important that she be provided with opportunities to sacrifice for the mother and other family members. If the child does not learn this—to give as well as to receive—to sacrifice as well as be sacrificed for—she will grow up feeling “entitled”—feeling it is her due to be served and waited upon. The capacity to love requires that the child also learn to set aside her selfish interests for the good of the family.

Family work provides an opportunity for children to learn this. On most occasions, if given a choice, my eleven-year-old son would rather play football or basketball than clean house or mow the lawn. But, faced with the reality that he is a needed member of our family, that we expect and appreciate his contribution, he is a good helper. He is probably stretched the most when his little six-year-old brother makes what he thinks are unreasonable demands of him. The thing that interests me is that, when he has risen to the occasion and been a helpful big brother, or after he has completed a household task, he seems to feel a great deal of satisfaction—he feels capable, he feels needed, he feels worthwhile.

I remember well a summer day when our lawn needed mowing. It was a warm day, and Alden would rather have been doing almost anything else. With some forceful persua-

sion on my part, he slowly mowed the lawn. Our lawn is on a hillside, and the mowing is difficult for a small boy, but he kept at it and finished the job. Then he surveyed his work. It looked good. "Isn't it amazing," he said, "When you do something you think you can't do, you feel like you can fly."

This taught me an important lesson. Today, in the U.S. at least, we prize our freedom, but what is freedom and how does real freedom feel? I want my son to learn that real freedom requires discipline and hard work—that if you persist in a difficult task, then you will have the freedom to soar. His participation in family work will teach him this.

In this country, we worry a lot about what will foster a child's feelings of self-worth. My research supports the idea that participation in family work is one of the best ways to do this. In family work, children learn new skills, they see the results of their work, and they develop a keen sense of being needed and valued—that they belong and are important contributing members of the family.

Today we see too many signs that children are growing up undisciplined, self-centered, and self-indulgent, seemingly unable to notice or respond to the real needs of others, especially the needs of members of their own families. How have we gone about trying to solve this problem? Generally, it has been through "values" curriculum in the school. That means talking about values and doing written exercises about values and playing little games about values. What do the children learn? They learn to talk and write about values. There is little evidence that such exercises teach them to live moral lives. The quality of morality they need is learned in the process of serving others, and typically such learning takes place in family settings or not at all. A child learns to be helpful by helping his father and mother and brothers and sisters. A child learns to recognize need by being encouraged to respond to the real needs of other family members. If young people do not develop these moral strengths at home, they may learn through hard experience later in life, a way that is surely more difficult. How much better it is for them to learn these strengths at home, while serving and caring for those nearest to them.

Philosopher Michael Novak recognizes the essential morality learned through participation in family work. Novak calls this view a "realist" moral tradition, one that associates liberation and growth with the concrete toils of involvement with family and/or familial communities. In this view, it is as we labor together through "the endless round of humble constraints" essential to family life that we discover true freedom. True freedom is choosing to do well what will bless the lives of others. Novak writes:

Marriage and family are tribute paid to earth, to the tides, cycles, and needs of the body and of bodily persons; . . . to the dirty diapers, dirty dishes, and endless noise and confusion of the household. It is the entire

symbolic function of marriage and family to remind us that we come from dust and will return to dust . . . The point of marriage and family is to make us realistic.<sup>5</sup>

The point of marriage and family is to make us moral human beings who care about each other and are willing to sacrifice our selfish interests to bless the lives of others. A simple but amazing truth is that this means of learning is available to almost everyone. Wherever we live, whatever religious beliefs we espouse, we all are born to a mother and father, and from the day of our birth must be fed, nourished, and cared for. As we grow, we are presented with numerous opportunities to learn to serve others as we ourselves are served.

Family work is the essential labor of life, the activity that makes all other social life possible. It is the most important work we do in this life. At BYU, we often quote a wise prophet, who said, "No other success can compensate for failure in the home."<sup>6</sup> Working alongside parents and grandparents, children learn to know their parents and to love, respect, and care for their elders. And as parents and grandparents work with their children, their love for them grows.

As fathers and mothers work together in this important work of nurturing family, boundaries disappear. Family work provides a common ground that brings husband, wife, children, the very old, and the very young together. Families that learn to work together and to care for each other are more likely to extend a helping hand to others in need, extending their good works beyond their home into their community and beyond.

