



Making a Home, Building a Family Traditions, Boundaries, and Virtues

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Abstract: The most valuable and useful things I have already received from my parents are the beliefs, virtues and skills they passed on to me. Thanks to them I know how to make a home, what is truly important in family life and “that commodities are [NOT] sufficient markers of love” (Salazar 413). I do not believe that toys and clothing for example can make up for a mother’s loving embrace and advice. Material things can not replace having an actual relationship with a parent. Majaj explores how as an Arab-American her constant struggle in life was to find a place “where [she] would become [her] true self [...]” and where she could become “whole” (87). I have discovered that this place to me could be anywhere in the world. My parents’ pride and belief in me and my skills, their trust, their support and their love have taught me that I have to find the place of true peace and completeness within me and in the relationships that I invest in. By teaching me the importance of responsibility, discipline, education, loyalty, dignity, honesty, fairness, loving care, respect for things and people and gratitude they have offered me the tools to find that place.

INTRODUCTION

When I reflect on my family experience I find that three aspects lie at the heart of what we are and want to be: a) traditions and special occasions, b) a sense of community and a sense of individuality and c) values and virtues. These themes represent what is most important in my family and how the members define their successes and failures. They are going to be at the center of the following analysis. But first I would like to make an attempt to define what *family* and *home* mean to me.

When I say ‘family’ I mostly mean my

wonderfully (with contemporary western culture conforming) traditional, biological, nuclear family. I love my boyfriend, I deeply care about some other members of the extended family and I do not want to be without my closest friends, but they are not ‘family’ like my father, my mother and me. As very young parents without much support or resources, they raised a child with more love than they ever received themselves. This quite narrowly defined view on family should not be understood as a completely static concept, though. As I get older, I acknowledge more and more that the safety, comfort and support that used to be

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unique to the relationship with my parents can be found in many other relationships when they grow close and intensive enough. So to me, the term family is mostly about the core of interdependent individuals who create a closely knit community that tries to survive, physically and emotionally.

Weston points out that kinship and family can be a matter of choice; she refers to homosexual relationships and cases of adoption (37-39). I would like to add to this notion that marriage and heterosexual partnership are also cases of family-construction. One day my priorities in terms of family life are going to shift toward a newly formed family. The relationship with a long-term partner is not biological. It is merely a choice. Adults decide who they want to include in their own family. The biology is added in, when partners conceive a child. The act of having children is a way of tightening the connection between partners; it symbolizes their level of commitment and their faith in a common future which they consider appropriate to raise a new person. A child in some ways biologically confirms the bond that was established previously in ritual. Parents become biologically connected indirectly through their children. But as Weston suggests this biological bond is "a symbol rather than substance" (34). The importance of this biological connection is not ultimate but will change over time. Today, the community within which I am embedded is with my parents; I still depend on them. But one day the term *my family* will mostly refer to the children that depend on me and the partner, with whom I am choosing to raise them.

Patricia Hill-Collins claims that home in the form of "Place Space and Territory" (161) is one of the fundamental dimensions of family. She argues that ideologically the home is the "feminized" and "privatized space where members can feel at ease" (Hill-Collins 161). But she also acknowl-

edges, and I agree with her, that in practice much has changed. Previously in American history the house might have been the main area of influence for women. But nowadays women are, fortunately, not confined anymore to the roles of wives and stay-at-home-mothers. Most women today have to or simply want to contribute their skills and knowledge to society, by being part of a professional context I do agree, though, that the notion of home is tied to the ideas of privacy and relaxation. I call places my home, where I feel safe, comfortable and appreciated and where I exert a certain level of control over the things and people who enter and the activities taking place there.

But to me home is mainly a set of feelings, beliefs and activities rather than a place. Throughout my life I have been able to feel at home in many different locations depending on the kinds of relationships I have been able to form there. Today my home is actually in two parts of the world, my parent's house is still a home that I may always return to, but I also have a home here in Cambridge, where I live with my boyfriend. My nationality is also a kind of home also; it defines a meta-physical place to which I belong and with which I am familiar. When I came to the United States for the first time, having two very close German friends helped me to feel *at home*. In terms of the home where my family is located, I realize that I continue to outgrow my parents' home. I am about to transition into a home of my own, one that will host the family that I hope to build myself. But I find that the home I am building should imitate many things I learned with my parents.

