

Family: Fairy Tale or Trap?

Now and again I've been asked what Chesterton essay I would preserve, if only one could be saved from destruction. The choice is not easy, but if I were forced to choose it might well be one with a very lengthy, yet vague, title: "On Certain Modern Writers and the Institution of the Family."

Calling family the "main cell and central unit of almost all societies," Chesterton points to what he contends is a wrong-headed defense of the family, namely, the idea that it is a "peaceful, pleasant" haven from the "stress and fickleness" of life. Chesterton suggests it is quite the opposite.

Peaceful or otherwise, the family did have its enemies. Chief among those enemies, according to Chesterton, were "certain modern writers" such as playwright Henrik Ibsen and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. They declared that the family was an "uncongenial institution." To Ibsen, that uncongeniality was experienced by women; to Nietzsche it was experienced by everyone.

Surprisingly, Chesterton agreed that the family could be a thoroughly uncongenial institution, but he then went on to declare that the family is good for many reasons, not the least of which is because it is a small institution. Rudyard Kipling favored "large empires" and large institutions, especially "large ideas." But Chesterton pointed to a unique feature of the family that "only the willfully blind" could ignore: living in a "small community" means living in a "much larger world."

Family life may not mean that this or that family member will be able to visit diverse foreign countries. But it inevitably will mean that all of its members will come to know "much more of the fierce varieties and uncommon divergencies" among people.

How could that be? Chesterton thought the answer was obvious: "In a large community we can choose our companions. In a small world our companions are chosen for us."

Large communities are home to "cliques." The family is a "clan." The "clique" is narrow; the family is not. Members of a "clique" are narrow, because they have the "same kind of soul." Their narrowness is one of "spiritual coherence and contentment." In sum, it is cliques, not families, that are peaceful, pleasant, and at one.

The larger the society, the more opportunities there are for havens where people of like mind can gather—and agree. Of course, large societies are also home to families, but the family is not a haven. To paraphrase Robert Frost, when a family member goes home, he or she has to be let in. But is that family member let in to a haven? It's not likely. And it's certainly not guaranteed.

Chesterton did not deny that people "flee" from families and home. What he did deny was that people fled in order to escape the dullness of the family. If anything, they left because family life was a "great deal too exciting." It was exciting, because it was "exacting;" and it was exacting, because it was "alive."

Of course, people leave their families of origin for all sorts of good reasons. But they do not flee those families. Nor are they part of what Chesterton termed the "modern revolt" against the family. To Chesterton, this revolt was a "revolt against mankind." In concrete terms, it was a revolt against "Aunt Elizabeth (who) is unreasonable, like mankind (or) Papa (who) is excitable, like mankind (or) our youngest brother (who) is mischievous, like mankind."

Life, wherever and however it is lived, is always an adventure. But to G. K. Chesterton the "supreme adventure" was to be born into a family. At birth, as he put it, one

“suddenly steps into a splendid and startling trap.” And then one steps into a “fairy tale.”

Perhaps “step” isn’t quite the right verb to capture Chesterton’s point. After all, entering a family is less like stepping into something than it is akin to climbing down into something. Experiencing that “supreme adventure” of being born, wrote Chesterton, is like “climbing down a chimney into any house at random and trying to get [along] as well as possible with the people inside.”

Such a journey could well be a trap. But trap or otherwise, it surely has the makings of a fairy tale, even if it’s not always pleasant or peaceful.

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