### Measuring Economic Worth

In the 1930s, Margaret Reid, a professor at the University of Chicago, noted that as people in the U.S. concentrated more on money values, pushing to build a thriving economic system, they became increasingly "blind to things which are close at hand."<sup>7</sup> She argued that because home and family is not a money-making institution, people are becoming blind to the value of the work in the family. As Reid was trained in economics, she decided that one way to increase the visibility of family work, and to raise the status of those who did that work, was to assess its economic value, to show the world that if they had to pay for the work done by the family providing for each other's needs, the economic value would be considerable. She set out to measure the economic worth of what she called "household production" by measuring the time used to do household work and assigning a dollar value to that time.

What has happened since, and what Reid did not anticipate, was that, rather than raising the value of the work we do in our homes, measuring the economic value of household production has blinded us even more to its real worth as the means to moral development, a channel of human relations, and a transmitter of culture.

How did this happen? To measure economic value, following the pattern established by Reid, researchers focused on those dimensions of household work that had economic value—the production of goods and services that could be purchased in the marketplace. This usually meant focusing attention on, and measuring the value of, the most easily measured products of household labor. If a mother and child worked side by side, peeling potatoes, the dollar value would be assigned as time spent peeling potatoes, while the skill development, relationship-building, and child socialization that occurred at the same time were ignored. Similarly, if a father were making bricks to build a home, with his children watching or even working alongside, the economic value would be measured as brick making and the worth of the teaching and companionship enjoyed while working became invisible.

Today, people who see the value of family work only in terms of the economic value of processes that yield measurable products—washed dishes, baked bread, swept floors, clothed children—miss what some call the “invisible household production” that occurs at the same time, which is, in fact, more important to family-building and character development than the economic products.

The results of this oversight are serious. Many are now convinced that a mother is wasting her time and talents by being a mother. If she is doing nothing more than staying at home and caring for her family, she must be lazy, lacking in intelligence and ambition, or simply oppressed.

Economists, Marianne Ferber and Bonnie Birnbaum published a paper comparing the value of household work and market work. The paper is now rather dated, but you will recognize that the ideas are alive as ever. Ferber and Birnbaum's stated purpose was to help people make “more realistic decisions” about how to divide their time between home and market work. They began with the assumption generally accepted by mainstream economists that “the family's goal is to maximize income.” They did some fancy figuring, economics style, and concluded that families where husbands were primary breadwinners and mothers were full-time homemakers bore “little resemblance to a rational maximizing unit.” Moreover, they said, such families were not units of free choice because “the role of the husband and wife is largely predetermined by tradition.”

These two economists argued that the American full-time wife and mother actually made very little contribution to her family:

Except for the relatively brief years when there are small children in the household, the time spent on essentials is relatively limited. Much of her effort in the home is directed toward “. . . arranging maintenance and repair of the house and household machinery . . . in organizing and management of social enjoyments,

[and] in participation in competitive social display.” These are all activities many people appear to value, but everyone knows they are not as crucial to the survival of the family as the husband's job is.<sup>8</sup>

Ferber and Birnbaum said it was a waste of a woman's time to specialize in doing household work since “all household work can be performed by a hired housekeeper.” This includes the care of children. They debunked the notion that mothers might bring special quality to the care of their children or gain special satisfaction from it. Compared to paid work, they said, whatever rewards the family might offer were short-term, less personally satisfying, and less useful to society. To continue in their words:

Account must be taken of the fact that work in the home has little effect on one's ability to contribute in the future, while work in the market increases a person's opportunity for doing work in the future that is not only more remunerative but also otherwise more rewarding.<sup>9</sup>

Stated bluntly, full-time homemaking is a dead-end job. What woman with any intelligence would waste her life that way?

Now, the question for us is, how do Ferber and Birnbaum, and others who share their view, come to these conclusions? We have just argued that the work we do in our families is the most important work we do in this life. Why the discrepancy? In part, it is the appeal to economic measurement. Economists assume that the market equivalent is all that is worth measuring about the activity. All the other good things about family activity—transcendent and essential things like building relationships and developing a moral sense—become invisible. From this economic perspective, they do not exist.