TRADITIONS AND SPECIAL OCCASIONS

Some traditions I consider to be parts of what goes into making a home and I wish to carry on. Festivities were always impor-

tant in my family. My parents baptized me into the catholic faith, so beyond birthdays, my "Namenstage" (the day of the year assigned to the holy Verena), Easter and Christmas were very important. Ever since I can remember, we have been part of a larger community in our parish, where I made friends, build my relationship with God and where my parents were involved. Church and things related offered a social net and context for our little family. Celebrating Christian Holidays meant going to church, indulging in pagan rituals (coloring Easter eggs, the Easter egg hunt, decorating the Christmas tree, etc) and following our personal traditions (preparing special food and enjoying extended meals together, waiting until dark, ringing the bell to mark the moments of giving and receiving presents, etc.).

Since I was very small my birthdays and "Namenstage" have been focal points of every year. My parents made those "my days," and they were more than special—I would say magical days. All those candles, favorite cakes and the parties with friends and with family solely happened to celebrate my life. Those were times overflowing with love, joy and pride, which I eagerly anticipated for weeks. I do not know where my sense of self-confidence and strength would have come from if it had not been for the sure feeling that I was wanted in this family, that I was a gift. Vinovsiks argues that ideas such as parental love or the importance of parent-child relationship or emotional bonding historically emerged only when the concept of family became more individualized (276). My family is definitely a good example for this phenomenon. Our family was an island of love for my parents. Neither one of them had very good experiences in their families of origin. They craved a haven, and they built it as best as they could. I grew up believing that nobody mattered as much as us three, and that my parents would be the few people in my life that I could always

rely on, that I did not owe anybody in the extended family, and that my happiness had to come first. Vinovsiks explains that in the individualized family children are put in the center (276), a concept I totally took for granted and thought was mandatory. I felt to be at the center of my family; to my parents I was the bundle that made us a family and they were determined to make it work. In many ways my progress has been an indicator of our family success. The idea of family without love is hard to grasp for me. I would not aspire to having a family without love and happiness. Emotions are a necessary part of family life in my opinion.

Other very special occasions in our family were vacation-times by the ocean. The love of the water and the beach connects my parents and me. Walks in the morning on the foggy German coast, days playing in the sand and the water, eating fresh seafood, writing cards, playing games and reading a lot are memories loaded with comfort. On vacation our souls were allowed to rest and we were able to enjoying each others company. To me the ocean has become a symbol of peace, physical and emotional well-being. For fourteen years, my family has yearly enjoyed another form of vacation: pilgrimages. On these occasions we join a group of fellow Christians and assume a very simple lifestyle. During these five days, all our time is filled with walking through nature, talking, having meals together, praying, singing and sleeping. It's a time where all of us disconnect with the stresses of our daily lives and instead focus on our relationship with God and Jesus. I draw much of my spiritual strength and much of my faith from this emersion in a spiritually based community, and I experience the beauty of creation most intensively during these days out in nature.

Because of all these special times that my parents and I cherish so much, I often see family and home as those environments

providing most comfort and appreciation in my life. Hochschild found some evidence that many Americans do not have the same experience. They actually feel more comfortable in their work environments than at home (692), because their family-lives are unsatisfying and very stressful. They enjoy the interaction with their coworkers and feel appreciated when honored as *employee of the month*. Although there are probably also many Americans who enjoy being with their families like me, I believe that these different experiences may partially be due to cultural factors. American society has a very competitive work ethic, where everybody fends for themselves and daily hard work is the only route to success. Bettering one's life is mostly about increasing the standard of living. The American Dream seems to be about owning a house and two cars.

Before having children educated couples try to push their careers in order to have something to offer to their children later: private school and piano-lessons. Then when they do have children most parents are left with only a "12-week job-protected leave" (Clawson and Gerstel 730). They are forced into a vicious cycle of having to earn more money to pay for childcare. And except for the rich most can not afford decent childcare. In addition, they have even less time for children. I do not understand a society that tolerates this kind of unfairness. But the stand taken on publicly available child care is just one example of a welfare system that is being kept to a minimum (Rank 742). American society does not seem to believe in the social responsibilities of the state and American law does not actually consider children's rights to good housing, nutrition, education and healthcare (Sugarman: 297). But American culture seems to assume that if everybody just worked hard enough and earned enough money, they would be happy. Americans seem to believe that everyone has the chance to become rich and will then

be able to afford piano lessons and private school.