Clearly, we cannot take up the defense of family work on economic grounds. The family may have economic functions and provide economic benefits to family members, but its primary worth is not in its economic contribution. The family is first and foremost a moral institution. To yield to the economists the economic-equivalence scale as the key criterion of family worth—to measure families only in terms of things which can be purchased with money—is to lose the game at the onset, for economically specialized institutions are better than families at turning a profit.

#### **When Family Work Patterns are Changed, a Whole Culture is Changed**

For the past several years I have had an interest in the transmission of culture through family work. I have interviewed Navajo and Apache grandmothers, daughters, sons, and grandchildren. I ask grandmothers to recall experiences with their grandmothers, what they did with them and what they were taught, what they learned. I have asked them to

compare their experiences as children with the experiences they have with their own grandchildren today. Their comparisons are dramatic.

An Apache medicine man recalled his relationship with his grandmother. She was old, and, as a young child, he was sent to help take care of her. He saw the care as reciprocal:

Grandmother and I took care of each other, in her wick-iup. When I was little, grandmother and I went on a donkey to get wood. My mother was with my dad, but I was with grandmother. My mother sent my sister and I to sleep with my grandmother. . . . They [your parents] always want you to respect older people. You never walk over them and you never talk back to them. You always listen and then they cook for you and you learn lots of things from them.

A granddaughter described her family:

We have so much love for one another, we are unselfish, we sacrifice for each other, and we respect each other. I think we learned these things because we did hard work together. There was eight of us kids, we didn't have much at all—no electricity or running water, so everything we did was a lot of work and one person could not do it alone. Everyone had to help for the job to get done. I remember hauling our laundry to a nearby lake and washing our clothes by hand all day there at that lake. The younger kids would hang the washed clothes on the bushes and trees to dry and then take them down when they were dry and folded them. My mother never went with us. We did it all by ourselves. We were so tired by the end of the day, but we still had to carry everything back up to the house. . . .

One of the things that was not our favorite thing to do was to make this bread. We make it out of corn, so we only do it at harvest time. This was not a fun job but it had to be done. We had to husk piles and piles, which we hauled up to the house in a horse-drawn wagon, the corn had to be husked in a certain way so as not to tear big pieces of the husks because you use the husks to wrap. The older kids would husk corn and the younger kids would grind the corn and keep the fire going in the hole where the bread is to be baked. Everyone would help wrap the corn mixture in the husks, and then carry it out to the dugout hole. I remember the interacting that went on when we did this—the laughing, joking, talking, and the stories my grandmother told, I'll never forget.

The grandmothers' recollections of their early experiences are rich, full of meaning. One described gathering edible plants with her grandmother. This herb-gathering took them on long walks. "What did you talk about?" I asked. She could not remember that they talked about anything. I asked, "

How did she teach you?" I have grown up in a culture that teaches by talking, so I was encouraging her to remember words. Her response corrected me; her grandmother did not teach with words but by working side by side with her. "I don't think she told me what to do, but I always felt that she wanted me to become like her."

In the traditional way of the Apache, adults were expected to live lives worthy of imitation, and children living and working side by side, doing as their parents and grandparents had done, learned their culture—what it meant to be a good Apache. Theirs was a rich culture, a proud heritage. What has happened today? What do today's grandmothers do with their grandchildren? Very few have gardens anymore; they buy their food in the store. They wash their clothes at the laundromat, or perhaps they are among the few who own a clothes washer. The children go to school all day, play in the streets, and when they are at home they watch television. The grandmothers report they have difficulty competing with the television for the attention of the grandchildren. Only a few of today's Apache children spend much time cooking or cleaning. And the grandmothers seldom tell stories anymore; no one has time to listen.

As family work disappears, so does culture. Some of the Apaches I talked to are trying to regain a sense of culture through reviving religious ceremonies, which is certainly important, but by itself insufficient. The sense of what it meant to be Apache did not emerge only from religious ceremonies but also from the humble tasks and routines of everyday life. Replace those old ways, and the culture, too, is replaced. What can be done? Anthropologist Dorothy Lee describes the process of culture loss and what is needed, through her description of the simple activity of shelling peas:

When my first child was two or three, I used to shell peas with her. Nowadays, I buy my peas already shelled and packaged. This saves me time; the peas are probably even fresher than they were when I used to shell them, and I get good and efficient nutrition. But was this all that happened when I shelled peas with my daughter? Did I merely get a dish of peas? If so, the package of frozen peas is more than an adequate replacement. Yet it was more than this. It was a total process; and if I am going to see to it that the totality, or the important aspects of it, are retained, I shall have to find out what these were and then find a media through which they can continue to be expressed.<sup>10</sup>

Take away the work that once brought us together, and what means are left to help us relate to one another? What do families do together today? Not much, it seems. Most watch television. Some play together, but play does not provide opportunities for service and sacrifice that work does.