I am sure it was not always easy to raise a child as very young parents, but at least parental leaves and kindergarten were available to my parents. Then, when I was school-aged my parents both worked, but they did not have money for either piano lessons or private school; instead they got home at five a clock. I grew up in a different culture in which not so much overwhelming importance was given to work, career and money making. The focus was on what American's call "quality time," eating and spending time together. Beyond the Sunday walk and an eventual trip to a museum, my parents did not have much to "offer," but I did receive a lot of attention and emotional support. I know that most of the time my parents liked coming home from jobs that were rather unsatisfying at times. Personally I have been very lucky with my working situation lately, but my family and my boyfriend are still the people that know me best and to whom I look for comfort and love. Home is still the place where I can relax and be myself.

A SENSE OF COMMUNITY AND A SENSE OF INDIVIDUALITY

One of the difficulties in family-interaction is to find a balance between forming a reliable net of social support and allowing every member the freedom that they desire. It is not always easy to define the appropriate boundaries among individuals within the family and toward the extended family, friends, acquaintances and outsiders.

Most individuals desire attention and support from their families but they do not want to feel controlled. I always enjoyed it when my parents showed interest in the things I did; my mother attended school concerts and my father spent days barbecuing at the school fair. Including each other in "what is going on" has been impor-

tant. I have always tried to introduce my parents to people with whom I spent a lot of time and environments that define my daily life, in school, at the university and at work. In return I try to stay informed about their professional lives, their personal projects and people with whom they are involved. Now that we live so far apart, my parents in Germany and I in Boston, visiting and speaking on the phone are crucial to stay informed. On the other hand, my parents tried to instill a strong sense of independence in me. I was encouraged to make my own choices. As a child and adolescent, I was seriously involved in important decisions such as which High School to attend. Later as a young adult my decisions on going to America, what to study and where to study were respected and supported as much as possible.

Formerly families were seen as institutions concerned with "long-term interests of lineage" and heritage (Vinovskis 273). In the early 17th century matters such as occupation and marriage were not left to the child coming of age. "Parental dominance" (Vinovskis 274) reigned over individual preferences in order to preserve the greater good of the lineage. These dynamics have totally changed today, and my upbringing is an example of that change. My parents stressed that I should become an independent woman. My mother used to say that she did not own me, but that I was only entrusted to her care for a while. And I was not raised to feel a large amount of obligation toward the extended family either. It was clear to me that my sense of individuality was appreciated and that strengthened me.

It even empowered me enough to explore the world. Especially since I am an only child moving away into another part of the country and to another country altogether made us feel the separation quite strongly. There have been times of homesickness and feelings of being lost or lonely. So to some extent I can relate to some of the

issues other "transnational families" face (Salazar). I understand how family members can feel guilty for leaving and feel disconnected. But, fortunately, my family was not forced into separation due to economic hardship. Salazar introduces us to the situation of Filipino mothers who have to leave their family behind to make a living in the United States or Europe. They can earn more money in these countries and thereby provide better financially for their children in the Philippines. But they sacrifice raising their children; their separation often lasts many years while the children are still very young. The host countries exploit them because they need the labor of these women but do not allow for them to bring their families with them. As a result mothers and children are denied the kind of bonding, interaction and involvement my parents and I enjoyed when I was younger. We are able to establish a very close and "normal" relationship during the twenty years of my upbringing; nobody can take that away anymore. Not all transnational families are this lucky. Facing the situation of these Filipino mothers, I am grateful for having grown up in an economically stable country like Germany. Our separation is for the benefit of my personal growth. The certainty that my family believes in me and I can always return to them if things do not work out has allowed me to follow my curiosity and broaden my horizons.

Being away from my family and trying to adapt to another culture has forced me to open up to new relationships. Although I was on my own in many ways, I was also able to establish support networks, which to some extent made up for the absence of my family. Griswold Del Castillo has explored the idea that among Mexican American families wider networks of biological and fictional kin as well as communities may provide necessary economic and emotional support (101). In their culture during times of economic hardship family members who do not live in the household, god-

parents and neighbors help out in whichever way they can. But there are also cases where a more randomly formed group of people becomes a community that can support a family or individuals. In the movie *A League of Their Own* the members of a baseball team grow so close that they develop a strong sense of loyalty. For the season, the team becomes a kind of extended family to the players in the story. The companionship within the team protects the individuals when the functioning of their nuclear family is disturbed during the war. I have had similar experiences as an au pair with my closest friends and today after years of going out dancing in the same community, visiting a bar where all my Salsa companions spend the night, truly feels like coming home. So, although my parents and I have always been very close, there was also room to form new relationship networks independently from each other.

Although my parents granted me a lot of freedom and respected my equal status as an independent person, I must say that as a child I was part of a very clear hierarchy. Families do not function well as anarchies, and so we also had a lot of rules on how our interaction with each other was organized. Hill-Collins theorizes that these hierarchies are “Naturalized” (158) and defined by gender and age. To some extent that was true in my family. In our house strict rules were applied when it came to things like my behavior towards adults, manners at the table, politeness, willingness to share, when and how to do homework and many more. My parents emphasized discipline, always making sure I understood why they enforced certain rules. So there was an age-related hierarchy in that mostly things were done my parents’ way; they did not tolerate any acting up on my part. There was also a quite traditional gender-related division of labor. My mother, although she has always worked, took care of cleaning, washing and cooking. My father on the other hand was responsible

for heavy yard-work, taking care of the cars and repairs. Thereby my parents went along with some of the social expectations in regard to their roles in the family, but they also created their own hierarchies. For example, in terms of child-rearing the responsibilities were always quite equally divided. Both of my parents were very caring; they read to me, combed my hair and played with me. In some sense these rules of interaction organized our lives and created a true sense of community.

None of these rules were ever presented as laws, though. I never felt that women absolutely have to do certain things and that men have to do others. I was not raised in the kind of “back into the kitchen”—as portrayed in the movie *A League of Their Own*—mentality of the immediate post World War II area in America. During the war women were called to do their duty in the labor market to support their country and the men overseas. But then after the war, it was presupposed that women would discontinue their careers immediately to make room for the returning men. My mother has always worked (full-time most of my life) and it was understood that I was going to work also. I was given the opportunity to receive high levels of education and I have always been very focused on the goal of pursuing a career. But I would like to raise a child also. Obviously this has implication for the kind of family-structure I envision for myself. I was raised to feel that it is right to be ambitious and to strive for personal fulfillment. I will not want to lose my sense of individuality. But at the same time I would like to be a mother and create a nurturing environment for a child. So I will need a husband that is willing to contribute to this environment, a man wanting to help making a home and raising children. My future family should be a joined effort; I do not want to try being the *super mom* who does everything herself.

Cherlin has pointed out that attitudes like mine contribute to the “Deinstitution-

alization of marriage” (185). Many couples today get married not only to become unified with their partner, but they also expect to fulfill their individual desires and needs. In my generation partnership is not about giving oneself up but rather about love and self-development. I have pretty high expectations when it comes to the emotional connection with my partner, but I also want every one of us accomplish what is important to us professionally. Therefore I agree that “communication and openness in confronting problems are essential” (Cherlin 189). Otherwise it is very difficult to build a family as a strong community while allowing every member a certain level of independence.

VALUES AND VIRTUES

Patricia Hill-Collins discusses how “Inheritance and the Family Wage” (167) can manifest themselves in various ways in different families. Traditionally inheritance describes the monetary wealth and properties that are being passed down from one generation to the next. When my grandmother died for example, I received a ring that I had always admired on her since I was a small child. It was her way of leaving something behind that had meant something to both of us and that would remind me of her. I wear this ring with pride and it reminds me of certain situations I shared with her. Other kinds of inheritances can be occupations and businesses.

Then there are some forms of heritage that are best not to be passed on. Both my parents experienced some form of violence in their homes, and it has marked them for life. Neither one of them have been very willing to share much information from those aspects of their past. Yllö (614) points out how violence and abuse are mainly about power and control, and this is still apparent in my parents. Their will was broken and they lack confidence in many

ways. But they were determined not to inflict the same kind of injustice and misery on me. They wanted to make sure that I learned the opposite of the lessons that they had to learn in their families of origin. Instead of putting me down, my parents decided to empower me. Physical, verbal and psychological abuse was not tolerated in my home, I was rather taught to maintain very high levels of self respect and respect for others.

And this leads me to the kind of inheritance that is most important to me in my family. The most valuable and useful things I have already received from my parents are the beliefs, virtues and skills they passed on to me. Thanks to them I know how to make a home, what is truly important in family life and “that commodities are [NOT] sufficient markers of love” (Salazar 413). I do not believe that toys and clothing for example can make up for a mother’s loving embrace and advice. Material things can not replace having an actual relationship with a parent.

Majaj explores how as an Arab-American her constant struggle in life was to find a place “where [she] would become [her] true self [...]” and where she could become “whole” (87). I have discovered that this place to me could be anywhere in the world. My parents’ pride and belief in me and my skills, their trust, their support and their love have taught me that I have to find the place of true peace and completeness within me and in the relationships that I invest in. By teaching me the importance of responsibility, discipline, education, loyalty, dignity, honesty, fairness, loving care, respect for things and people and gratitude they have offered me the tools to find that place.

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