Those of us who have assumed responsibility of introducing new ideas and techniques that will ease the burdens of work have sometimes not been careful about the consequences of our innovation. In the process, we may set in motion the destruction of culture. My own sense is that some quality of family work must be retained by the family, regardless of its members' occupation or station in life, if the family is to reproduce its values and cultural heritage.

I show my students a National Geographic film about the Baka, a hunter/gatherer group living in the rain forests of Cameroon, Africa. While grateful for the blessings of technology that allow us to live healthier lives, my students are envious of these people. The first comment they make after watching the film is how happy the Baka are. The Baka laugh and chatter away as they work; they seem to enjoy being with each other. [This seems to be a new idea for many of these students raised in affluence—can working together really be satisfying, even enjoyable?] Their second amazed comment is how involved the father is with the everyday care of his family. Baka mothers and fathers fish together, gather wild fruit together, and hunt for honey together, always with children in tow. There are also tasks specific to men or to women, a difference in what is expected from men as opposed to women, but all work centers around the care and nurture of the family. As long as their work remains, Baka children will have little difficulty learning what it means to be Baka, or to be a good father or a good mother, a good neighbor and friend. They will have lived and worked side by side with their people, taking in the knowledge of their culture as they took in their mother's milk.

But what will happen when modern technology and paid work replaces family work among the Baka? If they are wise, they will strive to retain at least some of the most basic tasks as a means of binding together as families.

### Conclusion

Today's media-sustained, popular climate seems hostile not only to family work, but to family life in general. As family work has become devalued, activities of television and computers and market-oriented work and recreation have crowded out many of the opportunities for teaching service, sacrifice, love, caring, respect, and mutual nurturance that were provided by shared participation in family work.

I am impressed by Wendell Berry's statement on the role of the family work in his upbringing. He tells how his father:

[I]n the face of prevailing fashion and opinion, [showed] remarkable insight and foresight; he insisted that I learn to do the hard labor that the land required, knowing—and saying again and again—that the ability to do such work is the source of a confidence and an independence of character that can come no other way, not by money, not by education.<sup>11</sup>

I am also moved by the New Testament account of the answer Jesus gave to those who asked him what would be the criteria for judgment at the last day, determining who would sit in favor on his right hand, and who would be found wanting and sit on his left. Not surprisingly, the criteria for judgment were not what one had done as paid work, one's professional status, or how much wealth or power one had managed to accumulate. Instead, the key activities were whether we had fed the hungry, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, visited those in prison, or helped in other forms of personal nurturance. The scriptures make it clear that such activity definitely includes feeding the hungry and clothing the naked in our own families. I believe that the most great world religions have similar traditions about the virtue of caring for one's own.

### NOTES

1. Brown, D. E. *Human Universals*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991.
2. Myers, Merlin G. "The Morality of Kinship," V. F. Culture Lecture, Brigham Young University, 15 November 1983. Unpublished.
3. Ruddick, Sara. "Maternal Thinking," in *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, Trebilcot, Joyce (Ed), Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984.
4. See Myers.
5. Novak, Michael. "The Family Out of Favor," *Harper's*, April 1976, p. 40.
6. McKay, David O.
7. Reid, Margaret. *Economics of Household Production*, New York: John Wiley, 1934, p. 3.
8. Ferber, Marianne A., and Birnbaum, Bonnie G. "The 'New Home Economics': Retrospects and Prospects," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 4, June 1977, pp. 19–28.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Lee, Dorothy. "The Individual in Changing Society," *Journal of Home Economics*, February 1960, pp. 79–82.
11. Berry, Wendell. *The Hidden Wound*, Berkeley, CA: North Point Press, 1989.